We know relatively little about the Ningbo artist, Chen Yunsheng (1820-1884). Like many artists working in later nineteenth century Jiangnan, he sojourned in Shanghai, though retaining close ties with his Ningbo hometown, and again, like many artists active at the time, through his specialties, in his case he positioned himself in the market as a landscape painter in the literati mode, with matching skills on view in calligraphy, seal-carving and poetry. If we know relatively little about him now, he seems to have enjoyed moderate success during his lifetime; respected by his peers and was well-known enough to have his biography included in the usual biographical collections of late Qing Shanghai artists. However, he breaks from the crowd in his unusual decision to publish his own illustrated book in 1876, Renzhai huasheng [Renzhai’s painting legacy], Renzhai being Chen’s style name. The date of its publication, just before the advent of lithography in Shanghai, places this book in an interesting position vis-à-vis the stampede of illustrated books produced slightly later in Shanghai from the late 1870s onwards. In its own way, Chen Yunsheng’s book presents the themes of the Shanghai illustrated book in a prescient manner, namely: the promotion of the artist as public figure, the illustrated book as a formulation of the art world, and in its address of a popular audience using a specifically Shanghai imagery and visual language. As such, the late Qing Shanghai
book, and Chen Yunsheng’s book in particular, takes on an intriguing number of functions; not only was it meant to be a stand-in of the artist, a celebration of his status and achievements, but also an encapsulation of his work, a miniature version of himself and his career. Ultimately, it was also a commodity that took on its own momentum, bearing his name and designs far out of the artist’s control and domain.

Chen’s book is an ambitious project. According to advertisements that Chen placed when the book was first published, the book gathers together landscape designs by the artist made over the course of his career (he was 56 at the time of its publication), and compiled by his sons and students. There are few, if any, contemporary books that compare with this project; its closest contemporary may be Ren Xiong’s magisterial quartet of books featuring designs of historical figures, and one wonders if Chen Yunsheng may not have had such a model in the back of mind, and wished to undertake a similar project, this time with landscape subjects. The author, as we shall see, seems fully aware of how unusual this publication was: few other artists at this time, produced a book exclusively of their own designs, and all signs indicate that Chen considered this book his magnum opus, a summing up of his career and work. The book is presented as a substantial statement, large in size, its four volumes encompass 160 original landscape designs, carefully organized into two volumes each of horizontal and vertical compositions. The seriousness of this project is also suggested by the meticulous attention to every detail of the book’s production; each page is a high-quality woodcut that systematically incorporates an image, and an original poem reproduced in Chen’s calligraphy. Every bit of the book’s extensive prefatory apparatus, from title slips, to title pages, to multiple prefaces, has been precisely matched with its particular author, and
reproduced in each author’s calligraphy. Seals are appropriately reproduced in red.

Structured, ordered, controlled, this is a publication that seeks to regulate the reader’s encounter with the book, and to instruct him or her on how to value its contents. Finally, the value of the book is confirmed by its sticker price: a considerable four yuan for a standard copy, an exorbitant five yuan for copies printed on extra-fine paper, tells us how highly the artist valued and correspondingly priced this particular production.

Like Ren Xiong’s books, this work does not appear to have been intended as a huapu, or painting manual. The title itself, Renzhai huasheng, presents the book in the light of the author’s achievements, as his painting legacy or painting monuments, and the book in format, despite its comprehensiveness, is not presented in the format of a painting manual. It is not an instructional manual; it neither guides the reader through an explanation of landscape motifs and compositions, not does it attempt to present a systematic look at landscape models drawn from the masters. The format of the book, instead, puts the focus on the author and his achievements. Instead of a huapu format, where a mélange of motifs are united by a guiding text that seek to instruct the viewer, Chen’s book instead espouses the format of the wenji or collected writings: assembling one career’s worth of work, united in authorship, and appropriately introduced with suitable prefaces and even an author’s portrait.

This focus on the author and his identity is carefully laid out in the book’s paratext. One of the most striking aspects of the book is its concern for order and structure, and the stress placed on the imposing framework that does instruct the viewer on how to conceive of the images. Every aspect of the book is meticulously thought through, and beginning with the book’s cover, with its distinctively calligraphed title slip,
is labeled and inscribed with names and markers of prestigious individuals and the bright
glow they cast on the central feature of the author. After the title slip, and preface, the
reader must proceed through an extensive series of prefaces, painstakingly reproduced in
each author’s own calligraphy. This hefty apparatus acts almost like a ceremonial
entrance to the book, constantly acting as a series of directives to the reader on how to
think of the book, and particularly its creator. Even before his actual creations are reached,
it firmly indicates to the reader the identity and status of the author, in terms of his
scholarly associations and connections. The selection of preface contributors is an
interesting one, and even at this somewhat early date in Shanghai art, shows a
preoccupation with art world credentials and contacts. This is apparent in the number of
prefaces – fourteen, including the author’s own, and this number does not include the
prefaced placed at the beginning of each of the three subsequent volumes of the book.
The copious number of prefaces is suggestive of several issues: first, the importance
Chen assigned to putting his work in a particular social context, that of Shanghai’s
scholarly circles.

This is evident from the choice of preface contributors, among whom are included
luminaries such as Hu Yuan (1823-1886), the famous landscape painter, the painters Wu
Tao (1840-1895) and Huang Shanshou (1855-1919), the writer Chen Honggao, and the
writer Yao Kui, son of the great mid-19th century Dream of the Red Chamber scholar
Yao Xie. These were all prominent figures in Shanghai, with high public profiles and
strong reputations; Hu Yuan and Wu Tao especially were regarded as major masters of
the day, the writer Chen Honggao is also conspicuous as an individual with a significant
public presence. The sheer mass of text, the variety and number of contributors, all lend
the scholarly authority and weight of the written word to Chen’s book and his own status. 
These multiple texts are given additional heft in the care taken to duplicate each preface 
writer’s calligraphy. Several of these figures, for example, Hu Yuan, were known for 
their calligraphy; the presence of their distinctive handwriting also confers an aura of 
intimacy to these prefaces that must have struck any reader paging through the prefaces 
and noting the changes in writing; the quality of the woodblock printing also gives the 
prefaces a simulacra-like quality, as if the reader held the original calligraphies in their 
hand, adding to the book’s “authenticity.”

While these elements may suggest or may have been meant to suggest Chen 
Yunsheng’s ensconcement in the upper reaches of Shanghai’s cultural hierarchies, one 
can’t help but wonder why Chen needed quite so many prefaces. One may also notice 
that some of the prefaces are actually fairly cursory: Wang Tao’s preface is nothing more 
than several generic complimentary phrases that do not even fill up a page; Hu Yuan’s 
preface seems to be about his acquaintanceship with Chen Yunsheng. The inclusion of 
Yao Kui is also interesting: Yao himself is a somewhat shadowy figure on the fringes of 
the artworld, known more perhaps for being the son of his father, the well-connected and 
well-respected scholar and bon vivant Yao Xie, whose accomplishments certainly 
towered over those of his son’s. The anxiety to bag important and culturally prestigious 
individuals is a striking aspect of the book, and the disparate and heterogeneous nature of 
all these contributions gives the book the makeshift nature of an autograph album, with 
the multiple contributions so arduously assembled on Chen’s part. They also 
unmistakably smack of the testimonial, with each name one more endorsement of the 
author’s achievements and status. The stress on number is also apparent, and seems to
reflect a recognition of the Shanghai art world as a unity, or community, that is reinforced again and again in this period. Jonathan Hay has spoken about the illusion of community that is presented in illustrated books in this period, and this relatively early book sets the tone for later books to follow; with its invocation of the larger cohort massed behind this particular author.  

This determined presentation of the art world as a community, as supporters and associates, and this affirmation of Chen’s place in the center of his profession and art circles, certainly raises the question of who exactly is the audience for this book, for whom does Chen Yunsheng offer up this proof of membership into an exclusive club? His inclusion of his own portrait asks this question in an intriguing manner. Dropped in among the prefaces, the reader after paging through the presence of other writers, conjured up by their distinctive calligraphies, suddenly comes face-to-face with the author himself. Author portraits in illustrated books were not unheard of, however, as with the prefaces, the presence of the author’s portrait is not significant, but the identity of its creator is, for Chen commissioned his portrait from Ren Bonian. The portrait’s authorship stands out; this is not a typical author portrait, which could be fairly stylized and conventionalized renditions of the author as gentleman, instead, the unusual cropped, close-up composition, and its use of a three-quarter pose, suggests the adoption of portraiture practices familiar in the West, that call on the subject’s physical presence and weight. At the same time, Ren’s hand is evident in the use of a lively and abstracted line that gives the figure and face both a pleasing specificity, and a stylized energy. Ren is known to have been a popular source of author portraits for writers seeking such an image to cap off their collected writings; in this, Chen seems to have again aped the
conventions of the contemporary wenji or collected writings. It is generally understood that Ren’s portraits were difficult to obtain, and that one had to know the artist in order to get one; it suggests that the very fact of the portrait was yet another form of proof of the author’s status and connections. The very achievement of obtaining this portrait is highlighted in the careful labeling of the portrait on the next page, presumably for those who would not recognize the acquisition of the portraits for the acquisition it was. Few author portraits are allotted their own inscription and commentary so that potential readers would grasp the full import of the portrait’s inclusion in the book. The portrait, and more importantly, the labeling of the portrait, suggests that potential readers were identified as possibly being outside the upper echelons of Shanghai’s scholarly circles.

It is only after wading through this prefatory material that readers reach the images themselves. According to advertisements for the book, the 160 images are based on Chen’s landscape designs made over the years, which had been gathered together by his sons and students. This suggests that the images are Chen’s studio sketches or huagao, the core of designs on which Chen’s paintings were based. While this may be the case, there is nothing fragmentary or makeshift about the images, each reflects the same care and planning invested in the prefaces. In fact, each image is painstakingly presented as polished and self-sufficient, fastidiously composed, and matched with a corresponding poem in Chen’s calligraphy, and a rendition of a seal printed in red. To ensure the reader’s complete attention per design, each image is presented in isolation, without a facing image, giving the sequence of pictures a stately and serious cadence as the reader must proceed slowly from picture to picture. The first image sets the tone for the book: a scene of wintry trees, with the small figure of a woodcutter picking his way
through the maze of bare trunks and branches. The image’s inscription alludes to Song models and imagery, and this apparatus of poetry, calligraphy and seal-carving reminds us again of Chen’s attainments in the artistic realm, and his identity as a scholar artist of a certain prestige and weight.

An important aspect of this book is its refusal to cohere to the model of the *huapu*, or painting manual. This is noticeable in a time when the term *huapu* often seems to be a synonym for the illustrated book, perhaps as an easy category in which to slot books heavy on images and light on texts. Chen meticulously avoids this designation, even though his catalogue of landscapes and landscape motifs readily lends itself to such a nomination. Obviously, the book’s various texts do not signal any kind of instruction or guide, and there is little indication of any address of the amateur or novice. At the same time, the selection of images is an intriguing one. One might expect a series of polished and completed landscape compositions, and indeed, there are a significant number of these. What stands out most about these images may be the element of fantasy and the fantastic. With Chen’s apparent fascination with literati trappings, one would assume that his art work would reproduce the subjects and iconography of the scholar landscape. However, the landscape compositions are a lively mix of fanciful and fictive landscape, with few overtly based on the ancient masters. An exception is this Mi-style landscape; the majority of the other landscape compositions feature imaginary scenery of dramatic and eccentric peaks. These are images that slip pleasantly before the viewer’s eyes. The neatness and completeness of each image, so lovingly and carefully designed, offer thrilling vistas of imaginary landscapes that are thoroughly domesticated by their careful consideration of the viewer’s privileged position, and the inclusion of stand-ins or
vantage points for the viewer, whether it be a civilizing viewing pavilion, a pathway with scholar tidily framed by a natural archway, or two chatty wanderers. Although not overtly narrative, the staffage, conventionalized and clichéd thought it may be, gives a comfortingly escapist and bucolic quality to these tidy landscape fantasies.

More specifically literati fantasies come to the fore with the other category of designs that fill the book, and these are the vignettes and landscape motifs that are fragments of larger views. Again, these motifs avoid open storytelling, but often focus on the human and architectural elements that connote an idealized scholar’s world. Considering Chen Yunsheng’s anxieties over his scholarly status, it is hard not to interrogate these scenes for their possible personal and biographical allusions. One might note, for example, an image showing a group of scholars in pleasant communion, seated in a lakeside pavilion, attended to by female musicians and obedient servants. The attention paid by the assembled scholars to the flute-playing musician causes this image to deviate from the usual elegant gathering, this is, in fact, a scene recognizable as a poeticized depiction of Shanghai’s pricey commercialized entertainments that often centered on female performers, and familiar from contemporary accounts of elite gatherings, in poem form, found in places such as the newspaper. An elite gathering was virtually staged in its own way the opening pages of Chen’s book, and one wonders what contemporary encounters and rituals are summoned up by the scholarly companionship so frequently staged in the book’s images. One might even look again at a typical design featuring a scholar, tête-à-tête with the volumes of books heaped in front of him, seated in a study suspended in a bower of trees that bear it up and cozily enclose it; above, a flock of birds take flight like thoughts. This romantic image of the highminded recluse,
is unexpectedly transformed by the inclusion of a wine shop flag, half-hidden in the leaves. The connotations of pleasure and conviviality displace our hermit from his wilderness retreat and plops him down in a more urban-friendly and updated vision of the literati, that seems appropriate to 1876 Shanghai.

This scene of the scholar and the scholar’s study is a frequent one in the book, and often the scholar is shown absorbed in some tome, lost in the act of reading. In other of these small scenarios, the motif of the book becomes the centerpiece of the image. In scene after scene, the fetishized book is featured front and center, occasionally filling the study in the form of imposing walls and stacks of volumes. In some of these scenes, the books leave no room for the scholar, who is ousted from the study, and left to look on sadly from the sidelines. This particular manifestation of the book is somewhat unusual; it is not a motif often found in contemporary paintings of the period and it is hard not to see its repeated appearance here as a reification of a certain imaginary of the scholar enshrined in the paratext, and a constant reminder of the very book in our hands, itself an incarnation of sorts of the author. The importance of this book to its author may be summed up by its final image, a surprising iconic image of the sun over the ocean waves, symbolic of universal order, that suggests the cosmic gravity of the landscape to its maker.

This tinkering with the conventions of the literati iconography bring us back to the fact that Chen’s primary occupation was an artist who specialized in landscape painting, in a period when landscape was decidedly declining in popularity. Unfortunately, few of his works now survive, but the few that do reveal his landscapes to incorporate color and the bold visuality so important to this period, and eschew the
traditional scholar landscape’s bland refinements with the use of lively figural details. One landscape, tellingly in the style of Qiu Ying, suggests that Chen’s modus operandi was essentially modular, inserting a series of engaging narrative motifs into the larger structure of the landscape, a landscape that is bundled with entertaining, eye-catching and decorative appeal. This is landscape for a market not particularly interested in landscape. And it is apparent that the pictures in the book are the distillation of a career’s worth of work, drawn from the artist’s huagao or study sketches, but remade into Chen’s magnum opus, the culmination of his oeuvre. The heightened intentions Chen may have held for his book bring the elitist framework of the book into tension with the actual nature of the images: charming and delightful, this procession of scenes is like a fictive pictorial travelogue that takes the viewer on a journey to distant and pleasant places.

As mentioned above, upon publication, the book was available in two editions, priced at four yuan, with a five yuan edition, printed on finer paper, also available. The book, judging from advertisements and its numerous subsequent editions, was a runaway success. It features prominently in Chen’s biographies, suggesting its important place in his career, and in the establishment of his reputation. However, it is less clear that the book was received in the way that Chen intended. He reissued the book in 1881, but other later editions have an unclear relationship with the author. It is here that the book begins its own trajectory as a prized commodity that takes on a life of its own in which it supersedes its author. This is most clearly indicated in an advertisement for one later edition put out by Dianshizhai press in a pocket-sized lithograph edition. The ad makes minimal mention of Chen, instead, it touts the book’s entertainment value, and its thrilling imagery of “strange peaks, inaccessible precipices, eccentric rocks, hoary pines,
remote fauna and rare flora,” reinterpreting the book’s value to its audience. Reduced in size and price, its six jiao price tag only increased the book’s availability. The august publishing house Saoye shanfang also issued another edition in 1882, this time priced at five jiao. The book also quickly made its way to other countries: at least three Japanese editions can be identified; an 1880 edition published in Osaka, and different editions published in Tokyo in 1880 and 1882. There is evidence that the book was also sold in Korea. That these other editions were pirated seems self-evident: a Japanese visitor to Shanghai in 1884 ran into one of Chen Yunsheng’s son, who complains to the visitor about his countrymen’s theft of his father’s intellectual property. This is only speculation, but considering the popularity of Shanghai painting in Japan in the 1870s and 1880s, specifically in literati-style artists, the appeal of Chen’s work may be its particular purveyance of a fantasy of China and the Chinese landscape, and also of Chen’s own fantasy of literati accomplishment. That only part of this fantasy had legs is suggested by yet another edition of the book issued in Shanghai in 1923, decades after the death of the author. The widespread reissue of many Shanghai illustrated books during the Republican era suggests a period of reassessment of the legacy of the Shanghai School, Renzhai huasheng is one of many Shanghai books reprinted in the 1920s. By this time, the book had been severely edited: reduced to two volumes, almost every bit of the books numerous prefaces and multiple title pages has been shorn away, stripping away the artist’s elaborately constructed public persona, leaving only Chen’s gentle landscape fantasies.
Abstract: Renzhai’s Painting Legacy, 1876: The Book as Artist in Shanghai

The introduction of lithography to Shanghai in the late Qing revitalized the publishing industry and gave rise to the busy production of illustrated books, many cheaply produced and featuring the designs of the treaty port’s most fashionable artists, targeting a broad urban audience. Fighting the trend of mass-produced, multi-artist publications, the artist Chen Yunsheng (1820-1884, courtesy name: Renzhai) took the unusual step in 1876 of publishing a luxury four-volume edition of his own landscape designs, Renzhai huasheng [Renzhai’s Painting Legacy] in a traditional woodblock format. Unlike many contemporary illustrated books, Chen’s book was exactingly structured, particularly in its prefatory materials which guided the reader through an extensive series of title slips, title pages and laudatory prefaces authored by well-known calligraphers and scholars. Upon finally reaching the illustrations, each is revealed to be a carefully-crafted union of Chen’s painting, poetry and calligraphy. By examining the innovations in and details of the book’s format, this paper will investigate the book’s multiple purposes for its author: magnum opus, affirmation of his scholarly achievements and social standing, and even as a stand-in for the artist and his best achievements. The book’s identity as the author’s self-image is emblematic of Shanghai’s highly-commercialized art market which called on artists to create a public persona, and thus suggests other possible identities for the book: as a commercial undertaking, and as a tool for self-promotion and self-advertisement.

2 Zhang Mingke, Hansong ge tanyi suolu [A record of discussions of art from the Cold Pine Pavilion] (1908; reprint, Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1987), 71.