

### 34. Anonymous, Ming dynasty (16th century)

#### “A Confucian Bowing to Li Tieguaì”

Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk  
131.7 x 74.8 cm. (51 7/8 x 29 1/2 in.)



In a space defined by foreground rock, rising tree, and misty valley in the background appear two figures, the one bowing very low in honor of the other, who sits comfortably on a rock; trees and rocky cliffs complete the scene behind. The seated figure can be identified as the Daoist immortal Li Tieguaì (“Iron-crutch Li”) by his crutch and bare stomach. The man before him wears a scholar’s robe and a jade belt and is surely intended to represent a Confucian scholar-official, one whose horse is tethered almost out of sight behind the figures but which gives the impression that the Confucian spent some effort to seek out Li. The scene might represent the conversion to Daoism of this scholar by the immortal Li, one of the most popular and powerful of the Eight Immortals, or perhaps this individual has come to seek special favor, perhaps a cure for himself or a loved one, from the accessible and generous, if irascible, divinity known for his ability to drive away illness and heal the infirm.

The story of how Li Yuan, Yuan being his original given name, became an immortal trapped in the body of a disheveled beggar is a fascinating one that can only be partially told here. Having studied Daoist precepts with no less than the father of Daoism himself, Laozi, Li was blessed with the ability to take leave of his body and embark on long journeys near and far without it. When this handsome individual was on an out-of-body trek, his apprentice, due to some very bad judgment, had his master’s lifeless body cremated. When Li returned, he was alarmed to find his own body had disappeared and thus entered the only available body, that of a beggar who had just died from starvation. Then, after having been tested time and again unawares by Laozi to determine his worthiness, Li was elevated to the ranks of the immortals, his earthly body remaining that of the crippled, beggar. Li was given an iron crutch to lean on and hence his name, Li Tieguaì, “Iron Crutch Li.” Laozi also presented Li with a magical gourd with which he could cure all illness and he was thus a popular and much sought after immortal given his healing abilities. Although his gourd is not on view in the present painting, the crutch Laozi had created from the magical gourd is, as well as a daunting expression conveying the bad temper Li was known to have exercised, despite his beneficent nature. The beggar further had large popping eyes, seen in the present painting, and the immortal was thus also called “Hollow-eyed Li”.

Although unsigned and undated by inscription, the painting speaks for itself, claiming a place within the oeuvre of the great Ming dynasty Zhe school of painters, active during the 15th-16th century. Zhejiang, the source of the name, was home of the Southern Song dynasty and its extraordinary 13th century painters Ma Yuan and Xia Gui. The Zhe school was comprised of artists, many from Zhejiang themselves, who followed in the footsteps of these Song masters but also included artists from other areas, such as Fujian and Anhui provinces, that worked in Zhe school style.

Expressive figures in swiftly brushed, often windblown landscape settings were a specialty of these artists. The style of the figures here brings to mind those of the painter Wu Wei (1459-1508), one of the most accomplished artists of this school and himself known as the “Small Immortal,” as well as other artists working later in the 16th century. The faces of the figures are done with great facility. The individuality and eccentricity especially of the Li Tieguaai is in keeping with Zhe school modes. While the ragged and jagged lineament of the drapery is not unrelated to a painting by Wu Wei (1459-1508) (fig. 1) and also to the well-known professional master, Zhou Chen (c. 1455-after 1536), (fig. 2), that mannerism is here taken to an expressive extreme establishing the present artist as one of great daring and originality. The landscape elements are precisely what one expects from a Zhe school painter as demonstrated by paintings of the 16th-century artist Wang Zhao (fig. 3) and those attributed to the lesser known but highly accomplished Jiang Gui of the early 16th century (fig. 4). The image of Li Tieguaai also appears in ceramic decoration of the Ming period. Examples here from the early 16th made in China for the Japanese market (figs. 5-6) and early 17th century (figs. 7-8) make us wonder if professional painters were employed to decorate such extraordinary wares.

Zhe school paintings are sometimes signed with the name Ma Yuan and in times past these Ming dynasty works were often accepted as Song paintings. In the present painting the origins of this school are preserved in an apocryphal seal of Ma Yuan, impressed above the horse’s head.



Fig. 1: Wu Wei (1459-1508) , “Strolling Village Entertainers,” handscroll, ink and color on paper, British Museum London, after Richard M. Barnhart, *Painters of the great Ming: The Imperial Court and the Zhe School*, 1993, Dallas, cat. 68, p. 237 (detail).

Fig. 2: Zhou Chen (c. 1455-after 1536), album leaf (ink and colors on silk) from “Beggars and Street Characters,” d. 1516, Honolulu Museum of Art, after Richard M. Barnhart, *Painters of the great Ming: The Imperial Court and the Zhe School*, 1993, Dallas, cat. 89, p. 287 (detail).





Fig. 3: Wang Zhao (16th century), "Scholars in the Mountains," hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, The Art Museum, Princeton University, DuBois Schanck Morris Collection, after Richard M. Barnhart, *Painters of the great Ming: The Imperial Court and the Zhe School*, 1993, Dallas, cat. 106, p. 321.

Fig. 4: Jiang Gui (attributed), "Daoist Immortal," c. 1500, after Richard M. Barnhart, *Painters of the great Ming: The Imperial Court and the Zhe School*, 1993, Dallas, cat, 72, p. 244.



Fig. 5: Underglaze-blue decorated porcelain jar with image of Li Tieguai, early 16th century, Shanghai Museum, after 1988, pl. 48, p. 72



Fig. 6: Detail of figure 3.



Fig. 7: *Kosometsuke*, underglaze-blue decorated square porcelain dish with Buddhist and Daoist eccentrics, Li Tieguai foreground right, late Ming period, 17th century, Effie. B. Allison Collection, Asian art Museum of San Francisco, no. 97, p. 115.