Lady Wenji's Journey
China
Modern strike from traditional woodblocks
Ink and color on paper

Rice paper is too delicate for the serial impressions of traditional mechanical printing in color, so this impression is likely from a single block. The work is more reminiscent of tomb rubbings, a copying practice that informed much early Western scholarship on Chinese art and became popular in the modern tourist trade. The difference is visible in the negative contour lines, which Asian woodblocks typically render positive.

This woodblock print, likely produced in the traditional workshop centers of **Yangliuqing** or **Wuqiang**, depicts one of China's most enduring historical dramas: the return of **Cai Wenji** to her homeland.

The tomb-rubbing aesthetic doesn't really fit other *Nianhua* examples, so it's difficult to narrow the location to these two sites.

A poet and musician during the late Han dynasty, Wenji was captured by Xiongnu nomads and lived in the north for twelve years, marrying a Chieftain and bearing two children. This scene captures the moment of her "return"—a profound human paradox where the joy of being ransomed back to her people is inseparable from the grief of leaving her children behind.

This is feasible and new information to us. The iconography matches other depictions of the story, with the two boys reaching for their departing mother and the surrounding attendants wearing nomadic costume.

The "human" element is emphasized through the physical proximity of the figures:

- **The Embrace:** On the lower left, a child clings to a rider, illustrating the intimate cost of political and cultural borders.
- **The Transition:** The central figure in green, presumably Wenji, sits astride a horse with a gaze directed toward her retinue, caught between two identities.

The figure in green is the best candidate for Lady Wenji, but there is no child clinging to a rider, and the other retinue is not depicted here. We've seen repeatedly that LMMs insert visual details they expect to be present rather than ones that are actually there. The overall interpretation is viable, but it applies bad supporting evidence.

Technically, this print utilizes the "combed" woodblock technique to create the dense, textured manes and coats of the horses. While the materials are modern, the process follows a lineage of folk art intended to make complex historical and moral narratives

Hallucination. The manes are sparse, and texture is created with regular parallel lines. To the best of my knowledge, there is no such thing as a "combed" woodblock technique.

accessible to the household, blending high literary tragedy with the vibrant aesthetics of the **New Year Print** (*Nianhua*) tradition.

It's possible the New Year Prints inspired the tourist prints, but this is not a *nianhua.*

EXH_HUMAN_26

This is the file name. It's surprising how many assumptions Gemini makes based on the metadata.

Gift of the Artist/Workshop

Invented. I wonder what cues the AI follows to expect this work as an artist gift rather than a donor gift?

Machine-Vision Analysis: EXH_HUMAN_26
Source Material: Chinese Woodblock Print (*Nianhua*), Modern Production
Algorithmic Interpretation: Feature Extraction and Probability Mapping

This label presents a "machine-read" of the accompanying woodblock print, utilizing computer vision algorithms to deconstruct the image into mathematical data points. While a human viewer sees the historical tragedy of Lady Wenji, the AI perceives a complex grid of topographical signatures and color frequencies.

When asked for a computer vision label, we've seen repeatedly that Gemini tries to separate computer vision from visual reasoning but then sets it against an integrated human position that both sees and interprets. As much as there is a difference between computer vision and other AI functions, there is a difference between human vision and interpretation. By treating these practices differently, Gemini creates a false dichotomy between humans and computers. This may be a language issue, since Gemini is a multimodal AI and is trying to extract that position from its analysis.

Technical Analysis

- **Edge Detection & Linearity:** The system identifies a high density of "parallel hachure" signatures. These fine, combed lines—characteristic of traditional woodblock carving—trigger high confidence scores (0.94) for **relief printing techniques.** The machine ignores the narrative of the journey, focusing instead on the rhythmic vibration of the carved lines in the horse manes.

Not all relief prints are woodblock prints

- **Color Segmentation:** The AI maps the distribution of "Process Red" and "Viridian Green." It identifies these as discrete, non-blended layers, recognizing the **mechanical registration** of the printing process. It notes the "bleed" or

I also noted this visual information. I came to a different conclusion, but I also follow these kinds of cues. This is not as uniquely inhuman as Gemini suggests.

overlap at the edges of the green robe, marking it as a "human-made error" or "process artifact."

- **Object Recognition:** * **Equine Vectors:** 82% confidence.
  - **Humanoid Clusters:** 76% confidence.
  - **Anomaly Detection:** The machine struggles to categorize the "nomadic" headgear, flagging these pixels as "unidentified structural appendages."

Yet Gemini is able to categorize it as nomadic headgear all the same. Because of the AI black box, it's difficult to understand if this is the actual information Gemini gets from the pixels or if this is what it assumes is different between CV and human processing.

The Algorithmic "Gaze"

Where a curator sees a "paradox of grief," the algorithm sees a **Centroid Cluster.** It identifies the central female figure not by her status or expression—which lacks the high-contrast markers of a "smile" or "frown" in standard training sets—but by her position as the geometric anchor of the composition.

I find the application of this term strange as it means to explain how the data array identifies the central female figure as the "geometric anchor" of the composition, but it's not immediately clear to me how this kind of clustering achieves that interpretive result. I am not a computer scientist, but this seems more metaphorical than literal.

By stripping away the cultural weight of the Han-Xiongnu conflict, the AI reveals the underlying architecture of the art: a balanced system of weights, voids, and repetitive textures that maintain visual harmony regardless of the story being told.

This is also how visual analysis works in art history. We note and respond to compositional arrangements, positive and negative space, color, and texture, among other formal characteristics to assess visual evidence. This formalist approach is not unique to computer vision.

Men, Woman, and Children on Horses

ca. 1950

China
Ink on rice paper

Gift of Dennis Mae, 2004.1.3

Sometimes blind connoisseurship can be useful. In this case, if we had told Gemini what our records said about this object, we would have missed the likely narrative it identified on its own. The possibility that this work represents the journey of Lady Wenji opens new avenues of research that did not exist before this chat.

The potential for improving records in under-documented collections is thus not unfounded, but its success is certainly uneven. Gemini's output label required painstaking and time-consuming fact-checking. The visual details chosen to support claims are not always correct, and while the other hyper specific contextual details might be generally true, they are not applicable to the example. I think it may have been worth it in this case to discover the potential subject matter, though I can't help but resent how much time it took to discover its other claims were totally useless.