

Gong Kai, the painter of the painting below (and another later), was an extreme loyalist, who had held a minor post under the Song but lived in extreme poverty after the Mongol conquest, supporting his family by occasionally selling paintings or exchanging them for food.



Gong Kai (1222-1307?), *Emaciated Horse*

SOURCE: Gong Kai (1222-1307?), *Emaciated Horse*, in *Genjidai no kaiga* (Tokyo: Yamato Bunkakan, 1998), pl. 1, p. 26. Collection of the Osaka Municipal Museum.

Handscroll, ink on paper, 29.9 x 56.9 cm.

SOME THOUGHTS: Scholars had long likened themselves to horses. Mistreated horses are still noble animals, like the noble but maligned scholars.

In 1271, [Kublai Khan](#) and the Mongols began assembling the oppressed Chinese people of the Song Dynasty to rise up against the current government. Over several years, he successfully brought the Song Dynasty to an end in 1279 with the [Battle of Yamen](#) and established the Yuan Dynasty, also called Da Yuan. The Mongols offered government

positions to some servants of the Song Dynasty because they wanted to employ certain aspects of the previous government. However, it was unlikely that they would have asked Gong Kai. Even though he had previously served under the former government, Gong Kai, being from Southern China, was now at the bottom of the social hierarchy under the Mongol Rule.

As a Song loyalist, Gong Kai could not work under the new government. He and many other loyalists became *i-min*. An *i-min* was literally a “left-over subject” who chose to live a life of exile. Without a productive method of protest, the *i-min* turned to forms of symbolic protest, such as their paintings. Quite frequently, they would meet and write poetry about their losses due to the fall of the Song Dynasty. After the defeating of the Song, Gong Kai fled to [Hangzhou](#) on the Yangtze River where he would spend his time writing and painting. He used his paintings as a medium of expression for his thoughts of the new government. This is most reflected in the painting *Jun Gu a Noble Horse*. Without his government job, Gong Kai’s family became extremely impoverished. The only sources of income to the family were the sale of Gong Kai’s paintings and calligraphy and the occasional trade for essential goods. Some accounts even suggest that Gong Kai was not able to afford a table and instead laid the paper on his son’s back to paint.

Paintings from the Yuan Dynasty were unlike any others produced in previous eras in China. Due to the Mongol seizure of the Song Dynasty and the difficult economic state, the existence of many professional art schools and painters in China began to decline. Now, fewer artists were working for the imperial courts or other wealthy sponsors. This led to the rise of the preexisting class of scholar-amateur painters, like Gong Kai. Since he was not a trained professional painter, Gong Kai’s style of painting could be described as amateur in appearance and straightforward. Some scholars believe that reason for his style was due to his appearance. He was reported as being an “imposing figure,” very tall and with a long beard. They feel that his rough looks caused his brushwork to be coarse and added the “oddness of the images in his paintings.”

The animal is probably meant to be from the Song Dynasty (even though drawn in the Tang Dynasty style). In previous years, this horse had been

a noble, lively, and youthful creature, but now is reduced to a mere skeleton, clutching onto the last pieces of his shattered dignity. One possibility is that the horse is a symbol for the devastated Song Dynasty. Another possibility is that the horse represents Gong Kai and other scholars like himself (especially since horses during this time period generally were used as a metaphor for humans). To Gong Kai, Jun Gu a Noble Horse is an i-min just like himself.

(Wiki)