to be timeless faces. The two portraits may well have been done after death, possibly by an artist who had never even seen the sitters. Often, artists would use physiognomy charts – not unlike our police identikit sketches, designed to put together a likeness and a personality. They showed how to draw high cheek bones, for example, and thus indicate that a person's personality was full of power. Certain kinds of eyebrows would reveal intelligence. These charts showed classic facial characteristics – and what they told us about the person who possessed them.

Veneration was principally owed to the portrait of the father, but families would often request a portrait of the mother as well. They would be hung together, with the husband's portrait always to the east of his wife's – the place of greater honour. The similarity in scale and dress in these two portraits might suggest that these were husband and wife. But the fact that their chairs are different (the man's is decorated in lacquer, the woman's is of wood) indicates that they are probably unconnected, and that they were paired only much later in order to appeal to Western collectors – a marriage made not in heaven but by a dealer, for the art market. Yet whether singly or together, these portraits were made, as Jan Stuart describes, to enable the people they represented to play a role in the lives of their descendants for centuries after their death:

Portraits like these were brought out for specific occasions, of which the Chinese New Year is the most important. Lighted candles and burning incense would be placed below them, along with offerings of fruit and wine. Then the chief descendant, the oldest son, along with other family members, would pay obeisance to the portraits. They would kneel down and knock their heads on the floor in front of them, so that the deceased parent or grandparent would know that they were being honoured, that the family was still connected to them and would make sure that the departed souls were properly cared for.

People would have been well aware of what could happen if they failed in their duties towards paintings like these ones, and the people they represented. Ancestral spirits remained benign as long as they were cared for appropriately, and from time to time they would take up residence in these portraits to receive offerings. Decades, even centuries later, they would recognize themselves in the painting – hence the care taken to secure the timeless elements of their likeness – and so would know which one to inhabit. The man in our portrait has on his chest a panel of splendid embroidery, clearly a badge of rank. Fascinatingly, however, it may not be his own rank. Ancestors remained so closely identified with their descendants that if a son or grandson got a promotion in, say, the

Giving thanks in front of a portrait of an ancestor, in a painting by Yin Tang of around 1500