Calligraphic Style and Poetry Handscrolls: On Mi Fu's *Sailing on the Wu River*

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Chinese calligraphy has been divided roughly into two broad stylistic categories, traditional and innovative. The former, alternatively called the classic style, refers to works dating from before the mid-T'ang dynasty; the latter, also called the modern style, dates from that period onward. During the Six Dynasties period, traditional-style calligraphy came to be judged by the criteria of naturalness (*t'ien-jan* 天然) and craftsmanship (*kung-fu* 工夫). A perfect harmony between spontaneity of spirit, on the one hand, and skillful adherence to the techniques of the old masters, on the other, was considered the apex of classical excellence. By contrast, innovative calligraphy avoided direct imitation of the old masters. By seeking to create new art forms that expressed the triumph of the human spirit over conformity to traditional technique, it escaped mere formalism. It is this concern for the human element that gives this style its modern designation.

The shift from the traditional to the innovative began during the reign of Empress Wu 武后 (685–705) and culminated during the K'ai-yüan 開元 (713–41) and T'ien-pao 天寶 (742–56) eras of Emperor Hsüan-tsung's 玄宗 reign (712–55). This shift in style and subject matter corresponds to the period in which T'ang culture, in general, reached its most mature level of expression. (In Chinese the term for maturity, *lan-shou* 爛熟, also implies the sense of being overripe—of having just passed one's zenith—and is often compared to the confused state of a banquet table at the end of a feast.)

The trend in calligraphy had parallels in the literary and art worlds as well. It is believed that Wu Tao-tzu 吳道子 (active ca. 710–60), for example, borrowed the attenuated brush form in his paintings from the cursive-script calligraphy of Chang Hsü 張旭 (ca. 700–750) and Ho Chih-chang 賀知章 (659–744), who were famous for their wild-cursive script (*k'uang-ts'ao* 狂草) and with whom Wu had studied. Although Wu never mastered the art of calligraphy, he learned to share Chang Hsü's and Ho Chih-chang's fondness both for wild-cursive script and for alcohol. In fact, Wu was reputed never to have painted sober. The influence of Ho and Chang on Wu resulted in a new, abbreviated style of landscape painting, exemplified by Wu's depictions of precipitous mountain paths in the Shu region, or Szechwan Province. In addition, Wu is said to have worked in line drawings without pigment (*pai-miao* 白描). Later, during the K'ai-yüan era, he witnessed the double-sword dance of Fei Min 裴旻 (active first quarter of the eighth century), a general of unparalleled valor, and became captivated by the phantomlike flickering movements of that mysterious figure. It is said that those movements, too, were directly incorporated into Wu's paintings. Wu Tao-tzu clearly exemplifies the creative spirit of the period. He is an excellent example of the difference between the traditional and innovative styles. Such a change in technique, triggered by personal experience, never could have occurred among calligraphers of the classic school, in which imitation of the masters was the standard of excellence.

Other key figures were Wang Wei 王維 (701–61), who founded a new style of landscape painting that came to be known as literati painting (*wen-jen hua* 文人畫), and his contemporary Wang Mu 王默 (d. 805). Like Wu Tao-tzu, Wang Mu painted under the influence of alcohol; he was known for dipping his hair in ink and using it in lieu of a paintbrush. The calligrapher mentioned above, Chang Hsü, did likewise. This is why he is nicknamed "Upside-down Chang." He was famous for his flamboyant style of writing when he was intoxicated. He would shout out a phrase and then write it horizontally or vertically on a wall in his wild-cursive script to the applause of appreciative onlookers. He was said to have been enlightened to the essence of calligraphy upon seeing the sword dance of Kung-sun Ta-niang 公孫大娘 (active first half of the eighth century).

In the literary field, there was the great poet Li Po 李白 (701–62), who was dubbed "the drunken immortal." His old-style ballads (*ku-yüeh-fu* 古樂府) are free and uninhibited, often expressing a devil-may-care attitude that was in keeping with the style and atmosphere of his time. Li, Ho Chih-chang, and Chang Hsü are included among the Eight Immortals of Wine (*Yin-chung pa-hsien* 飲中八仙) in Tu Fu's (712–70) poem of the same name. For best expressing the flavor and temperament of the K'ai-yüan and T'ien-pao eras, Li Po's songs and poetry, Fei Min's sword dances, and Chang Hsü's wild-cursive calligraphy were hailed as "the three perfections" (*san-chüeh* 三絶) during the reign of the T'ang emperor Wen-tsung 文宗 (827–39).

Upon closer inspection of these immortals of wine of the K'ai-yüan–T'ien-pao era, however, a curious point emerges. Although Chang Hsü's wild-cursive script had great mass appeal, it seems doubtful that Chang himself took it seriously. Considering that his *Lang-kuan shih-chi* 郎官石記 (*Stone Inscriptions of the Senior Secretaries of the Board*), dated 741, was executed in orthodox standard script (*k'ai-shu* 楷書) and that his many disciples included his celebrated contemporaries Yen Chen-ch'ing 顏真卿 (709–85), Li Po, Li Yang-ping 李陽冰 (dates unknown), Hsü Hao 徐浩 (703–82), and Chang Ts'ung-shen 張從申 (dates unknown), it would seem that his works in fantastic cursive script were done "for amusement" and were not intended as serious art. It was Han Yü 韓愈 (768–824) who first elevated wild-cursive script to such a distinction. As a master of old-style prose (*ku-wen* 古文)—a form which was revived in reaction to the artificial Six Dynasties–style of parallel prose—Han Yü ranks with Liu Tsung-yüan 柳宗元 (773–819). Han discusses Chang Hsü's cursive script in the preface to his "Seeing Off the Monk Kao-hsien" ("Sung Kao-hsien shang-jen hsü" 送高閑上人序):

> When he was moved by joy or anger, poverty, grief, sorrow or pleasure, resentment or longing, intoxication, boredom, or discontent, he would always express it in cursive script. Furthermore, he would create a calligraphic counterpart for what he saw in nature—mountains and rivers, valleys and cliffs, birds and animals, insects and fish, grass and trees, flowers and fruit, sun and moon, the constellations, wind and rain, water and fire, thunder and lightning, song and dance, and the vicissitudes of all things in heaven and earth. Rejoicing over them, amazed by them, he would express them through his calligraphy. Thus the variations in Chang Hsü's calligraphy are as unfathomable as the motivations of gods and demons. For these reasons his name is known by later generations.[1]

In short, Han praises Chang for seeking subjects in nature to write about and for ex-

pressing the feelings in his heart when he writes about them. Han Yü had no interest in Chang Hsü's crazy behavior but, rather, in the intrinsic truth in the heart of the man. For Han Yü this was the essential lesson to be learned.

Han Yü's theory is rooted in the spirit of old-style prose composition, which takes the Original Way (*yüan-tao* 原道) as its essence: one seeks to learn not from a particular teacher but from the Way (*tao* 道) itself. In contrast to the luxurious dalliances of the parallel-prose writers, who had prevailed since the Six Dynasties period, the masters of old-style prose sought to strip away excess and return to the basic nature of things. Using as their model the prose style of the Ch'in and Han dynasties, they took as their standard a respect for simplicity and antique artlessness. And so was born a new prose style in harmony with the new age. In like fashion, in the sphere of calligraphy, Yen Chen-ch'ing created a new style based upon the ancient seal script (*chuan-shu* 篆書) and clerical script (*li-shu* 隸書). The special characteristics of Yen's cursive script can be seen in the spontaneously executed drafts of his compositions, which we can see today on stelae (fig. 18). Huai-su 懷素 (ca. 735–800?) studied calligraphy under Chang Hsü and excelled in wild-cursive script. He was universally praised and commemorated by the poets of his day in the "Poem on the Cursive Script of the Monk Huai-su" ("Huai-su shang-jen ts'ao-shu ko" 懷素上人草書歌). In this respect, Huai-su was representative of the same trend as Chang Hsü. In the Sung, however, Mi Fu 米芾 (1052–1107) commented: "In comparison with the work of Chang Hsü, Huai-su's calligraphy had a touch of simplicity (*p'ing-tan* 平淡) which approached spontaneity and naturalness. Unfortunately, this achievement was overpowered by the trend of his time. Thus Huai-su was unable to attain the quality of high antiquity in his calligraphy."[2] For Mi Fu, simplicity was the calligraphic ideal; it is noteworthy that he finds this quality in the works of Huai-su.

So far I have discussed the innovative calligraphers of the T'ang dynasty, Chang Hsü, Yen Chen-ch'ing, and Huai-su chief among them. Before I move into the following period, in which the accomplishments of these men bear fruit, one more point about their style of calligraphy needs to be addressed.

The Six Dynasties period is regarded as the high point of Chinese calligraphy. The school that developed around the calligraphic style of Wang Hsi-chih 王羲之 (ca. 307–ca. 365) and his son Wang Hsien-chih 王獻之 (344–86) largely defined the Six Dynasties calligraphic tradition that extended into the first half of the T'ang dynasty. The two Wangs were noted for their standard script, yet most of their extant work is in running and cursive scripts. Although correspondence was executed in standard (*k'ai* 楷), running (*hsing* 行), and cursive (*ts'ao* 草) scripts, the first type was usually reserved for addressing the emperor, the second for superiors, and the third—or a combination of the second and third—was used in ordinary correspondence dealing with daily life. Consequently, very few of the extant works of that period are written in standard script. Accordingly, the calligraphic works of the two Wangs are largely in running and cursive scripts. Their letters have been valued as the highest form of artistic calligraphy. Two examples are Wang Hsi-chih's *Sang-luan t'ieh* 喪亂帖 (*Letter Written in Deep Grief*), in the Imperial Household Collection, Tokyo (fig. 19), and his *K'ung Shih-chung t'ieh* 孔侍中帖 (*Letter to the Official K'ung Shih-chung*), in the Maeda Ikutokukai Collection, Tokyo, which came to Japan during the Nara period (710–94). Valued as among the best examples of his calligraphic style, the two works usually have eight columns per page, sheets of approximately the same dimensions, and characters of mostly medium size (none are large).

The two Wangs' calligraphy was much admired up until the eighth century, around the time of the K'ai-yüan reign of Emperor Hsüan-tsung. At that time there was a change in the content of calligraphy. While correspondence had provided the main texts for calligraphy before the mid-T'ang, thereafter the preference was for literary pieces, both poetry and prose. Also, large-size characters began to be used to write poetry and prose compositions on handscrolls.

Although we have no evidence today, it seems likely that Chang Hsü must have been among those who created poetry or prose handscrolls in large characters. Certainly what he wrote on walls while intoxicated was not correspondence; no doubt it was poetry or snatches of prose, probably the former. One of Li Po's old-style poems (*ku-shih* 古詩) or free-spirited ballads, for example, would have been most appropriate, providing the proper phrasing and easy to slap up any which way on a wall. Chang Hsü's *Ku-shih ssu t'ieh* 古詩四帖 (*Four Old-Style Poems*), an extant handscroll in cursive script, suggests how he must have worked.[3] Also, as Huai-su most closely followed Chang Hsü's free-spirited calligraphic style, we can gain insight into Chang by looking at Huai-su's works. Huai-su's famous *Autobiography* (*Tzu-hsü t'ieh* 自叙帖), dated 777, in the Palace Museum, Taipei, is the best extant example of poetry and prose executed in large-size characters in the handscroll format (figs. 17, 20). Unlike a passage of classical literature, which would have been executed in the small-size standard script of a book, this work of personal reflections is in bold wild-cursive script. It could have been executed only under the influence of alcohol. However, in later generations the *Autobiography* came to be regarded as an expression of art, and attempts were made to imitate it. These later imitations were no longer products of drunken fits. Instead they were executed in states of aberrant exultation. Such works of calligraphy as Chang Hsü's cursive script inspired by the sword dance of Kung-sun Ta-niang and the double-sword dance of Fei Min were fashionable during the K'ai-yüan and T'ien-pao eras. It is not unreasonable to suppose that out of such phenomena, as well as the production of poetic or prose texts in large-size characters, calligraphy moved in the direction of high artistic quality.

During the mid-T'ang, Po Chü-i's 白居易 (772–846) poems were in vogue. According to tradition they were often executed in cursive script. Two fragmentary examples, the *Ayaji-gire* 綾地切 and *Kinuji-gire* 絹地切, have been known in Japan since the Heian period (794–1192). As their names suggest, the first is a patterned damask fragment, and the second is a patterned silk fragment. Both bear Po Chü-i's "New Ballads" ("Hsin-yüeh fu" 新樂府). Traditionally attributed to Fujiwara no Sukemasa 藤原佐理 (944–98), the textile fragments are beautiful examples of poetry executed in cursive script. However, as their calligraphic style closely resembles that of Huai-su's *Shih yü t'ieh* 食魚帖 (*Eating the Fish,* a work executed on paper) and therefore is marked by a strong continental influence, it is questionable that the two fragments are in fact products of Japan. Another example in Japan is a handscroll of a Po Chü-i poem executed in drunken wild-cursive script and attributed to Emperor Daigo 醍醐天皇 (885–930). The final stroke in the cursive character for "wine" in this work extends upward like a dragon tail. This brush technique, known as broken hairpin prongs (*che ch'ai-ku* 折釵股), is identical to that of Chang Hsü. One look at the work immediately reminds us of Chang Hsü's wild-cursive script. This is obviously an imitation that was brought to Japan from the continent and thus is not a work of Emperor Daigo. Another wild-cursive handscroll of which only a fragment remains is a transcription of the *Tso-yu ming* 座右銘 (*Precepts*) by Ts'ui

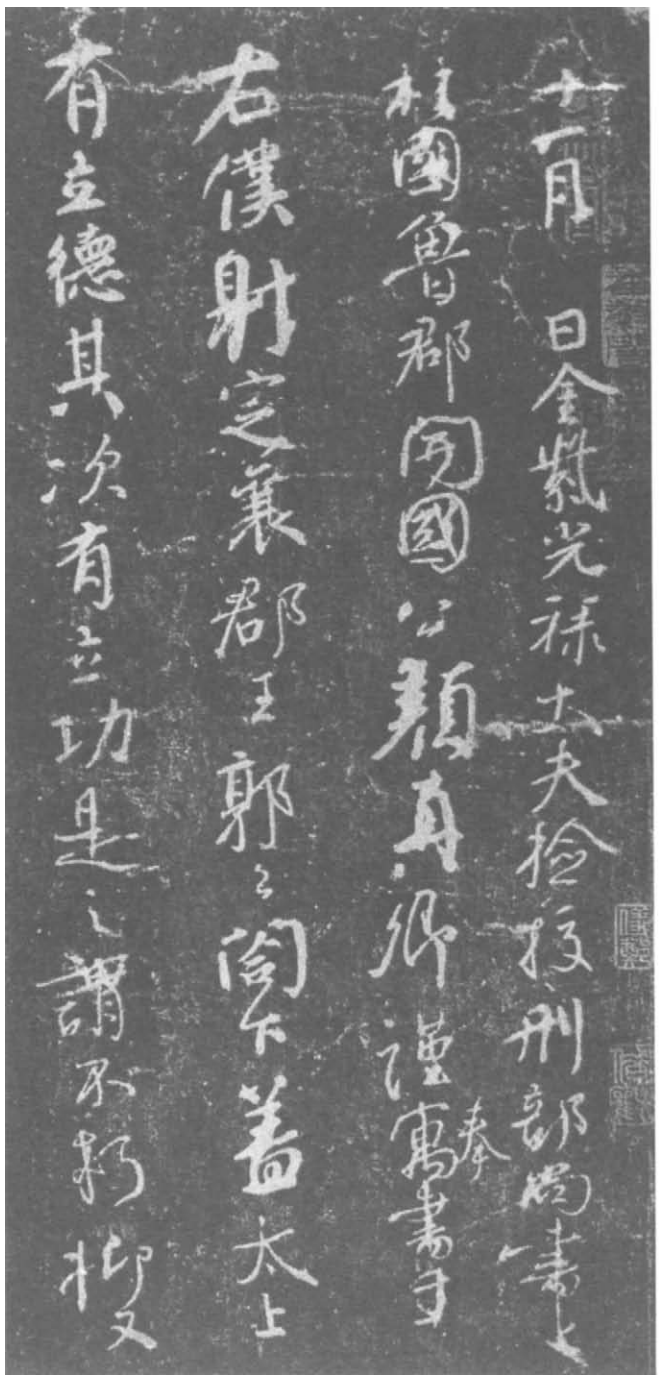


Figure 18.
Yen Chen-ch'ing (709–85),
Cheng tso-wei t'ieh, dated 764.
Rubbing of inscription
(from *Shodō zenshū*
[Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1958–71],
vol. 10, p. 24)

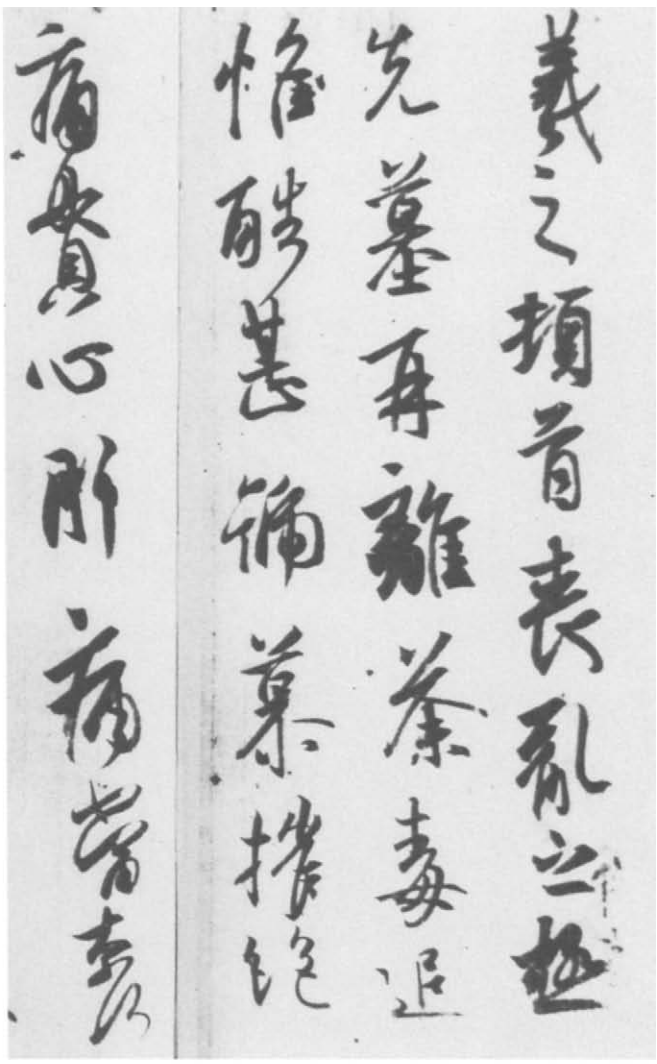


Figure 19.
Wang Hsi-chih (ca. 307–ca. 365),
Sang-luan t'ieh.
Detail of handscroll (tracing copy).
Imperial Household Collection, Tokyo

Yüan崔援 of the Han (Hōki-in Collection, Wakayama Prefecture; fig. 21). The transcription was executed during the Chen-yüan貞元 era of Emperor Te-tsung德宗 (r. 780–804) of the mid-T'ang and has been known in Japan since the Heian period; by tradition, it is attributed to the monk Kūkai空海 (Kōbō Daishi弘法大師; 774–835). It is a handscroll with large-size characters; there are two characters per line, with an occasional single-character line. There is also a dot that looks as if it were made by dropping a brush from above, causing the ink to splatter in all directions. Then there is a stroke executed in a long and high-swept dragon-tail style similar to the broken-hairpin-prongs brush method described above. Thus borrowing from a variety of old techniques, this scroll has the characteristic flavor of Chang Hsü's wild-cursive style. Further, Chang Hsü was also an exponent of the traditional style, emulating the twelve brush methods of the Six Dynasties period. In the *Tso-yu ming* attributed to Kūkai, we find both the traditional cursive style and the newer calligraphic style. This corresponds with what we find in Chang Hsü's works. While in China examples of Chang Hsü's wild-cursive style are most commonly found as rubbings bound into albums, it may be possible to get a feeling for his original calligraphy from the examples transmitted to Japan.

The cursive style nurtured by the innovative calligraphers of the late T'ang bore fruit in the Northern Sung during the reign of Emperor Jen-tsung仁宗 (r. 1023–63). Skilled calligraphers from the gentry class, such as Ou-yang Hsiu歐陽修 (1007–72), Su Shih蘇軾 (1037–1101), and Huang T'ing-chien黃庭堅 (1045–1105), began to circulate writings on calligraphy and reintroduced the styles of Chang Hsü, Yen Chen-ch'ing, and Huai-su of the T'ang and of Yang Ning-shih楊凝式 (873–957) of the Five Dynasties period. Ou-yang Hsiu held that Yen Chen-ch'ing's integrity was obvious in his calligraphy and tried to emulate Yen in his own works. Su Shih also sought to grasp Yen's spirit in his writing. For Su, calligraphy was a manifestation of human nature, the capturing of the five elements of spirit, breath, bones, flesh, and blood. Huang T'ing-chien's models were the Tsin masters. He also adopted the less vulgar qualities of Chang Hsü, Huai-su, and Yang Ning-shih, practicing cursive calligraphy for decades. In the end he achieved a marvelously lofty, transcendent style.

Mi Fu was heir to the radical calligraphy movement of the K'ai-yüan and T'ien-pao eras of the T'ang. A student of Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien, he was interested especially in calligraphy and painting but also in writing implements and inkstones. His remarkable achievements as a calligrapher and painter were due, in part, to the depth of his powers as a connoisseur, in which respect he far surpassed both Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien. Basing his aesthetic on the *Li-tai ming-hua chi*歷代名畫記 (*Record of Famous Paintings of All the Dynasties*) by Chang Yen-yüan張彥遠 (ca. 815–after 875), Mi devised a comprehensive system for evaluation. He became well known initially for his connoisseurship in calligraphy and painting, later extending his expertise to rubbings as well. Putting authenticity first, he personally examined the signatures, colophons, official seals, mountings, scroll rollers, and decorations on each piece. In addition he visited the major collectors of calligraphy throughout the realm. As a result, he was acquainted with almost all the famous works of calligraphy produced between the Tsin and T'ang dynasties extant in China during his time and wrote critical appreciations in addition to making freehand copies of them.

Mi's career began when he was a youth with his copying famous pieces of calligraphy by the old masters. He kept a collection of these copies, which he called "collected

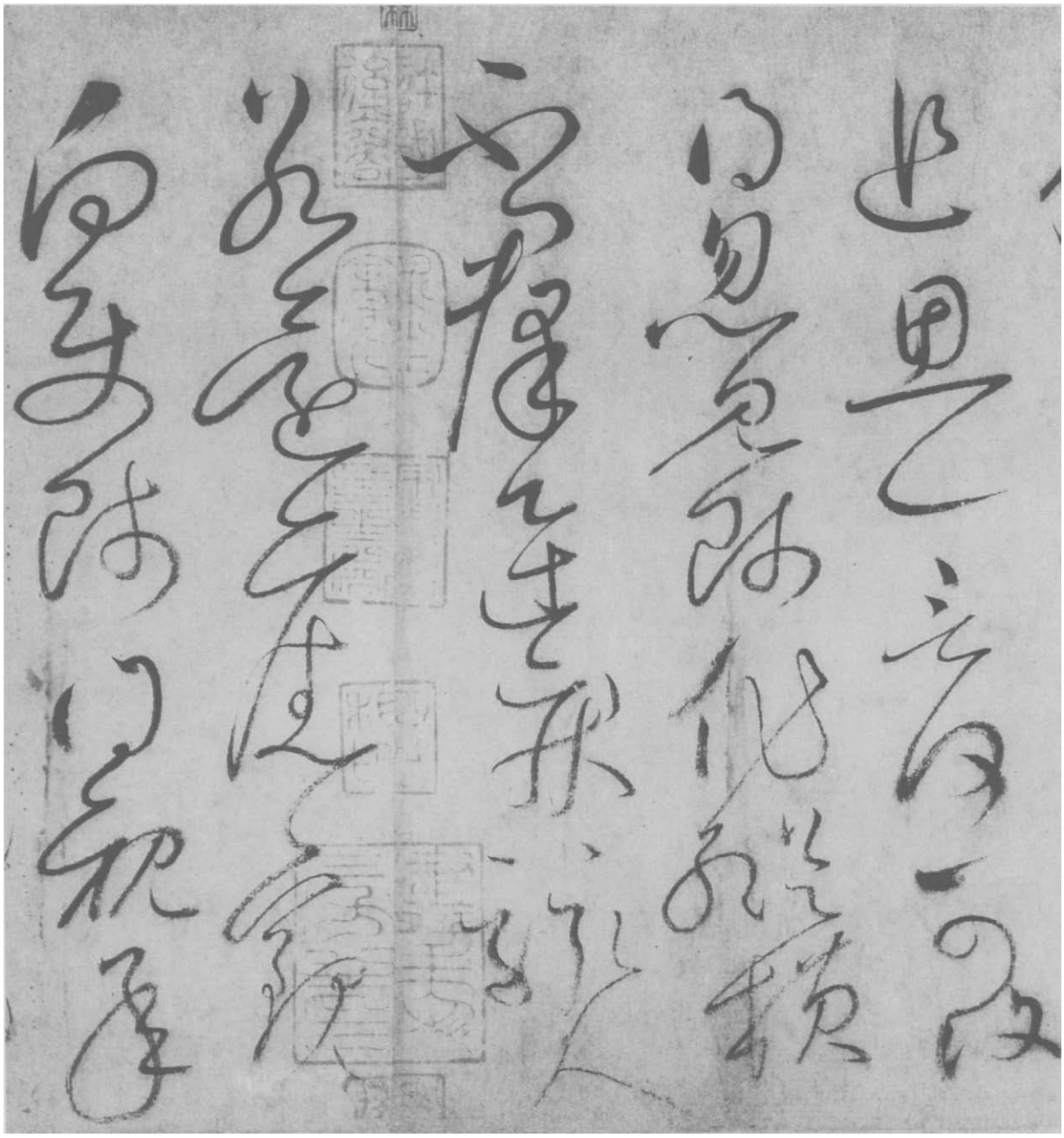


Figure 20. Huai-su (ca. 735–800?),
Autobiography, dated 777.
Detail of handscroll, ink on paper, H. 28.3 cm.
Palace Museum, Taipei

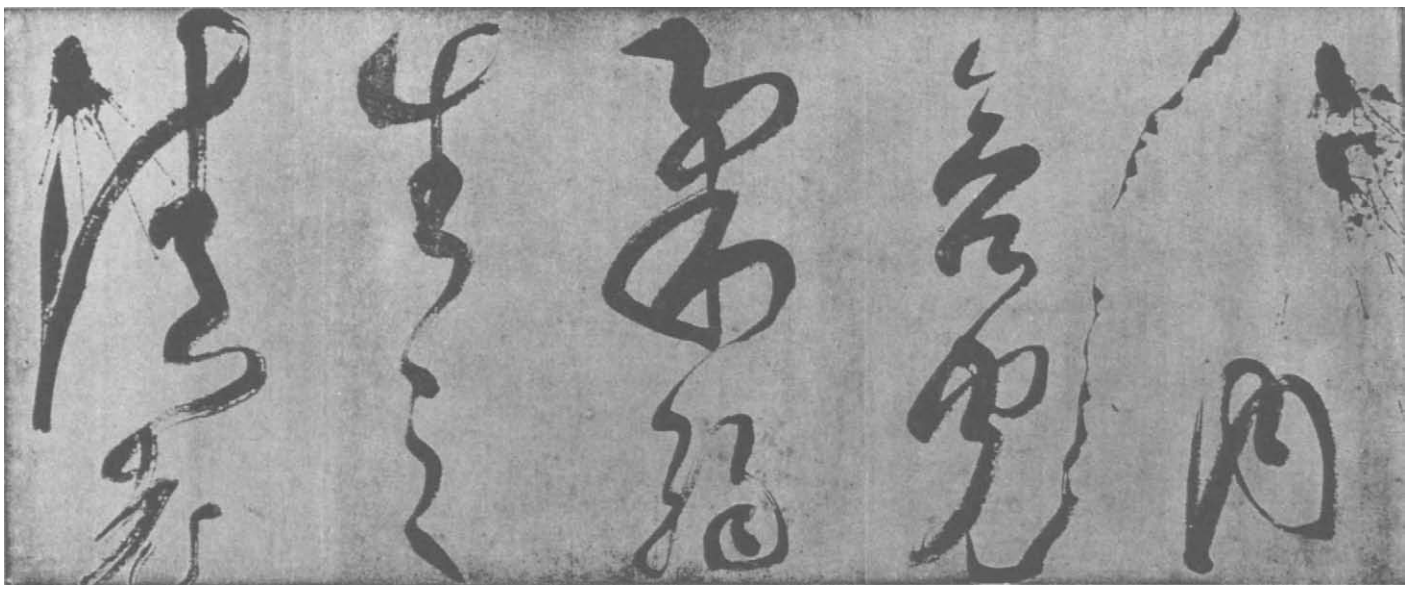


Figure 21. Attributed to Kūkai, *Transcription of Ts'ui Yüan's "Tso-yu-ming."*
Fragment of handscroll, ink on paper, H. 28.5 cm.
Hōki-in Collection, Wakayama Prefecture (from *Shoseki meihin sōkan* [Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1959], vol. 35, pp. 35–36)

characters." Striving to emulate the Tsin masters, he sought out examples of genuine Tsin calligraphy and wrote appreciations of them. Later he managed to acquire a few choice pieces for his own collection housed in a studio which he called the Treasuring the Tsin Studio 寶晉齋. Only in his middle years, when he felt he had mastered the art of copying, did he begin to produce original works. In his own works, Mi aspired to and achieved not only the forms of Tsin calligraphy, but also the spirit of the Tsin masters. He called this spirit "simplicity and truth."

Just as the calligraphic styles of Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien differ from each other, so too did Mi's style differ substantially from his masters'. However, all three shared a respect for the old masters and the desire to grasp the essential element underlying their calligraphy. Su Shih was very insistent on this point. As we can see in his writings on painting, for him, spirit was more important than form. An error in form is correctable, but there is no remedy for a mistake about the principle of things.[4] Huang T'ing-chien is considered the founder of the Kiangsi school of poetry of the Sung dynasty. This school practiced recasting old poems in the creation of new ones, but for them, "exchanging the bones and seizing the womb" meant that one should grasp the spirit rather than the words or phrases of the old masters to create anew. In painting as well, Mi admired the "simplicity and truth" inherent in the brushwork of the Tsin masters. Although the mainstream painters of his time were Li Ch'eng 李成 (919–67), Fan K'uan 范寬 (ca. 960–ca. 1030), and Kuan T'ung 關仝 (active ca. 907–23), Mi favored the natural depiction of clouds and mists in the ink paintings of Tung Yüan 董源 (d. 962) and Chü-jan 巨然 (active ca. 960–80), which embodied for him truth, simplicity, and spontaneity—the same qualities he so admired in Tsin calligraphy.

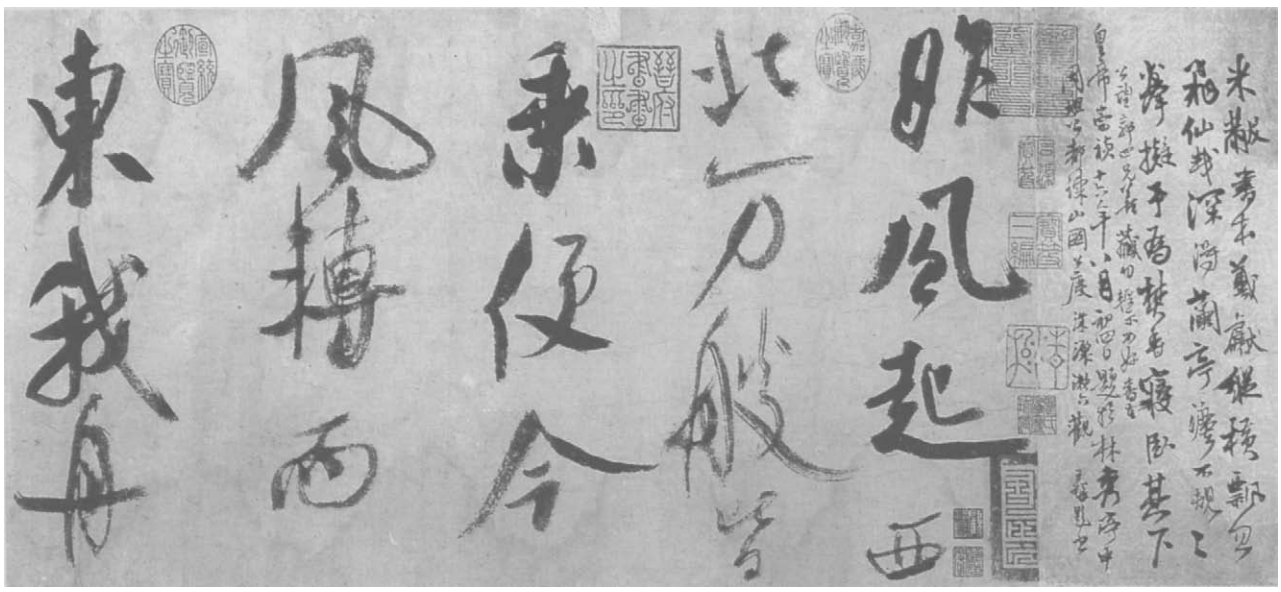


Figure 22. Mi Fu (1052–1107), detail, and Wang To (1592–1652), colophon, to *Sailing on the Wu River.* Handscroll, ink on paper, H. 31.3 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York;
Gift of John M. Crawford, Jr., in honor of Professor Wen Fong, 1984

Mi was a literatus skilled in both calligraphy and painting. His numerous brushworks all fall under the category of calligraphy. Although many difficulties have beset the transmission of T'ang calligraphy, a relatively large number of Sung works have come down to us. Many works of calligraphy by or attributed to Mi have survived. They embrace a wide variety of styles. A large category of these works are literary pieces—transcriptions of poems (*shih* 詩), lyric songs (*tz'u* 詞), and rhyme-prose pieces (*fu* 賦)—which Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien also produced in great numbers. Most of Mi's works of this type were executed in running script or a highly informal cursive script in the handscroll format stemming from the poetry and prose handscrolls executed in large-size characters of the post–mid-T'ang period. However, Mi usually used ordinary medium-size characters, and only on some handscrolls do we find a line consisting of one, two, or three large-size characters, an outstanding example of which is his *Sailing on the Wu River* (*Wu-chiang chou chung shih* 吳江舟中詩) handscroll in the John M. Crawford, Jr., Collection (figs. 22, 23). Note that writing poetry and prose in large-size characters on handscrolls brings out the poetic quality of a literary work. This type of calligraphy must be discussed in terms of art. This innovative calligraphy can be contrasted with traditional calligraphy, which consists mostly of correspondence, with virtually no literary texts written in large characters.

Mi's calligraphy is also found on stelae, grave markers, and other types of engravings—some of which exist as rubbings and others as brush-written copies. There is no question as to the authenticity of most of these. The brush-written copy of his inscription on the stele of the Ch'an master T'ien-i 天衣 (993–1064) is a noteworthy example. We also find numerous Mi inscriptions in small-size characters in eulogies, grave markers,

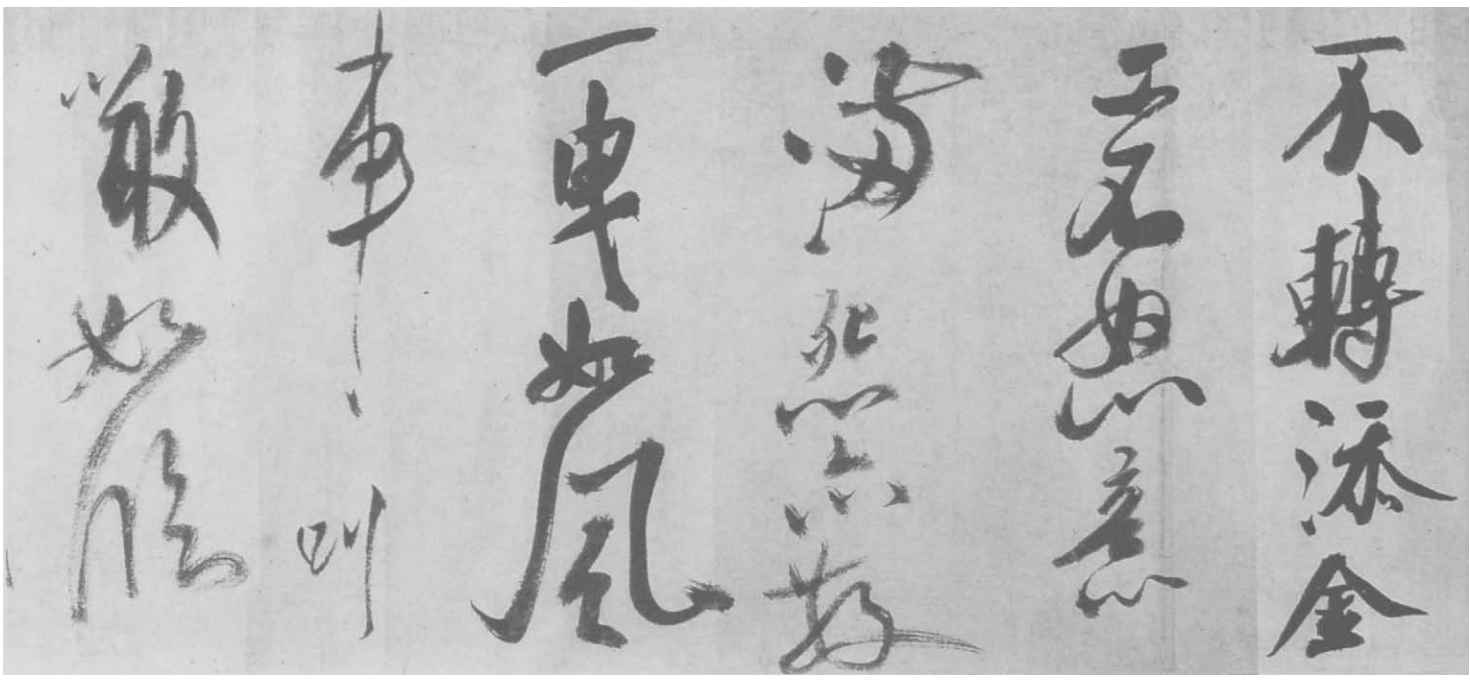


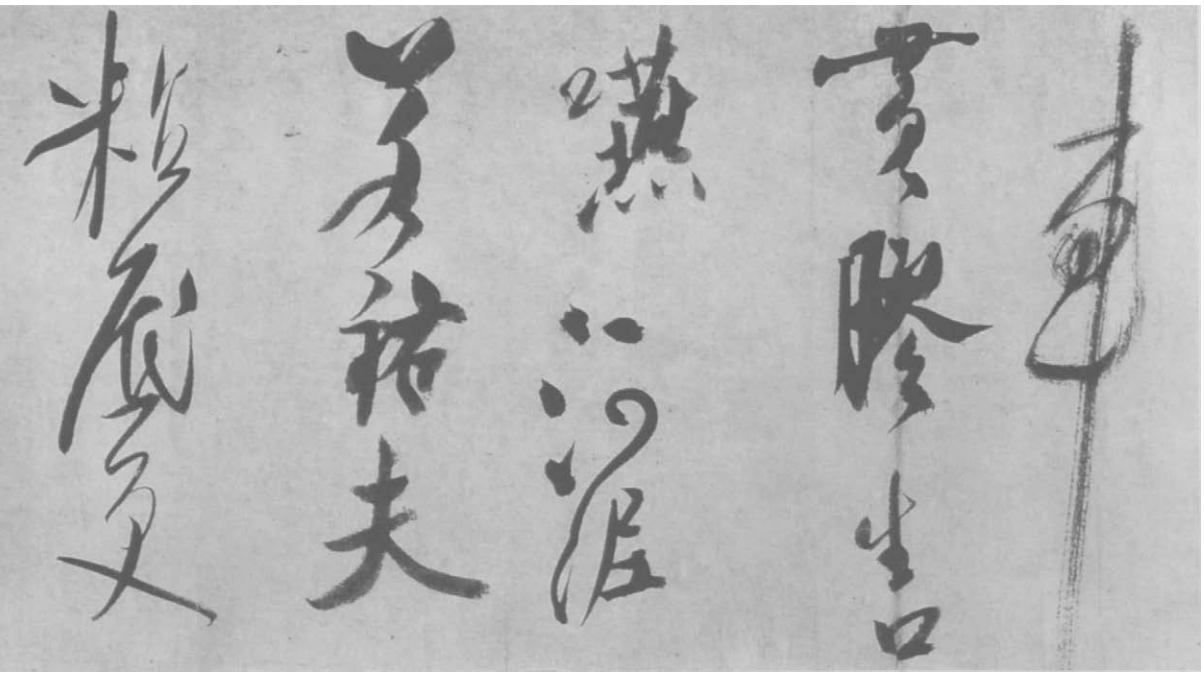
Figure 23. Mi Fu, detail of *Sailing on the Wu River*

and colophons. Some of these inscriptions were done in small standard script in the style of the T'ang calligrapher Ch'u Sui-liang 褚遂良 (596–658); others are in small running script. With respect to his small-size calligraphy, Mi was inspired by such works as Wang Hsi-chih's *Yüeh I lun* 樂毅論 (*On Master Yüeh I*) and *Huang-t'ing ching* 黃庭經 (*The Yellow Court Scripture*) and by the inscription on a painting ascribed to Tung-fang Shuo 東方朔 (ca. 187–161 B.C.).

The majority of Mi's extant work, however, takes the form of correspondence. Mi greatly admired the calligraphy in the letters of the Tsin masters and patterned his own writing after them. He not only adopted the outward form but also sought to capture the "simple and true" spirit of these earlier masters. It is in Mi's letters that we find the most perfect expression of his ideal style of calligraphy.

Mi's prose writings also include miscellaneous inscriptions, records, commentaries, and essays, most often executed in running and cursive scripts. Although the calligraphy in these works is considered good, it is artistically weaker than the calligraphy in his works of poetry. In this category of Mi's work, we find many faithful copies of the old masters. Mi was also expert at executing large-size characters with the brush held between the thumb and forefinger, the so-called thumbhole style, which originated with Yen Chen-ch'ing in the T'ang. Mi's large-character style was, in turn, followed by calligraphers of the Yüan and Ming dynasties.

Of the twenty some extant horizontal scrolls of poetry executed in large-size characters, *Sailing on the Wu River* is one of the two best. Ranked with it is the *Hung-hsien*



Poem Scroll (*Hung-hsien shih-chüan* 虹縣詩卷; fig. 25). Just below these two I would place *T'ien-ma fu* 天馬賦 (*Rhapsody to a Heavenly Horse*). Because there are several renditions of the last, it is difficult to assess and will not be discussed in this paper.

The poem "Sailing on the Wu River" is an old-style five-character poem. The first couplet reads: "Yesterday's wind rose in the northwest; / All boats took advantage of the wind." Mi chose a long scroll and wrote in a free and easy style. He arranged the poem in thirty-six lines, with two or three characters—sometimes only one character—to a line. At the end he signed, "Written in a boat on the Wu River, on paper sent to me by Chu Pang-yen from Hsiu[-chou]. Mi Yüan-chang." Following the poem a Ming-dynasty colophon by Sun K'uang 孫鑛 (1542–1613) dated 1591 states that he had heard from Hsiang Tzu-ch'ang 項子長 (1521–86; older brother of Hsiang Yüan-pien 項元汴 [1525–90]) that the scroll was once owned by Li Po-yü 李伯玉 and that he had examined it twice (fig. 24). A 1643 inscription by Wang To 王鐸 (1592–1652) on the brocade mounting at the beginning of the scroll states that he and several others had viewed the scroll, which was then owned by a Kuo Kung-wang 郭公望 (see fig. 22). Sun K'uang's colophon comments on the calligraphy:

> Recently I stayed at home for seven years and seriously studied calligraphic method. I came to realize that the calligraphy of the old masters depended exclusively on how they handled the brush. It reminded me often of the work of Mi Fu. Going up to the capital, I was able to see it [*Sailing on the Wu*

> *River*]. It was truly enlightening. For the first time I understood the meaning of Huang Lu-chih's [Huang T'ing-chien's] statement about "a swift horse cutting through an encampment." The method of the old masters depends solely on one's arm and is strict about how one holds the brush. I have seen many old works of calligraphy but, until now, none could be considered genuine.

Sun K'uang was a student of Wang Shih-chen 王世貞 (1526–90) and the author of *Shu-hua pa-pa* 書畫跋跋, so named because it added "colophons to the colophons" of Wang Shih-chen's inscriptions. In chapter 1, entitled "Mi Nan-kung shu-hou" 米南宮書後 ("The Colophon Following Calligraphy by Mi Fu"), we read:

> Among the calligraphy I have seen, there is a scroll owned by Li Po-yü [also known as Li] Yin-t'ai of the old poem which begins, "Yesterday's wind rose in the northwest." It is a genuine work [of Mi Fu] and is empowered with a divine presence. It does not have the sense of composure associated with the old masters nor does it "sink three inches into the wood" [a phrase used in conjunction with Wang Hsi-chih]. Its brushwork is similar to that of Su [Shih] and Huang [T'ing-chien]. I think that [it] is a product of the time.[5]

This comment can serve as a supplement to Sun's colophon.

We should note here that Sun K'uang's comment that Mi lacks the sense of composure of the old masters and the ability to "sink three inches into the wood" can be interpreted as praise for the marvelous lightness of the scroll. This is similar to how Su Shih assesses Mi's calligraphy:

> The seal, clerical, standard, running, and cursive scripts used by Hai-yüeh [Mi Fu] for writing throughout his life are like a sail against the wind or a horse in battle; [they are] marked by both a sense of composure and exhilaration. Mi Fu should surely be ranked with Chung Yu 鍾繇 [151–230] and Wang Hsi-chih. He is in no way inferior to them.[6]

It is my opinion that this is the more appropriate appreciation of Mi's work. Mi was proud that his own calligraphy lacked the qualities associated with Wang Hsi-chih's works, which were essentially popular in their appeal. Although instruction in Wang-style calligraphy was widespread at that time, Mi consciously tried to avoid its common features while valuing the true elegance and style of the Tsin masters. Here again we can recognize Mi's concept of the revival of ancient ideals.

Mi's scroll *Sailing on the Wu River* must have entered the imperial collection during the Ch'ing dynasty, for it carries five palace seals of the Chia-ch'ing emperor (r. 1796–1820) and the Hsüan-t'ung emperor (r. 1909–11). The whereabouts of the scroll after the 1911 revolution are documented in Yeh Kung-ch'o's 葉公綽 commentary to a photographic reproduction of the scroll.[7] According to Yeh, the scroll was executed by Mi Fu when he was about forty-five years old, an estimate with which I concur. He points out that this scroll is stylistically similar to Mi's handscrolls *Shan-hu t'ieh* 珊瑚帖 (*Coral Tree*), *Hsüeh-shu kuei lung-han t'ieh* 學書貴弄翰帖 (*The Importance of Brush Techniques When Studying Calligraphy*), and *T'ien-i ch'an-shih pei-kao* 天衣禪師碑稿 (*Manuscript of the Monk*

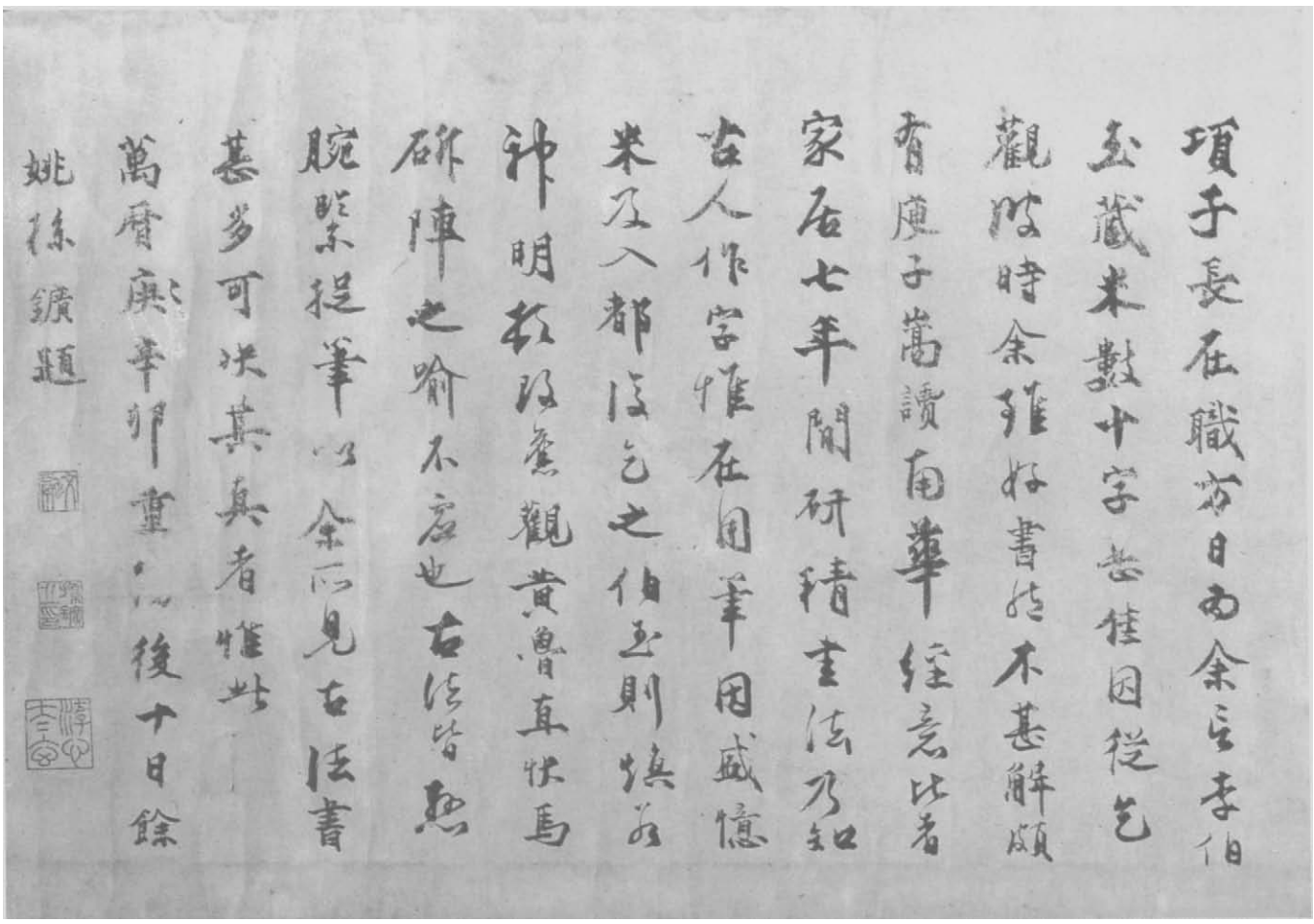


Figure 24. Sun K'uang (1542–1613),
Colophon to Mi Fu's "Sailing on the Wu River,"
dated 1591 (see figs. 22, 23)

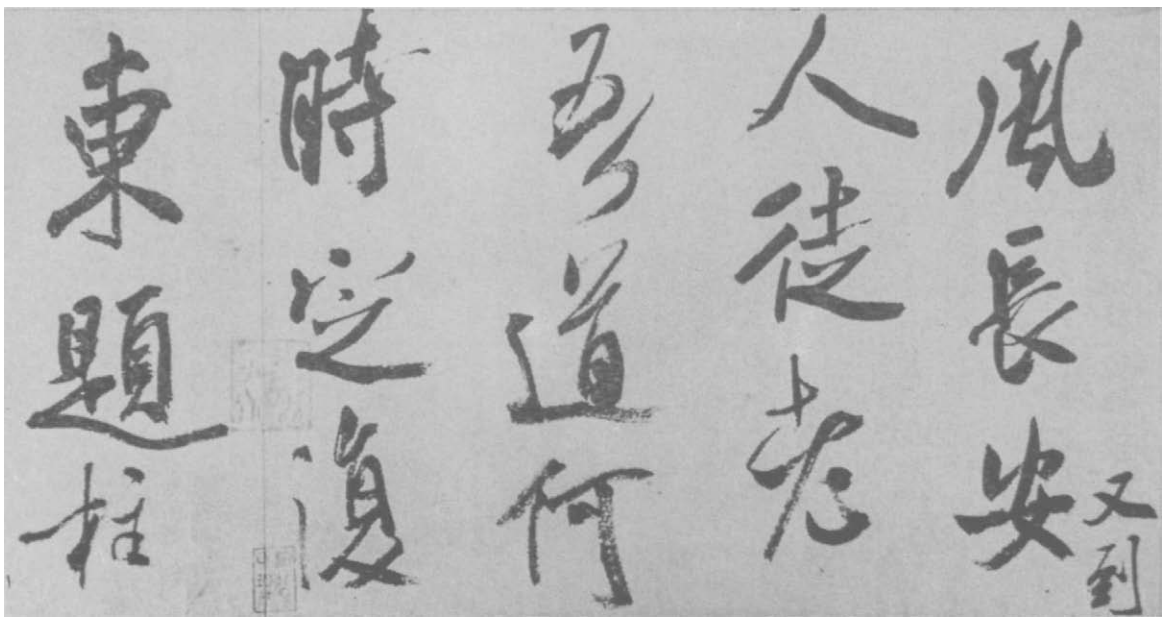


Figure 25.
Mi Fu, *Hung-hsien Poem Scroll.*
Detail of handscroll, ink on paper.
Tokyo National Museum
(from *Shoseki meihin sōkan*
[Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1964],
vol. 125, pp. 3–4)

T'ien-i's Stele), and calls it the crown jewel of all of Mi's handscrolls executed in large-size characters.

My main interest here is to discuss the significance of writing poetry in large-size characters in the handscroll format. I have gone back to the T'ang dynasty to consider the influence of the K'ai-yüan and T'ien-pao eras on the development of this new art form. To recapitulate, in the traditional school of calligraphy, following the two Wangs, daily correspondence—health inquiries and the like—was almost exclusively the subject matter of calligraphy. Out of the flourishing culture of the K'ai-yüan and T'ien-pao eras arose the revolutionary horizontal scroll of poetry and prose in large-character cursive script. This development marked the beginning of the liberation of calligraphic form from its traditional restrictions. Born out of drunken playfulness, this new calligraphic form's significance in the world of art was soon recognized, and, properly guided by such revivalist thinkers as Han Yü, it ultimately became a true and refined art form. We can compare this development with Li Hou-chu's 李後主 (937–78) elevating the small prose (*hsiao-tz'u* 小詞) of the official in charge of music (*ling-jen* 伶人) during the Five Dynasties period to an art form of the gentry class during the Later T'ang.

One difference, however, is that it appears that Mi's ideal is represented more by Huai-su than by his predecessor Chang Hsü of the K'ai-yüan and T'ien-pao eras. Yet we should remember that although Mi stated that Huai-su had more simplicity in his style than did Chang Hsü and that he reached a state of natural perfection, according to Mi, he still did not match the level set by the old masters. Thus Huai-su alone was not

enough for Mi, who aimed beyond, to high antiquity. Nevertheless it would not be wrong to assume that Mi's cursive script in general and his *Sailing on the Wu River* in particular are indebted to Huai-su's *Autobiography.* It is just that, in addition to Huai-su's influence, in the end, Mi attained "simplicity and naturalness" and "simplicity and truth" from the masters of high antiquity after a lifetime of struggling to understand the principles behind connoisseurship. Tung Ch'i-ch'ang 董其昌 (1555–1636) described the subtlety of these principles in Ch'an Buddhist terminology.

A work similar in concept to *Sailing on the Wu River* is the *Hung-hsien Poem Scroll,* which is in running script (see fig. 25). It, too, attains the natural perfection of the old masters. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of its protean mystery in the handling of cursive script, *Sailing on the Wu River* must still be regarded as unsurpassed.

In keeping with the dictum that Sung calligraphy emphasized meaning, the innovative style in calligraphy concerned itself with that which welled up from the depths of a personality and achieved expression. The use of large-size characters on handscrolls seemed to flow naturally out of the mind and poetic feeling. This can certainly be verified by the calligraphic works in that format produced by the gentry class during the Northern Sung dynasty as well as by the handscrolls left by Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien. Huang T'ing-chien also produced many wonderful handscrolls using cursive script. Yet while Mi may have learned something from Huang T'ing-chien, their artistic intent differed. That fact, too, helps to confirm the importance of the human quality in works of that period.

Finally, calligraphy changed with the passage of time. Alongside the handscroll format appeared the hanging scroll, which became more and more prevalent as the Yüan dynasty progressed, finally, during the Ming, becoming the norm for calligraphy. Although the handscroll did not totally disappear with the dominance of the hanging scroll in the Ming, the poetry and prose handscrolls executed in large-size characters came to represent the fighting spirit of the Northern Sung. Su Shih, Huang T'ing-chien, and Mi Fu stand as magnificent guiding lights in the history of Chinese calligraphy. The incorporation of humanity into calligraphy reached its height among the gentry of that period, and it was Mi Fu who stood at the apex of it all. The importance of his position in the history of art in China is clear.

Translated by Fumiko E. Cranston

NOTES

The notes were compiled by the editors.

1 Han Yü, *Sung Kao-hsien shang-jen hsü* (Seeing off the monk Kao-hsien), in Ma Tsung-ho, comp., *Shu-lin tsao-chien* (Reflective critiques on calligraphy), ISTP (Taipei: Shih-chieh, 1968–71), *chüan* 8, p. 140b.

2 *Mi Nan-kung chiu t'ieh* (Nine leaves of cursive-script calligraphy by Mi Fu), in Pien Yung-yü, comp., *Shih-ku-t'ang shu-hua hui-k'ao, shu-k'ao* (Classified record of calligraphy and painting in Shih-ku Hall, calligraphy section) (Wu-hsing: Chien-ku, 1921), *chüan* 11, p. 44b.

3 Reproduced in *Shoseki meihin sōkan* (Compendium of masterpiece calligraphy) (Tokyo: Nigensha, 1971), vol. 168.

4 Su Shih, "Ching-yin yüan hua chi" (Record of the paintings in Abbot Ching-yin's room), in Yü Chien-hua, comp., *Chung-kuo hua-lun lei-pien* (Chinese painting theory by category) (Taipei: Hua-cheng, 1975), p. 47.

5 Sun K'uang, "Mi Nan-kung shu-hou" (The colophon following calligraphy by Mi Fu), in *Shu-hua pa-pa* (Colophons to the colophons) (reprint, Taipei: Han-hua, 1971), *chüan* 1, p. 6b.

6 Ma Tsung-ho, comp., *Shu-lin tsao-chien* (Compilation of comments on calligraphy), ISTP, *chüan* 9, p. 226b.

7 Yeh's reproduction was made after the scroll's entrance into the Crawford Collection and was published in Taipei (*Mi Nan-kung shu "Wu-chiang chou chung shih" chen-chi* [Mi Fu's authentic calligraphy *Sailing on the Wu River*] [Taipei, 1972]).