A Way of Writing: The Art of Chinese Calligraphy

Chinese calligraphy (□□, simplified □□, *shūfǎ*, literally ‘way of writing’) is the art of writing Chinese characters (□□, simplified □□, *hànzì)* with a brush. Together with poetry and painting, calligraphy is considered one of the “Three Perfections” (□□ *sānjué*) of Chinese art. This essay reviews the development of calligraphy and provides some examples of its beauty. The illustration shows the calligraphy of the characters of *shūfǎ* in regular and semi-cursive styles*.*

A Brief History

According to legend, Chinese writing began during the reign of the Yellow Emperor in the 3rd Millenium BCE. The emperor asked Cangjie (□□) one of his ministers to create a way to record knowledge. Cangjie was blessed with two pairs of eyes. This allowed him to see the basic shapes and patterns underlying the perceived world.

The first clear evidence for writing in China, however, comes from symbols found on the shoulder blades of oxen and the shells or tortoises. These date to around 1250 BCE. The symbols appear to have been used during divination, and the writing is therefore called **Oracle Script** (□□□,*jiǎgǔwén,* “shell and bone script”).

Beginning around 1000 BCE, characters were being cast onto or incised into various ritual bronze containers. This type of writing is called **Bronze Script**, (□□, *jīnwén*).

Over the years various styles of writing were used. Legend has it that the First Emperor Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BCE) established a standard writing style to be used across his newly unified empire: the **Small Seal Script**, □□ (*xiǎozhuàn*).

Although the histories attribute this to the First Emperor, the script likely developed incrementally rather than by fiat. The script is characterized by thin lines that do not vary in width. The characters tend toward right-left symmetry, and the shapes are curved rather than rectilinear.

The invention of paper (in China in 105 BCE) and the use of writing brushes led to the development of the **Clerical Script** (□□, simplified □□, *lìshū*) by around 100 BCE. The lines vary in thickness as befits the use of a brush. The characters show a tendency for the lines to sweep toward the right. The script is rectilinear rather than curved, and the width of the characters tends to be greater than their height.

Over the following years clerks and scholars modified the clerical script to be lighter and more regular. The characters tended to occupy a square form. The individual strokes making up the different characters became standardized. This development occurred over several centuries beginning in the Second Century CE. The final version of **Regular Script** (□□, simplified □□, *kǎishū*) became established during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE).

While the regular script was being perfected, the needs of writing speed and emotional expression led to the development of **Cursive Script (**□□, simplified □□*cǎoshū,* literally “grass writing”). As well as denoting “grass” the character □ can also mean “careless, hasty, draft.” The characters are no longer created by discrete strokes, but formed with one or several continuous movements of the brush. The characters are curved and tend to have widths less than their height. The illustration on the right shows □□ written in regular script and in cursive

script. Regular script requires 20 separate strokes, but cursive uses only 3. Cursive script is variable from one writer to another.

A more legible version of cursive script soon developed: **Semi-cursive Script** (□□ simplified □□, *xíngshū*, “running script”). This script is a compromise between the regular and cursive scripts. Characters are clearly demarcated from each other. Nevertheless, the individual strokes within the character become connected and flow together. There are conventions for depicting various sets of strokes. For example, parallel lines are represented as a z form rather than as = and dots are connected into a line. The style is analog rather than digital.

After the Chinese Communist Revolution, the new government of the People’s Republic of China simplified many of the commonly used highly complex characters. From 1949 to 1986, these changes led to the current **Simplified Characters** (□□□; *jiǎnhuàzì*, literally “simple transformed characters”). In writing this name, the traditional character □ has been simplified to □. In the names of the earlier scripts, the traditional □ was simplified to □.

The following illustration of the different scripts shows the evolution of the characters □ *tiān* sky/heaven, □ *mā* horse, □ *lǚ* travel/journey, and □ *zhěng* straight/correct. Of these, only the character for horse underwent modern simplification. The dates show the approximate times when the different scripts began.

	tiān	mā	lǚ	zhěng
	heaven sky	horse	travel journey	straight correct
Oracle 1250 BCE				
Bronze 1000 BCE				
Small Seal 200 BCE				
Clerical 100 BCE	天	馬	旅	正
Cursive 100 CE				
Semi-Cursive 200 CE	天	馬	旅	正
Regular 250 CE	天	馬	旅	正
Simplified 1960 CE	天	马	旅	正

More information about the evolution of Chinese characters is available in Chiang (1973), Qui (2000), Shi (2003) and Li (2010)

Thousand Character Classic (□□□ *qiānzì wén*)

The *Thousand Character Classic* is a long poem that uses a thousand different characters (Paar, 1963; Sturman, accessed 2025). The poem contains 250 lines, each four characters long, arranged in rhyming quatrains to facilitate memorization.

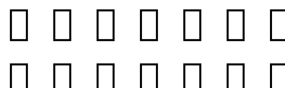
Legend has it that in the 6th Century CE, the Emperor Wu commissioned the poem to teach children the rudiments of writing. Since the text was learned by any literate person, the order of its characters could be used to put documents in sequence in the same way that alphabetical order is used in alphabetic languages. Copybooks showing the thousand characters in different writing styles soon became popular. The following example shows the beginning of the poem in a modern version (“The sky was black and the earth was yellow; space and time vast and limitless”):

千字文
qiānzì wén

		Cursive	Regular	Semi-cursive	Clerical	Seal	Bronze
tiān	sky						
dì	earth						
xuán	black						
huáng	yellow						
yŭ	space						
zhoù	time						
hóng	vast						
huāng	limitless						

Zhang Xu (□□, ca 675-750 CE)

Zhang Xu was a court scholar and calligrapher. Although adept in regular script, he became renowned for his works in a wild cursive style (□□ *kuángcǎo* ‘crazy cursive’), often created under the influence of wine (Jagger, 2023). His friend the poet Du Fu considered him one of the *Eight Immortals of the Wine-cup* (Li Bai was another):



□ □ □ □ □ □ □□

Zhang Xu, the Sage of Cursive Script, after three cups of wine,
Would doff his cap from his head before princes and dukes,
And let his brushstrokes fall on the paper like misty clouds

The most famous work attributed to him is his *Four Ancient Poems* (□□□□) a scroll (29.5 x 195.2 cm) on multi-colored paper now in the Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang (Ouyang, & Wang, 2008 pp 217-223). The first poem by Yu Xin (513–581) is about the beginning of spring and the New Year celebrations:

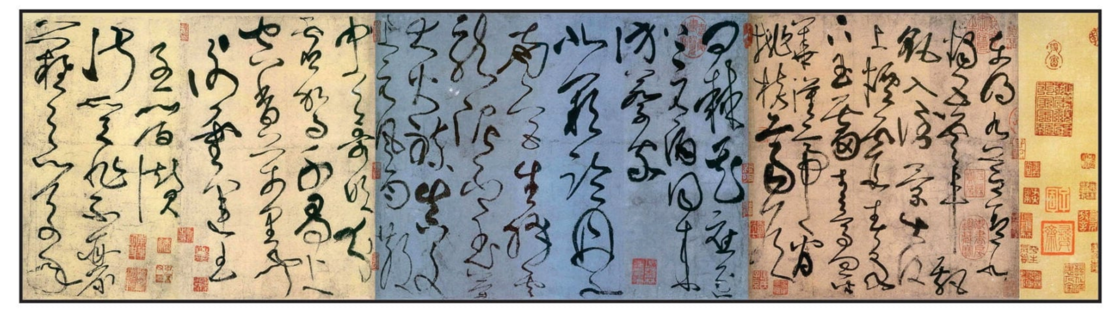
東明九芝蓋，北燭五雲車。
飄颻入倒景，出沒上煙霞。
春泉下玉霤，青鳥向金華。
漢帝看桃核，齊侯問棘花。
應逐上元酒，同來訪蔡家。

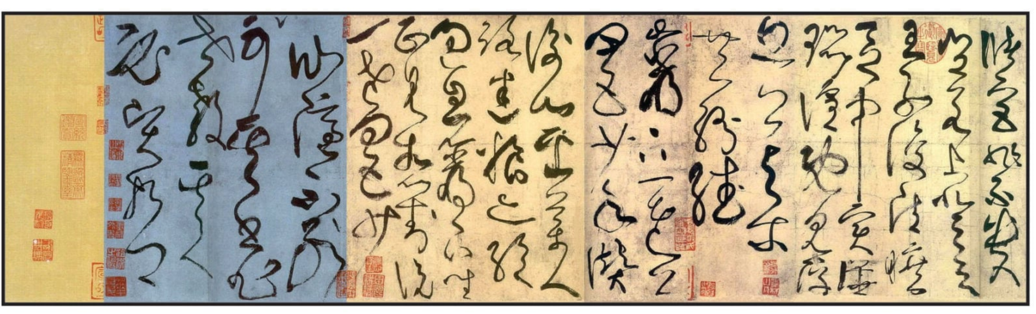
The Eastern Light with his nine-petal mushroom canopy
And the Northern Candle with her five-hued cloud-chariot
Descend and drift into the light of sunset
Appearing and disappearing among the clouds.
Spring water flows like rain falling on jade,
And bluebirds fly towards the Jinhua mountain

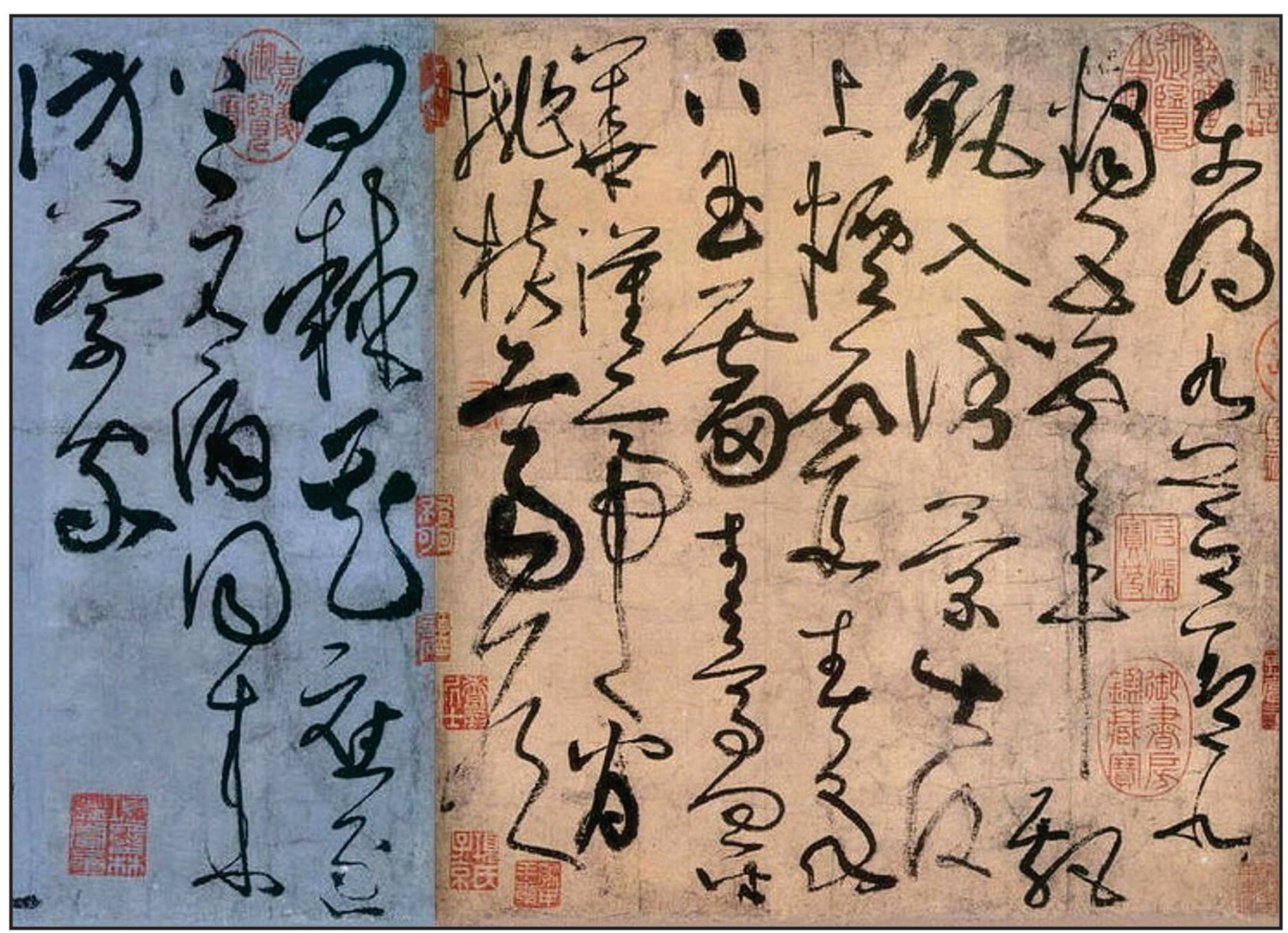
The Han Emperor examines the peach-tree seeds,
And the Qi Marquis inquires about the jujube blossoms.
We drink the wine of the Lantern Festival
And visit with the Cai family.

The Eastern Light and the Northern Candle are the names of Daoist deities (Luo, 2019, pp 320-321). The ecstatic energy of the Zhang Xu’s calligraphy befits the poem’s enthusiastic enjoyment of the beginning of spring.

The following illustration shows the complete scroll divided into two parts, and an enlargement of the first poem. To compare the characters, note that the calligraphy moves from top to bottom and from right to left, whereas the text above is written from left to right.





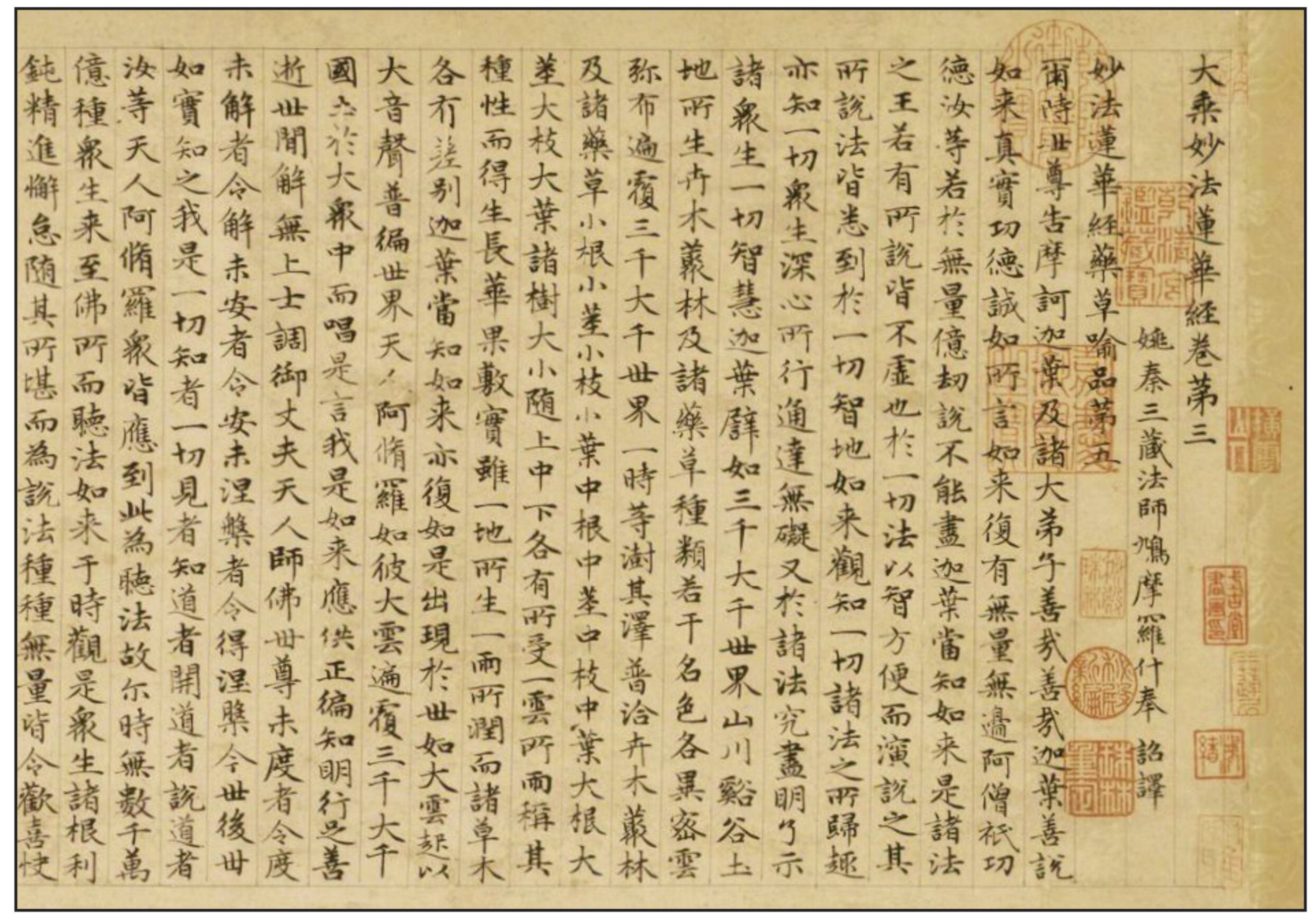


Zhao Mengfu (□□□, 1254–1322)

Zhao Mengfu was a calligrapher and painter at the time when the Mongols conquered China and established the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). Since he worked for the Mongol emperors, his

politics were considered suspect by later historians. However, he is recognized as China’s most talented calligrapher (McCausland, 2011). He wrote in all styles, but was an absolute master of the regular script. Copybooks of his calligraphy are still widely used by students wishing to master *kaishu*.

The following illustration shows the beginning of the third scroll in an original set of seven for the *Sutra on the Lotus of the True Dharma* (Chinese: □□□□□ *miàofǎ liánhuá jīng*), a basic text in Mahayana or “Great Vehicle” (Chinese: □□ *dàshèng*) Buddhism. The scroll, written in small regular script, is now in the collection of the technology entrepreneur Jerry Yang (Wang Lianqi in Chang & Knight, 2012, pp 70-103). The scroll is 28 cm wide and 275 cm long.



The beginning of the text (4th line from the right) reads □□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□: At that time the world-honored one [Buddha]

spoke to Mahakasyapa [one of his disciples] and the other major disciples “Excellent, excellent …” This is the beginning of Chapter 5 in the Sutra.

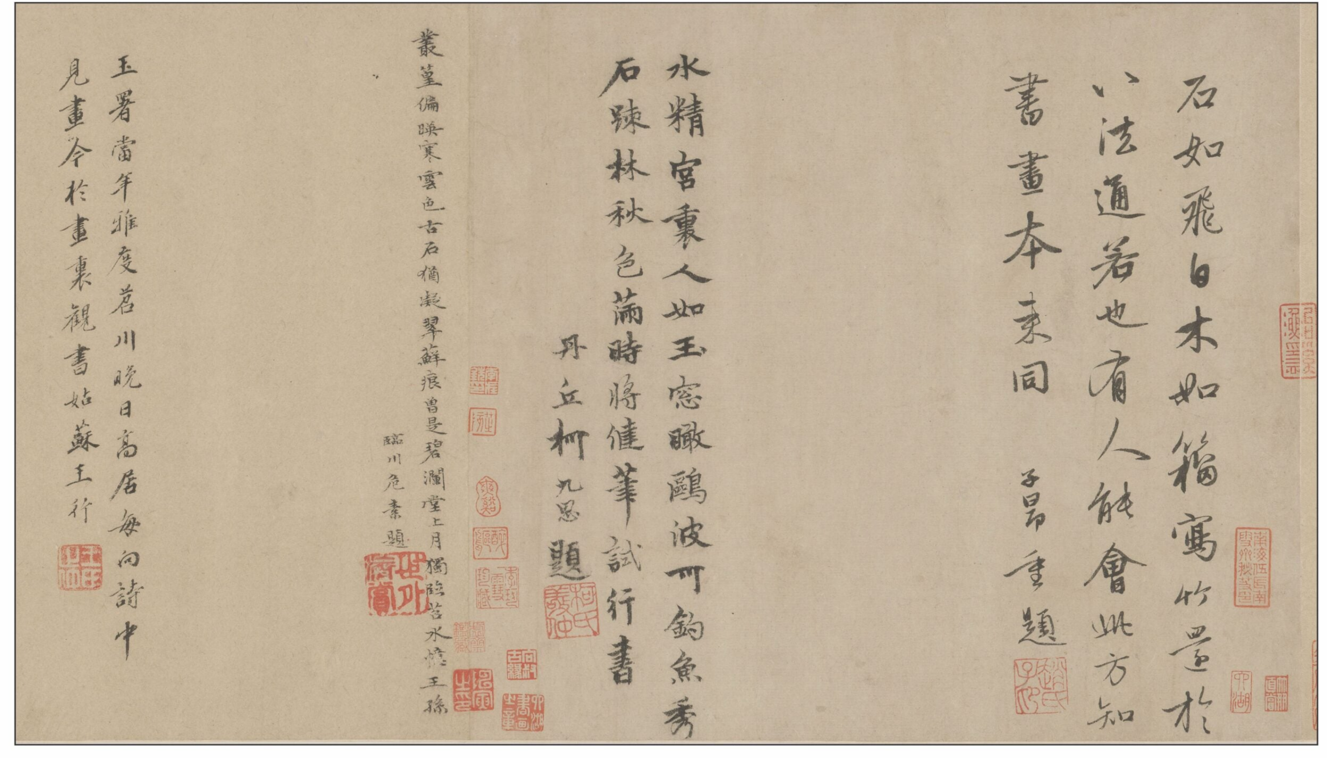
Wang Lianqi (Chang & Knight, 2012, pp 98-99) remarks about the calligraphy:

> This scroll by Zhao Mengfu has more than ten thousand characters written with seeming effortlessness, and from start to finish they are consistent in that they are steady yet agile at the same time. Unless one has exceptional skill, something like this would be utterly impossible. But what is especially exceptional here—apart from the refined beauty of its dots and strokes, the stability of its composition, the comfortable spacing, and the openness of its forms (all achieved while adhering strictly to the principles of standard script)—is that Zhao is able to impart freshness and vitality to the forms, so that strength emerges amid their graceful charms. As a result, viewers forget the concentration and care that went into their structure and brushwork and see only their naturalness and serenity.

Zhao Mengfu was also a brilliant painter. The following illustration shows his depiction of *Elegant Rocks and Sparse Trees* on a scroll 28 cm widenow in the Palace Museum in Beijing. The painting shows a scene in early spring. Two large rocks are painted in “flying white” (□□*féibái*) style, with the upper edge of the right rock accentuated, provide the main structure of the painting. “Flying white” is a style of painting or calligraphy that uses a lightly loaded brush to leave lines with white streaks showing through. Between the rocks are two lightly traced leafless trees. At the outer edge of each rock are trees more darkly inscribed. The tree on the right is leafless but the one on the left has new buds on its sinuous branches. Young bamboo shoots grow in clumps on the ground and between the rocks. On the ground are sprouts of new

grass. This is a marvelous portrayal of the transition between winter and spring.

The scroll includes colophons by the painter (right) and three colleagues:



Zhao Mengfu’s colophon reads:

石如飛白木如籀、寫竹還於八法通。
若也有人能會此、方知書畫本來同。

> The rocks are like “flying-white,” the trees like “seal script.”
> Depicting the bamboo draws upon the “eight clerical” method.
> If indeed there are people that can make these associations,
> They will understand that calligraphy and painting have the same root.

The “eight” style of clerical script was right-left symmetrical with long sweeping strokes as in the character □ *bā* for eight.

The painting and poem provide a fine example of the “Three Perfections” (□□ *sānjué*): the combination of poetry painting and calligraphy.

Ni Zan (□□ simplified □□, 1301–1374)

Ni Zan was another gifted painter and calligrapher who worked during the Yuan Dynasty. One of his most famous paintings, now in the Shanghai Museum has come to be known as *The Six Gentleman* (1345):

遠望雲山隔秋水近看古木
擁坡陁居然相對六君子
正直特立無偏頗大癡贊
雲林畫
江頭碧樹動秋風江
上青山接遠空君向
波心添釣艇還須畫
我作漁翁
松木居士

Xu (2022, p 32) describes the striking combination of emptiness and strength in the image:

> [T]the composition has been pulled apart, introducing an almost unbridgeable gap between foreground trees and distant hills. Moreover, the gap between the edge of the paper and the sandbank isolates the foreground subject, and refuses to provide us, the viewers, easy access into his landscape. The stark spaciousness of the painting, the tension created by horizontal ground lines and vertical tree lines, enhances this feeling of aloofness.

The six trees are all different:

> The six trees in this picture are the pine, cypress, camphor tree, Chinese scholar tree, phoebe and elm – all Confucian symbols of moral integrity (Xu, 2022, p 33).

To the left of the trees, Ni Zan wrote a brief note describing how the painting was created during a visit to his friend Lu Shanfu (Xu, 2022, p 32):

> [illegible],[illegible].

> Each time Lu Shanfu sees me, he urges me to paint for him. On the eighth day of the fourth lunar month of the fifth year of the Zhizheng era [May 10th, 1345] I had just docked my boat on the Bow River when he greeted me with a lamp and a piece of paper, insisting strenuously that I paint for him. I was feeling extremely weary from the journey but did my best to answer his request. When the old master Dachi [courtesy name of Huang Gongwang] sees this, he will have a good laugh over it.

Huang Gongwang himself added a poem to the upper right of the

painting. This likened the foreground trees to six gentlemen:

□□□□□□□,
□□□□□□□,
□□□□□□□,
□□□□□□□

In the distance cloudy mountains are separated by the autumn river.
Close by, old trees huddle along the sloping shore,
Calmly facing one another, the Six Gentlemen,
Who stand upright, outstanding, without being lopsided.

Shen Zhou (□□, 1427–1509)

Shen Zhou was a painter, poet and calligrapher during the early Ming Dynasty. His painting *Poet on a Mountaintop* (□□□□, 39 by 60 cm), currently held by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, is probably the most famous example of the three perfections. The painting shows the poet reaching the peak of a mountain and looking out over the mist in the valley below. He speaks a poem, the words of which are written on the sky.

A transcription and translation of the poem follow

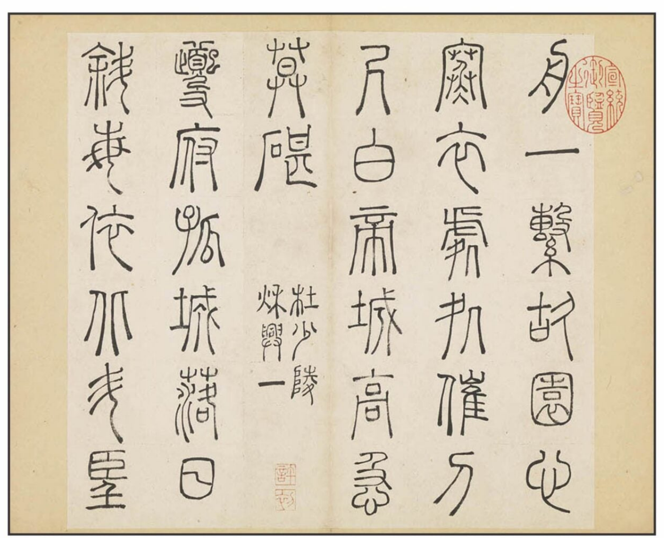
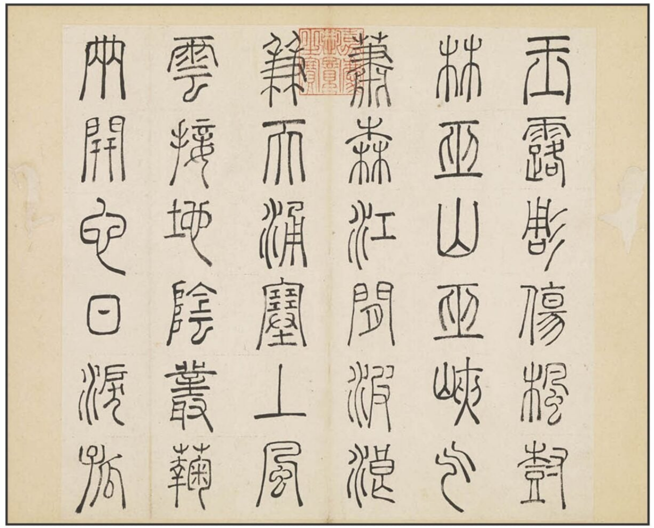
□□□□□□□□
□□□□□□□□
□□□□□□□□
□□□□□□□

White clouds sash-like wrap round the waists of mountains,
The rock terrace soars into space over a distant narrow path.
Leaning on a bramble staff, I gaze far and free;
I will reply to the sound of the mountain stream with my flute.

Xu Chu (□□, fl 16th Century CE)

Xu Chu created an album of the *Autumn Meditations* of the Tang poet Du Fu (712-770 CE) using seal script. The illustration

shows the first two leaves of the album, now in the Palace Museum in Beijing. The first poem of the sequence (beginning on the right leaf and extending through much of the second) transcribes the first meditation:

The text of the poem with a translation by Mark Alexander follows:

玉露凋伤枫树林	Jade dew withers and wounds the groves of maple trees,
巫山巫峡气萧森	On Wu mountain, in Wu gorge, the air is dull and drear
江间波浪兼天涌	On the river surging waves rise to meet the sky,
塞上风云接地阴	Above the pass wind and cloud join the earth with darkness
丛菊两开他日泪	Chrysanthemum bushes open twice, weeping for their days
孤舟一系故园心	A lonely boat, a single line, my heart is full of home
寒衣处处催刀尺	Winter clothes everywhere are urgently cut and measured
白帝城高急暮砧	Baidicheng above, the evening's driven by beating on stones

Wu Gorge is the second of the Three Gorges on the Yangtze River. Chrysanthemums are short-day flowers that can bloom twice a year, once in the spring and a second time in autumn. Baidicheng (White Emperor City) is a hill-top fortress between Wu Gorge and the upstream Qutang Gorge. During the Tang

Dynasty heavy cloth was prepared for winter clothes by being beaten on stone.

Zhu Da (□□,1626-1705)

Zhu Da, also known by his pen name Bada Shanren (□□□□) came from an aristocratic family who served in the Ming Court. When the Manchus took over the capital and established the Qing Dynasty in 1644, Bada found refuge in a Chan Buddhist temple and became a monk. Over the years he rose to become an abbot. However, he returned to secular life in 1680, producing numerous works of calligraphy and painting in his later years (Chang et al., 2003).

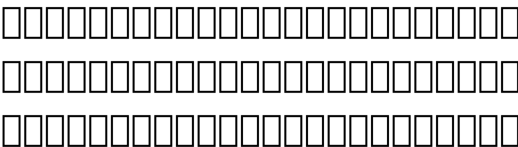
The following is *Falling Flower* (□□ luòhuā) from an album of paintings created in 1692. The cursive calligraphy gives a sense of gentle falling and the signature in the center of the page appears like another blossom.

In 1699 Bada Shanren transcribed a poem by Geng Wei (fl 8th Century) in memory of Wang Wei (701-761 CE) using a semi-cursive script that was both beautiful and restrained. The poem was dear to Bada, who shared Wang Wei's Buddhist philosophy and love of nature.

儒墨兼宗道雲泉挹岸[illegible]要堪[illegible]
寘洞水句行徐由學錦句畢西圖乃
始石深居素以老門自夜讀練麾之
當為地遠文任石渠亦有[illegible]庭[illegible]
深所[illegible]覽也

[illegible]之

The following provides a transcription of the calligraphy and translation of the poem:



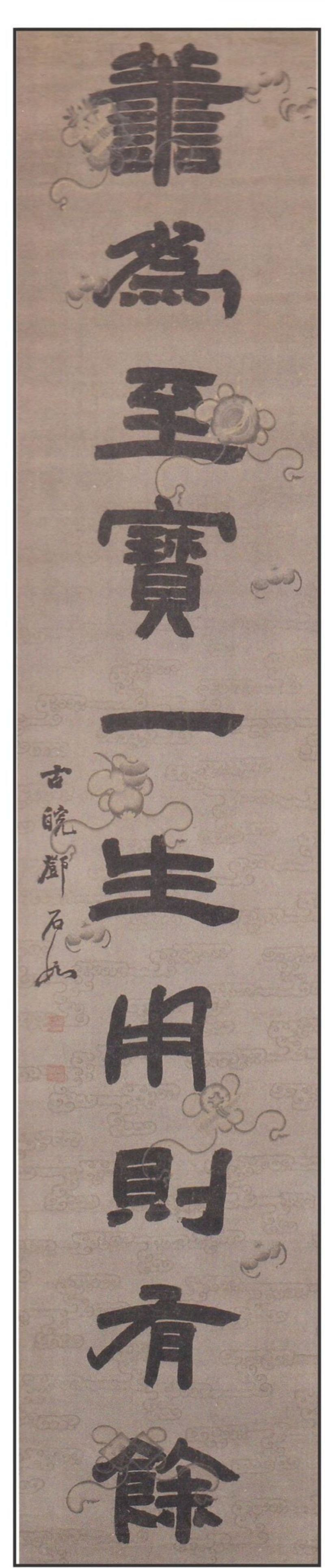
Blending Ruism, Moism, and the Holy Religion,
By the cloudy spring, he built his former hut;
But Meng Wall Cove is desolate now and still,
And Wheel Rim Creek just winds naturally away.
The inner teachings dissolved his many cares,
The western garden transformed his old abode;
In the deep chamber, spring bamboo grows old,
In the thin rain, the night bell seldom tolls.
His dusty tracks remain in the golden earth,
His writings are kept beside the Stone Canal;
Still I do not know which of his companions,
Has inherited the books of this Cai Yong!

"Ruism" is the philosophy of Confucius (5th and 6th Centuries BCE); "Moism" refers to the teachings of Mozi (3rd Century BCE) who promoted asceticism and self-restraint; and the "Holy Religion" refers to Buddhism. Meng Wall Cove is located near Wang Wei's country estate and was described in the set of poems entitled *Wangchuan Ji* (Wheel River Poems). The Stone Canal is the name of one of the imperial libraries. Cai Yong was a famous scholar and politician from the 2nd Century CE.

Bada Shanren's calligraphy expresses the meaning and emotion of the text. The character □, "deep" (fifth from top in the third column from left) extends its tail into the depths of sadness.

Deng Shiru (□□□, simplified: □□□ 1743-1805)

Deng Shiru became adept in calligraphy in the style of seal script and clerical script. The following illustration below shows a pair of homiletic sayings in clerical script on hanging scrolls each 1.7 meters high:


善為至寶一生用則有餘
古皖鄧石如

心作良田百世耕之不盡

The calligraphy is powerful and serious (Ho Chuan-hsing in Chang and Knight, 2012. The strokes are broad and the characters wider than they are high. The beginning and end of each stroke are cleanly demarcated: the brush is turned to “conceal the tip.” The sayings read:

□□□□□□□□□□

> The heart is a good field – plow it for a hundred generations and it’s never depleted.

□□□□□□□□□□

> Goodness is a perfect treasure – use it for a lifetime and some will still be left over

Epilogue

Chinese calligraphy has continued through the years as an artform that appeals to both the eye and the mind. The writing of Chinese characters with a brush became popular throughout East Asia as a way of combining art and meditation (Tanahashi, 2016). Modern artists still produce calligraphy. They use new forms but still maintain links to past masters.

Wang Jiqian (□□□, Westernized name C. C. Wang, 1907-2003) was both a major collector of Chinese art and calligraphy and an artist. The illustration shows his calligraphy of a *Poem by Du Fu:*

The calligraphy presents a line from a poem by Du Fu (712-770 CE):

□□□□□□□

Without belittling the moderns, I love the ancients

The full poem can be found in Owen (2016, Vol III p 114-115).

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Searching for the Dao

This post presents some ideas about the *Dào* ("Way") as described in the *Dàodéjīng* ("Book of the Way and its Virtue"), that legend claims was composed by *Lǎozī* in the 5th Century BCE. The *Dào* cannot be explained in words. But that has never stopped anyone from writing about it.

An Incident at Hangu Pass

No one is sure of the season or even the year. It was probably at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE), and it would have been appropriate if it were autumn. An old man riding on a water buffalo, together with a young servant,

requested passage to the west through the frontier gate at Hangu. They were leaving the violence and corruption of the Kingdom of the Eastern Zhou, which was slowly dissolving into anarchy, a time that later historians called the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE).

Yǐnxǐ, the head guardsman, realized that the old man was of some importance. In answer to his questions, the old man confirmed that he had been the Royal Archivist at the court of Zhou. He had resigned his position, and was now on his way to the mountains to find peace. *Yǐnxǐ* requested that the old man not leave without providing him with a summary of his wisdom. The scholar obliged and wrote out a summary of all that he considered important. And then he departed, never to be heard of again.

The writings that he left with *Yǐnxǐ* became known as the *Dàodéjīng* – the "Book of the Way and its Virtue" (*Tao Te Ching* in the old Wade-Giles system of romanization), containing about 5000 characters in 81 brief chapters. The first section of the book (chapters 1-37) dealt with the *Dào* ("way"), and the second section with *Dé* ("virtue"). The author became known as *Lǎozī* – the "Old Master" (*Lao Tzu* in Wade-Giles). Sometimes the book itself is also referred to as *Lǎozī.*

I have told the story as best I can. There are several legends about what happened, and I am not sure which are true, or even whether *Lǎozī* was an actual person (Graham, 1998; Chan, 2000). The story does explain the nature of the book – an anthology of cryptic sayings and opinions on the nature of the universe and how people should behave.

The Eastern Zhou dynasty had its court in Chengzhou, now called Luoyáng. From there the king tried to maintain his rule over the surrounding feudal states. After many years of internecine warfare, the Qin state in the west ultimately prevailed over the others and founded the first Chinese Empire in 221 BCE.

The frontier gate in the Hangu Pass has been preserved as the centerpiece of an archeological site in Xin'an:

Lǎozī on his water buffalo was portrayed by *Chao Buzhi* in an ink painting (around 1100 CE) now in the Palace Museum in Taipei:

A carved jade circle from the early 19th Century represents the meeting between *Lǎozī* (right) and *Yǐnxǐ* (left) with the Hangu Gate at the top.

In 1938, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) felt definite empathy for *Lǎozī*. He was living in Denmark, an exile from his home in Germany, which was descending into the horrors of Nazism. He wrote a poem *The Legend of How the Tao te Ching Came into Being on Lao Tse's Journey into Exile,* which was later published in *Tales from the Calendar* (1949, translated 1961). The custom's officer asks the boy attending on *Lǎozī* what he has learned from the old man and receives the answer

> … Daß das weiche Wasser in Bewegung
> Mit der Zeit den harten Stein besiegt.
> [That over time the gentlest water
> Defeats the hardest stone]

This paraphrases some lines from chapter 78 of the *Dàodéjīng*

Brecht ends his poem with

> Aber rühmen wir nicht nur den Weisen Dessen Name auf dem Buche prangt! Denn man muß dem Weisen seine Weisheit erst entreißen. Darum sei der Zöllner auch bedankt: Er hat sie ihm abverlangt.
>
> [But we should not just praise the Sage
> Whose name is displayed on the book.
> Since we must retrieve from the Wise their wisdom,
> The customs officer should also be thanked
> For demanding it of him.]

The Nature of the Dào

The main focus of *Lǎozī* ’s book is the *Dào* (pinyin, *Tao* in Wade-Gilles). The character is composed of the “walk/march” radical on the left (a leg taking a step forward) and the “head/chief” radical on the upper right (a head with hair or horns above a stylized face). The illustration below shows the Small Seal Script version (which would have been used at the beginning of the Qin dynasty) on the left, and the modern version on the right.

As a noun, *Dào* is most often translated as “way” or “path.” When it is used as a verb it generally means “say” or “explain.” This confluence of “way” and “word” also occurs in the Christian gospel of *John* (1:1, and 14:6), where the source

of everything is called the word (*logos*) and salvation is obtained through the way (*odos*) (Ching, 1993, p. 88).

In *Lǎozī* ’s book, the *Dào* represents the underlying and enduring principle of the universe, something completely beyond human comprehension (Schwartz, 2000):

> The *Dào* that can be explained is not the eternal *Dào*;
> The Name that can be told is not the eternal Name.
>
> The nameless is the source of heaven and earth,
> The mother of everything which can be named.
>
> Free from desire, you can realize its mystery;
> Caught in desire, you see only its manifestations.
>
> That these two aspects are both same and different
> Is the paradox:
>
> Mystery of mystery,
> Gateway to wonder.
>
> [Chapter 1, my translation. I am indebted to Mitchell (1988) for the opposition of “mystery” and “manifestations.” And to Pepper and Wang (2021) for their word-by-word analysis.]

Livia Kohn (2020, p 16) proposed:

> One way to think of *Dào* is as two concentric circles, a smaller one in the center and a larger on the periphery. The dense, smaller circle in the center is *Dào* at the root of creative change— tight, concentrated, intense, and ultimately unknowable, ineffable, and beyond conscious or sensory human attainment… The larger circle at the periphery is *Dào* as it appears in the world, the patterned cycle of life and visible nature. Here we can see *Dào* as it comes and goes, rises and sets, rains and shines, lightens and darkens— the everchanging yet everlasting, cyclical alteration of natural patterns, life and death… This is *Dào*

> as natural transformations: the metamorphoses of insects, ways of bodily dissolution, and the inevitable entropy of life. This natural, tangible *Dào* is what people can study and learn to create harmony in the world; the cosmic, ineffable *Dào*, on the other hand, they need to open to by resting in clarity and stillness to find true authenticity in living.

Her description fits with that in Chapter 11 of the *Dàodéjīng*:

> Thirty spokes converge on the wheel's hub,
> The emptiness of which allows the cart to be used.

And perhaps point to Eliot's image in *Burnt Norton* (1941)

> At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
> Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
> But neither arrest nor movement.

As pointed out by Kenner (1959, pp 297-8))

> This is the philosophers' paradox of the Wheel, the exact center of which is precisely motionless, whatever the velocity of the rim.

Yīn* and *Yáng

The *Dào* is the source of all the different things in the word. The multiplicity of the world is described in Chapter 2 of the *Dàodéjīng* (translation by Ursula Le Guin, 1997):

> For being and nonbeing
> arise together;
> hard and easy
> compete with each other;
> long and short

shape each other;
high and low
depend on each other;
note and voice
make music together;
before and after
follow each other.

The source of this multiplicity is proclaimed in Chapter 42 (my translation)

The *Dào* gives birth to one
One gives birth to two
Two give birth to three
Three gives birth to the myriad things of the world.

These carry *Yīn* on their back and *Yáng* in their arms
And together they achieve harmony

Yīn is water, earth, night, female; *Yáng* is fire, sky, day, male. Through much of the *Dàodéjīng*, *Lǎozī* is more partial to *Yīn*, the eternal female. *Yīn* and *Yáng* mix to form a third type of being and from this intermingling comes everything – *Wànwù* (ten thousand things). This process is depicted in the *Tàijítú* symbol*:* the outer circle represents the whole while the light and dark areas represent its opposing manifestations. The *Tàijítú* in turn becomes the center of the *Bāguà* ("eight symbols") map, representing all the different elements of the world.

Name	Nature
乾 Qián	天 Sky (Heaven)
巽 Xùn	風 Wind
坎 Kǎn	水 Water
艮 Gèn	山 Mountain
坤 Kūn	地 Earth
震 Zhèn	雷 Thunder
離 Lí	火 Fire
兌 Duì	澤 Lake

The Rule of *Dé*

The character for *Dé* (pinyin, *Te* in Wade-Giles) contains on the left the radical for “step/road.” The upper right of the character represents “truth” — something placed on a pedestal to be examined. The lower right is the radical for “heart.” The character thus embodies the idea of following the path of the true heart. *Dé* is translated as “virtue” or “morality.” The illustration below shows the Small Seal Script version on the left and the modern version on the right.

According to *Lǎozī*, virtue is attained by behaving in harmony with the *Dào*. Exactly how one does this is not completely clear. When he wrote his book, *Lǎozī* had decided that he needed to retire from the world, and much of his thought espouses the concept of *wéiwúwéi* — “acting without acting.” He urged leaders not to interfere with the lives of their people

and not to overburden them with taxes. He urged generals to exercise restraint and patience.

Acting in harmony with the *Dào* means doing things for the good of all rather than the benefit of one. Occasionally *Lǎozī* does recommend particular virtues. The following is from Chapter 67 of the *Dàodéjīng*:

> I have three treasures
> that I hold and protect:
> first is compassion,
> second is austerity
> third is reluctance to excel.
>
> Because I am kind I can be valiant,
> Because I am frugal I can be generous
> Because I am humble I can be a leader.
>
> [My translation owes much to Red Pine (2004), from whom I took the names of the treasures. Other expressions derive from Pepper and Wang (2021).]

The Religion of Dàoism

In the 2nd Century CE, *Zhāng Dàolíng* was visited by the spirit of *Lǎozī*, and proclaimed himself the first "Celestial Master" of the Dào. (Ching, 1993; Hendrichke, 2000, Kohn 2020; Robinet, 1992; Wong, 1997). Dàoism became an organized religion. *Lǎozī* was deified. Various other sages and believers were raised to the rank of "Immortals." The descendants of *Zhang Dàoling* have continued to lead the religion to the present day. Dàoism as a religion provided its adherents with rituals, prayers, scriptures, talismans, and divination. Some of the "austerity' of *Lǎozī* was perhaps lost in the proliferating ceremonies.

Dàoism was immensely popular. Temples sprang up everywhere. Dàoism was particularly attracted to the mountains, perhaps because this is where *Lǎozī* attained his immortality after

leaving through Hangu Pass. Statues of *Lǎozī* and the immortals abound. The following is a large statue of *Lǎozī* created during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). It is located in the Qingyuan Mountain Park near Quanzhou city in Southern China.

The Art of Dàoism

Much of the art associated with Dàoism concerns the activities of the Immortals (Little, 2000; Little & Eichman, 2000). However, during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) when the Mongols controlled China and ruled an Empire that spread as far west as Europe, several artists evolved a style of landscape painting that attempted to portray the simple power of nature (Barnhart, 1983; Cahill, 1976; Scott, 2006).

Probably the most famous of these painters was *Ní Zàn* (1301-1374), an aristocrat who gave up his worldly goods and retired from public life to live as an ascetic. One of his

last paintings, now in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, is entitled *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu* (1372).

The poem appended to the top of the painting identifies where it was created and concludes:

> We watch the clouds and apply our paint;

We drink wine and write poems.
The joyous feelings of this day
Will linger long after we have parted.

The painting portrays the stillness of the water in the lake and the power of the mountains on the further shore. These seem to embody the eternal forces of *Yīn* and *Yáng*. In the foreground are a few of the ten thousand things that make up our particular world. The most powerful part of the painting is that which is not painted – the water representing the force of *Yīn*.

The spirit at the center of all is called the dark female,
Gateway of the foundations of heaven and earth,
Which lasts unbroken and forever: use it.
[*Dàodéjīng,* Chapter 6, my translation]

Final Thoughts

Most people believe that the universe is governed by rules. Many believe that such rules are purposeful and that the universe is evolving toward some goal. We are a hopeful species and we like to think of this process as benevolent rather than blind. Many of our religions urge us to fit our individual intentions to this more general goal. Of all this we are unsure. But there is something behind it all:

Something there is, whose veiled creation was
Before the earth or sky began to be;
So silent, so aloof and so alone,
It changes not, nor fails, but touches all:
Conceive it as the mother of the world.
I do not know its name;
A name for it is "Way."
[*Dàodéjīng,* Chapter 25, Blakney (1955) translation]

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