

Wu Wei: Effortless Action

One of the central ideas in the *Daodjing* of *Laozi* is the idea of *wu wei* (无为, simplified 无为; *wúwéi*). This has been translated in many ways: “non-action,” “actionlessness,” “effortless action,” and “doing nothing.” The 37th chapter of the *Daodjing* considers *wu wei* an attribute of the eternal *Dao*. The 48th chapter promotes *wu wei* as a human virtue. The illustration shows *wu wei* in regular script (left) and in cursive (right).

Being True to Oneself

A foundational concept in Daoism is 自然, *zìrán*. This word is composed of 自 (self, oneself, from, since) and 然 (right, correct, so, in this manner). Almost impossible to translate, the word has been variously rendered simply as “self-so” (Ziporyn, 2009) or more abstractly as “as-it-is-ness” (Fu, 1973, p 382). The meaning contains the idea of acting “naturally” or “spontaneously.” An underlying concept is “authenticity” – one’s action should be true to one’s nature.

Laozi uses the word in the ending to Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing* (with translation by Wu, 2016):

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

Man follows the ways of Earth;
Earth follows the ways of Heaven;
Heaven follows the ways of *Dao*;
Dao follows its own ways.

Several aspects of *zìrán* need consideration. First, the *Dao* acts through all things. As well as ordering the cosmos, the *Dao* acts through each individual object it contains. Human beings must ultimately follow their own *zìrán*. Zhuang Zhou, commonly known as Zhuangzi (庄子), a Daoist philosopher from the 4th Century BCE, begins his writings with a description of all

the different things in the universe from the mythological great Peng bird to the morning mushroom, and recommends that one must act “on the rectitude (正, zhèng) of Heaven and Earth” (Lynn, 2022, p 8). Guo Xiang (郭象, 265-312 CE) commented on this section of the *Zhuangzi*

“Heaven and earth” is just a blanket term used to indicate all beings. It is all individual beings that form the very substance of heaven and earth, and it is each being’s self-so [*ziran*] that aligns true to itself. “Self-so” [*ziran*] means what is so of itself [*ziran*], without being done by anyone or for any purpose. Thus, Peng’s ability to fly high and the sparrow’s ability to stay low, the great tree’s ability to last long and the mushroom’s ability to perish quickly, all these are done spontaneously, all are self-so [*ziran*] (Ziporyn, 2009, p 132.)

Second, the concept of *zìrán* does not mean that all things passively accept their lot in the universe. Misha Tadd (2019) argues that *zìrán* has as much to do with “authority” as with “authenticity.” We need to be true to our ideal selves: to seek what we should be rather than accept what we are.

Third, the idea of acting “naturally” means acting in accord with the *Dao*. However, human beings do not need to return to the simple state of primitive societies to do so (Tadd, 2019, p 4). Although the idea of the “noble savage” was popular when the *Daodejing* was initially translated into Western languages, *Laozi* was not being nostalgic for a lost Eden; rather he was imagining a future utopia (Stamatov, 2023).

Yet Nothing is Left Undone

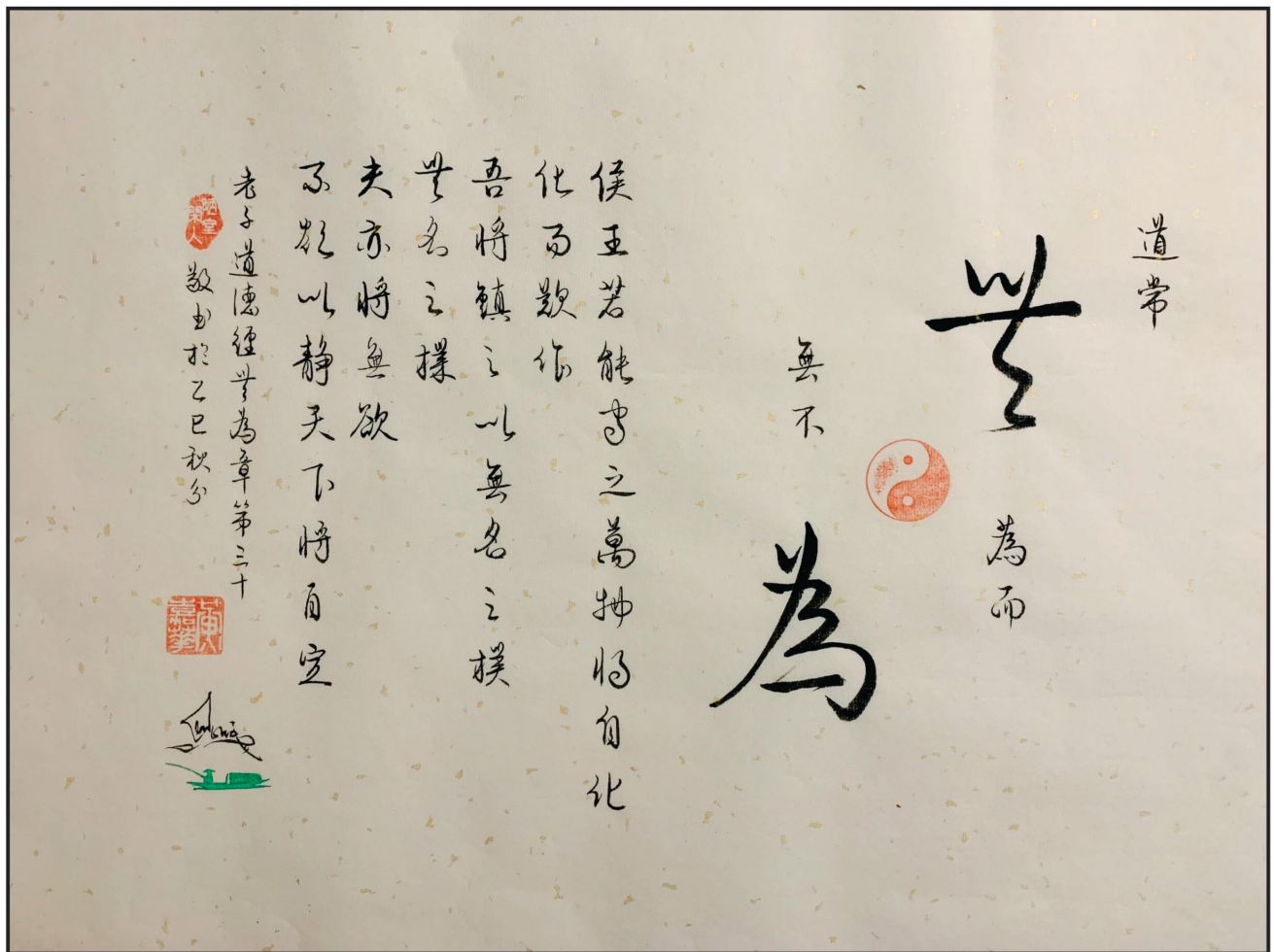
How the *Dao* “follows its own ways” is described in the 37th chapter of the *Daodejing*. This is the final chapter in the section of the book that deals with the nature of the *Dao*

The commonly accepted version of the *Daodejing* is divided into two parts. The first 37 chapters are concerned with the *Dao* (way), and the next 44 with the nature of *De* (virtue). Some recently discovered early versions reverse the ordering of the two parts (Chan, 2025). However, for our purposes it is appropriate to follow the traditional order and to understand the nature of the *Dao* before we propose a way for human virtue.

The last chapter of the first part states that the eternal *Dao* – the principle that governs the universe – exercises its power by means of *wu wei*. The following is the Chinese text of Chapter 37 together with a translation by Wu (2016) and calligraphy by Ken Wong:

道之在天下
道之在天下
道之在天下
道之在天下
道之在天下
道之在天下
道之在天下

Dao in its eternity does nothing, yet nothing is not done.
If lords and kings can all abide by that, all things will
change of themselves.
As they change, their desires start to grow;
I calm them down with the nameless pristine timber.
Calmed by the nameless pristine timber, they will have no
more desire.
Desireless and calm, the world will correct its own course.



The phrase 無不為 is usually translated as “nameless simplicity” (e.g., Fischer, 2023). The character 無 (*pǔ*), another version of which is 樸, generally means “simple.” However, it once meant “unworked wood” – hence the “nameless pristine timber” of Wu’s translation.

The famous first line is shown below in a character-by-character translation:

道	恆	無(无)	為(为)	而	無(无)	不	為(为)
dào	héng	wú	wèi	ér	wú	bù	wèi
way	eternal	nothing	do	and yet	nothing	not	do
path	constant		act	but			act
	enduring		govern				govern

The translation of *wu wei* (無為) is problematic. A simple translation is “doing nothing” but that is not *Laozi’s* meaning. In Chapter 37 the *Dao* does nothing and yet somehow everything is done. The following are suggested translations of *wu wei*: “non-action” (Moeller, 2016), “effortless action” (Slingerland, 2003), “unself-conscious action” (Lynn, 2022, p 3), “non-contrivance” (Fischer, 2023, p 27), and “no purposive action” (Hansard, 2003).

Loy (1985) proposed that *wu wei* represent “nondual action:” the activity of an individual that has no self (with intentions and goals) but is rather part of a universal self. This can eliminate the problem of free will in a deterministic universe:

whenever “I” act it is not “I” but the whole universe that “does” the action or rather is the action. If we accept that the universe is self-caused, then it acts freely whenever anything is done. Thus, from the nondualist perspective, complete determinism turns out to be equivalent to absolute freedom.

Slingerland (2003, p 7) comments

It is important to realize, however, that *wu-wei* properly refers not to what is actually happening (or not happening) in the realm of observable action but rather to the state of mind of the actor. That is, it refers not to what is or is not being done but to the phenomenological state of the doer. ... It describes a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one’s spontaneous inclinations—without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle—and yet nonetheless accord perfectly with the dictates of the situation at hand, display an almost supernatural efficacy, and (in the Confucian context at least) harmonize with the demands of conventional morality.

Fischer (2023, p 27) describes the mental concomitant of *wu*

wei:

It describes the state of acting genuinely, unselfconsciously, or, as we might say, “from the heart,” as opposed to doing something self-consciously, because others expect you to, or because you are coerced.

Decreasing Day by Day

In the 48th chapter of the *Daodejing* Laozi proposes *wu wei* as the ideal of human behavior. The following is the Chinese text together with a translation by Wu (2016):

□□□□□□□□
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□□□□□□
□□□□□□
□□□□□□□□□□

To pursue learning you increase day by day; to pursue *Dao* you decrease day by day.

Decrease and yet again decrease, till you reach the state of Non-doing.

Do nothing and yet nothing is not done.

The world is often won without busying around;

When busying around occurs, the world cannot be won.

The third line repeats the first line of Chapter 37 as an injunction for human behavior. We must follow the same principle as the *Dao*. Although it is easy to say that the *Dao* can act according to its own self, how exactly human beings can do so is clear. The chapter states that the world can only be won without □ (*shì*, business/work/responsibility).

The *Zhuangzi* provides several examples of acting in accord with *wu wei*, the most famous example being butcher Ding. The story is introduced with the comments:

The flow of my life is always channeled by its own boundaries, but the mind bent on knowledge never is. A flow channeled by its own boundaries is endangered when forced to follow something that is not, and trying to rescue it with the doings of the knowing mind only makes the danger worse. (Ziporyn, 2009, p 21).

King Hui of Liang was very impressed with the skill of his butcher Ding who was able to cut up an ox with remarkable speed and agility. When asked how he had become so adept, Ding replied:

What I love is the Course [*Dao*], something that advances beyond mere skill. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet still I was unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter it with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. My understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus the promptings of the spirit begin to flow. I depend on Heaven's unwrought perforations and strike the larger gaps, following along with the broader hollows. I go by how they already are, playing them as they lay. So my knife has never had to cut through the knotted nodes where the warp hits the weave, much less the gnarled joints of bone. A good cook changes his blade once a year: he slices. An ordinary cook changes his blade once a month: he hacks. I have been using this same blade for nineteen years, cutting up thousands of oxen, and yet it is still as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone. For the joints have spaces within them, and the very edge of the blade has no thickness at all. When what has no thickness enters into an empty space, it is vast and open, with more than enough room for the play of the blade. That is why my knife is still as sharp as if it had just come off the whetstone, even after nineteen years. (Ziporyn, 2009, p 22).

One might simply understand that through years of study and

Where there is insufficient good faith,
there is loss of faith.

Relax and spare your words.

When the goal is achieved and the job is done,
everyone says, "We did it."

Laozi favors the ruler who exercises *wu wei*, who allows his ministers to exercise their responsibilities, and who lets his people to be true to their own selves: 自然, *ziran*. Another translation of the final line is: The people all say: "We have done it by ourselves." (Lin, 1977)

These ideas on government were extensively discussed in the *Huainanzi*, a collection of writings collected to assist the Prince of Huainan in the 2nd Century BCE (Ames, 1981). The following is from one of the essays entitled *The Art of Rulership*:

Thus, the ruler in possession of the Way extinguishes thought and dispenses with guessing, and waiting in limpidity and vacuity, he uses words that do not boast and takes action that does not rob subordinates of responsibility. He makes demands of fulfilment according to claims made. He lets them get on with their duties without telling them how; he expects them to fulfil their duties without instructing them. He takes not knowing as his Way and being at a loss as to what to do as his treasure. Acting in this way, each of the various officials has his appointed tasks. (Ames, 1981, p 202)

The Concept of Flow

Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi (1934-2021), a Hungarian-American psychologist, became interested in why people can become so completely involved in difficult, time-consuming and sometimes dangerous activities, that they lose all sense of self and time. He described the experience as one of "flow"

(Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi (in Csíkszentmihályi, 2014, p 240) describe the following subjective characteristics of being “in flow:”

1. Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment
2. Merging of action and awarenessLoss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
3. A sense that one can control one’s actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
4. Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)
5. Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process.

Athletes during peak performance, musicians during virtuoso recitals, and scientists formulating a new theory all experience this state of flow. Other terms that have been used to describe it are “in the zone” or “being locked in.” The individual in the flow is fully conscious of what is going on, but there is little if any self-consciousness. The game is being played, the music is being made, the theory is being grasped.

This state can only come after one has become an expert. Only when the actions can occur automatically, can consciousness move to a higher level – directing the strategy of the game rather than making individual movements, conveying the meaning rather than playing the notes, finding the underlying pattern rather than simply recording what is happening.

A person in a state of flow is very similar to a person acting according to the principle of *wu wei* (De Pryker, 2011). Both are acting effortlessly and without self-consciousness. In

both action and awareness are fused. There are differences – flow empowers the individual self, whereas *wu wei* leads to a decrease in personal desires as one seeks greater union with the universal self. Nevertheless, the two states are far more similar than different.

In recent years, the concepts of *wu wei* have been used to promote higher achievements in sports (Kee et al. 2021) and to find happiness in normal human behavior through “effortless living” (Gregory, 2018). A major difficulty is in deciding how to attain *wu wei*. One must become highly skilled and then become so completely involved in something that one loses oneself in the endeavor. One can try to be “mindful,” to live in the present, to eliminate personal desires, but such advice is imprecise.

The Flow of Calligraphy

Chapters 37 and 48 of the *Daodejing* – the chapters that are crucial to the concept of *wu wei* are shown below in the calligraphy of the 13th Century Zhao Mengfu in regular script, and of the 14th Century Sheng Mao in clerical script):

為學日益為道日損損之又損以至於無為
無為而無不為矣故取天下者常以無事及
其有事不足以取天下

為學日益為道日損損之又損以至於無為無為而
無不為矣故取天下者常以無事及其事不足以
取天下

道常無為而無不為侯王若能守萬
物將自化而欲作吾將鎮之以無名之樸無
名之樸亦將不欲不欲以靜天下將自正

道常無為而無不為侯王若能守萬物將自化而
欲作吾將鎮之以無名之樸無名之樸亦將不欲不
欲以靜天下將自正

The esthetics of Chinese calligraphy depends on the flow from one character to another. The true calligrapher follows the principle of *wu wei* and writes effortlessly. Chiang Yee (1973, p 117) describes the essential characteristics of Chinese calligraphy:

The beauty of Chinese calligraphy is essentially the beauty of plastic movement, not of designed and motionless shape. A finished piece of it is not a symmetrical arrangement of

conventional shapes, but something like the co-ordinated movements of a skilfully composed dance –impulse, momentum, momentary poise, and the interplay of active forces combining to form a balanced whole.

Envoi

We can conclude with some comments of the poet and Trappist monk Thomas Merton in his introduction to his free translations from the *Zhuangzi* (2004, p 21):

The true character of wu wei is not mere inactivity but perfect action—because it is act without activity. In other words, it is action not carried out independently of Heaven and earth and in conflict with the dynamism of the whole, but in perfect harmony with the whole. It is not mere passivity, but it is action that seems both effortless and spontaneous because performed “rightly,” in perfect accord with our nature and with our place in the scheme of things. It is completely free because there is in it no force and no violence. It is not “conditioned” or “limited” by our own individual needs and desires, or even by our own theories and ideas.

And an excerpt from his translation (p. 69):

If man, born in Tao,
Sinks into the deep shadow
Of non-action
To forget aggression and concern,
He lacks nothing
His life is secure.

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A Way of Writing: The Art of Chinese Calligraphy

Chinese calligraphy (书法, simplified 书法, *shūfǎ*, literally ‘way of writing’) is the art of writing Chinese characters (汉字, simplified 汉字, *hànzì*) with a brush. Together with poetry and painting, calligraphy is considered one of the “Three Perfections” (三绝 *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 Millennium BCE. The emperor asked Cangjie (仓颉) 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** (甲骨文, *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**, (金文, *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**, (小篆, *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** (隸書, simplified 隶书, *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** (楷書, simplified 楷书, *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** (草書, simplified 草书, *cǎoshū*, literally “grass writing”). As well as denoting “grass” the character 草 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 草書 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** (半草书 simplified 半草书, *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** (简体字; *jiǎnhuàzì*, literally “simple transformed characters”). In writing this name, the traditional character 体 has been simplified to 体. In the names of the earlier scripts, the traditional 体 was simplified to 体.

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

	tiān heaven sky	mǎ horse	lǚ travel journey	zhèng straight correct
Oracle 1250 BCE				
Bronze 1000 BCE				
Small Seal 200 BCE				
Clerical 100 BCE				
Cursive 100 CE				
Semi-Cursive 200 CE				
Regular 250 CE				
Simplified 1960 CE				

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

Thousand Character Classic (千字文 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

tiān sky
 dì earth
 xuán black
 huáng yellow
 yǔ space
 zhòu time
 hóng vast
 huāng limitless

Cursive

Regular

Semi-cursive

Clerical

Seal

Bronze

天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒
 天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒
 天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒
 天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒
 天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒
 天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒

Zhang Xu (张旭, 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 (狂草 *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):

张旭草书
 张旭草书

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* (四古詩) 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:

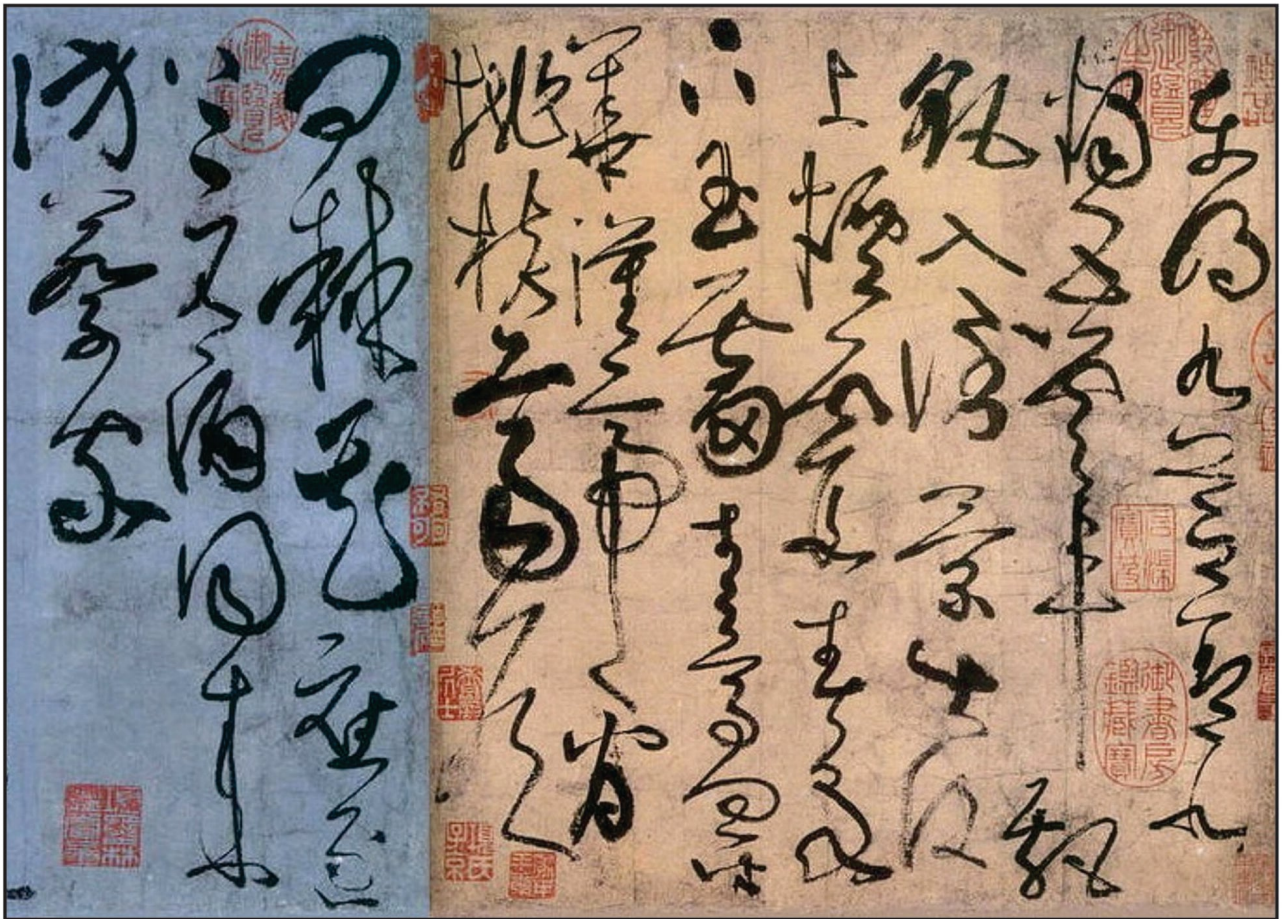
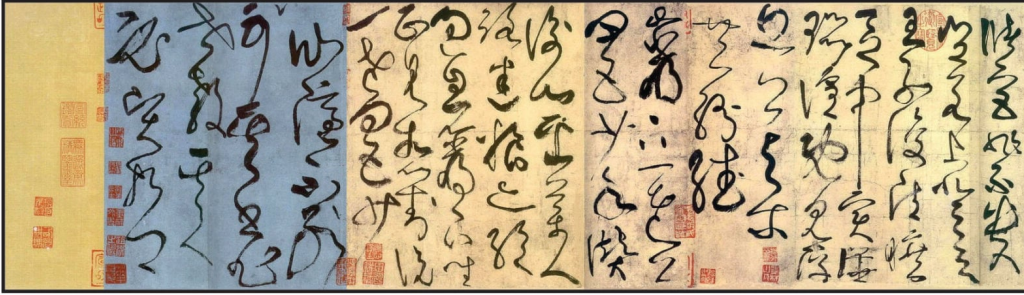
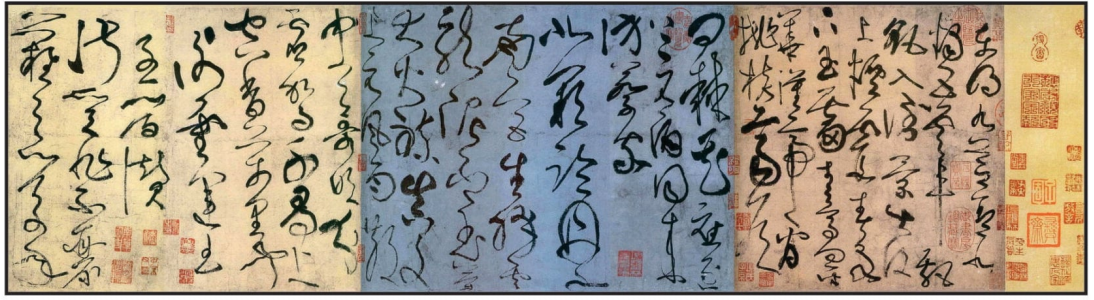
東明九芝蓋，北燭五雲車。
飄颻入倒景，出沒上煙霞。
春泉下玉雷，青鳥向金華。
漢帝看桃核，齊侯問棘花。
應逐上元酒，同來訪蔡家。

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.

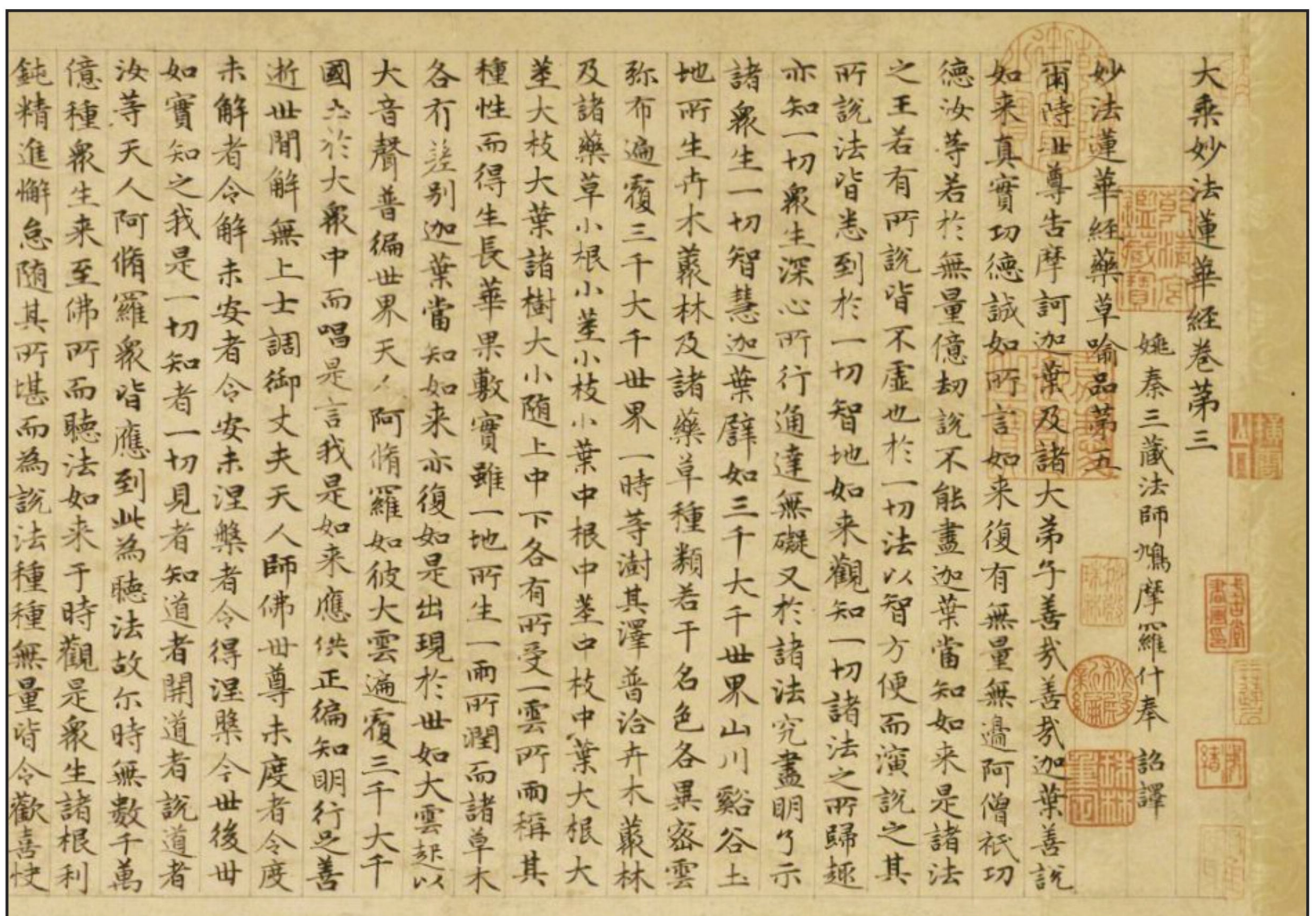


Zhao Mengfu (赵孟頫, 1254–1322)

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: 妙法蓮華經 *miàofǎ liánhuá jīng*), a basic text in Mahayana or "Great Vehicle" (Chinese: 大 *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 阿耨多羅三藐三菩提: 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:

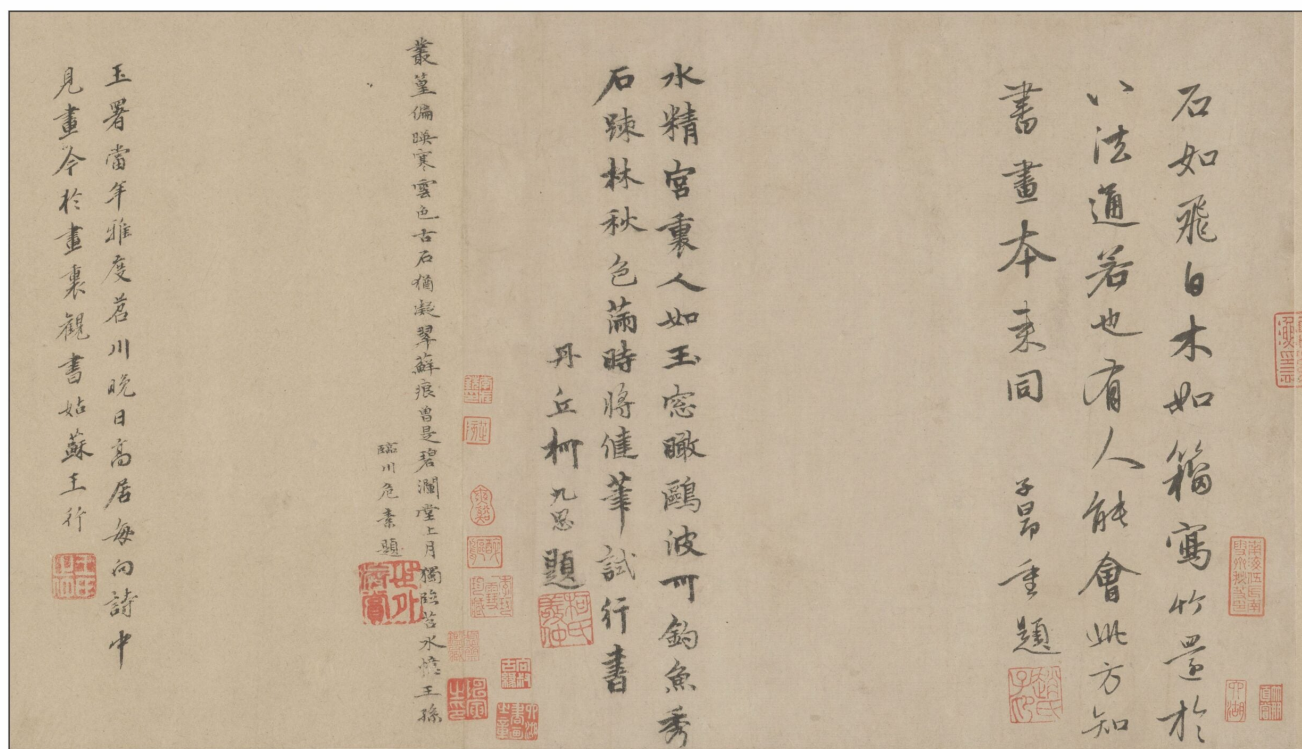
This scroll by Zhao Mengfu has more than ten thousand characters written with seeming effortlessness, and from start to finish they are consistent in that they are steady yet agile at the same time. Unless one has exceptional skill, something like this would be utterly impossible. But what is especially 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 wide now in the Palace Museum in Beijing. The painting shows a scene in early spring. Two large rocks are painted in “flying white” (皴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 八 *bā* for eight.

The painting and poem provide a fine example of the “Three Perfections” (三絕 *sānjué*): the combination of poetry painting and calligraphy.

Ni Zan (倪瓚 simplified 倪, 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

擁波掩屋然相對六君子

正直特立無偏頗大癡贊

雲林畫

江頭碧樹動秋風江

上青山接遠空若向

波心添釣艇還須更

我作漁翁

松木居士

風起雲林象對

為秋色仙人格不

來空山倚晴碧

澗水趙觀

黃公別上已多年如

見雲林畫裏傳二老

風流遠鶴語悠長

卷對江天吳興錢雲



廬山甫每見韓宋作畫至五年四月八日
泊舟丹河之上而山甫筆意此紙苦微
畫時已憶甚二得勉以復
此擬老師見之必大嘆也倪瓚



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

□□□□□□□□
 □□□□□□□□
 □□□□□□□□
 □□□□□□□□

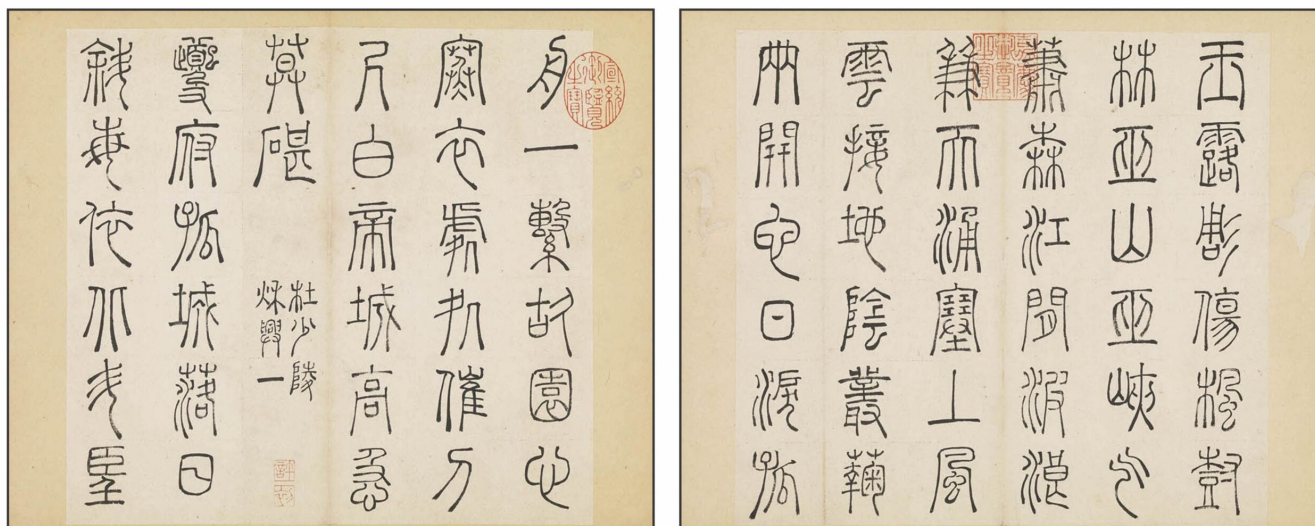
White clouds sash-like wrap round the waists of mountains,
 The rock terrace soars into space over a distant narrow path.

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 (朱大, 1626-1705)

Zhu Da, also known by his pen name Bada Shanren (八大山人) 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).

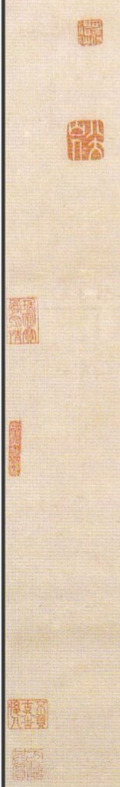
The following is *Falling Flower* (落花 luòhuā) from an album of paintings created in 1692. The cursive calligraphy gives a sense of gentle falling and the signature in the center of the page appears like another blossom.



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.

儒墨並行道
實烟水自行徐
好古深自志
為多地造文
漢學

笑



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 深, “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:

心
化
良
田
百
世
耕
之
不
盡

嘉慶甲子秋中節書於任城寓齋

書
為
至
寶
一
生
用
則
有
餘

古曉聲石

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 (王季千, 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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