June 2013

"A Painter's Brush That Also Makes Poems": Contemporary Painting After Northern Song Calligraphy

Andy J. Patton
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Patrick Mahon
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Art and Visual Culture

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

© Andy J. Patton 2013

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd

Part of the Art Practice Commons, Asian Art and Architecture Commons, Contemporary Art Commons, Esthetics Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the Theory and Criticism Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/1302

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca, wlswadmin@uwo.ca.
“A PAINTER’S BRUSH THAT ALSO MAKES POEMS”:  
CONTEMPORARY PAINTING AFTER AN IMMERSION  
IN NORTHERN SONG CALLIGRAPHY

by

Andy Patton

Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

© Andy Patton, 2013
Abstract

There is no Western equivalent to the practice of calligraphy in pre-modern China, an aesthetic form which does not resolve itself into a literary object or a visual one. Calligraphy was sustained by a rich and complex body of thought that can fully rival art criticism and theory in the West. To undertake this project, I immersed myself in the study of both key works of calligraphy and the aesthetic that sustained it during the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) in China—not in order to practice calligraphy but to transform my own understanding of art and make contemporary Western paintings out of that immersion.

Various elements of that aesthetic are studied. Among them are the relation of the Chinese writing system to the natural world; the belief that calligraphy displays the writer’s character; the role of calligraphy in sustaining social relationships; calligraphy’s particular temporality; its political role during the Northern Song; the belief that the different arts of the brush could be transmuted into each other; and its relation to the past.

After outlining the Northern Song aesthetic, I examine two canonical works of calligraphy: Su Shi’s scroll, Rain on the Festival of Cold Food, and Huang Tingjian’s Scroll for Zhang Datong. Following this, my own practice is examined in one recent painting, The Declining Year at Hangzhou. This leads into a wider, fragmentary discussion of the influence of the Northern Song aesthetic in relation to contemporary practice. As a result of this immersion, art is understood as a form of conduct rather than as a subjective expression.

Keywords:

Calligraphy, Chinese Art, Northern Song Dynasty, Arts of the Brush, Chinese Aesthetic, Pingdan, Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, Li Zehou, Text Paintings, Contemporary Art, Pain Not Bread.
Dedicated to

Janice Gurney, my beloved wife,
thank you for persuading me to return to school,
and once more, changing the course of my life;

and to my Mother,
because humanity begins in the family.
Acknowledgements

There are so many people to whom I owe so much that I hardly know where to begin. My supervisors, Patrick Mahon, David Merritt, and James Flath, nurtured this project over several years. I am grateful for their support and criticism. Patrick—and Mark Cheetham at the University of Toronto—played a crucial role in pointing out how important certain concepts and attitudes, first in Ch’an Buddhism and later, the larger Chinese aesthetic tradition, were becoming for me. It is in large part due to them that I began to see these ideas as much more than academic objects of knowledge. I am also grateful to Elizabeth Harvey at the University of Toronto: through a lucid series of questions, she made clear how human suffering could find its place in the world of academic thought without being stripped of compassion. Julian Haladyn and Mimi Jordan, both a year ahead of me in their PhD Programs, were more helpful than they may realize: Julian’s research into the formation of the modern human subject exerted a quiet but persistent influence over my own research, while Mimi’s insistence that how a dissertation was written was crucial to its content opened up a myriad of possibilities for me.

I was exceptionally fortunate in receiving funding for this project. I was initially awarded an Ontario Graduate scholarship, and The University of Western Ontario supported my research with a Mary Routledge Fellowship. I was shocked when The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council awarded me a Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS Doctoral Scholarship; this support suddenly made multiple avenues of research possible. The knowledge that this is money drawn from the public well has never left me; I have tried to act in a manner that would merit this support.

I knew so little, and yet so many were generous. Klaas Ruitenbeek, then at the Royal Ontario Museum, gave me valuable advice at the very beginning of my studies. Cary Liu,
at the Princeton University Art Museum, allowed me to study the Huang Tingjian scroll, an act of intellectual generosity for which I will always be deeply grateful. I benefited from the knowledge of Cary Liu, Peter Sturman, Yugen Wang, and Anna Shields, all of whom were kind enough to reply to my questions about the intricacies of calligraphy, the Northern Song, and its material culture.

It has been a pleasure to have so many good friends along for the ride. During the time I was engaged in this project, my longest-serving friend, Guy Gavriel Kay, was also studying the Northern Song, for a novel which has now surfaced as River of Stars. We shared the freshness of discovery; I enjoyed seeing the very different lessons and meanings he drew from the same period and, often, the same figures. Andrew Lee, my old pal from days at the Toronto Reference Library, and Yam Lau, artist and friend of many years, both helped translate the Huang Tingjian scroll—so that when I saw the great scroll, I had some of idea not only of what it said but where certain meanings occurred. The support of my dealers, Patricia Libralato and Robert Birch, of Birch Libralato Gallery in Toronto, has allowed me to exhibit the paintings influenced by these studies. Chak Man Lei ferried a new edition of Yan Zhenqing’s works across the Pacific to me—which we celebrated appropriately with Scottish ale. Yi (Evie) Gu has given me a still ongoing education in the nuances of classical, modern, and contemporary China, as well as a memorable tour of Shanghai’s Xuhui district, and a glimpse into the warmth and humour of her family’s life in that great city. In Hangzhou, Jenny Tong guided me through the Xiling Seal Carving Society, then Lingyin and Jingci Temples, teaching me the intricacies of what foot one should use to cross a temple threshold, and where my fierce-looking protector deity stood.

Zhou Yan, poet and literary translator, spent many hours trying to educate me in the resonances of key Chinese terms, and served as well as a constant resource for all questions of poetry. She also schemed to ensure that I did not return from Xi’an without a proper education. Her friend from their university years, Wang Lei, drove a small group
of us into the mountains near Lantian in an attempt to find the site of Wang Wei’s estate. Navigating with a copy of an engraving of Wang Wei’s long-lost painting of the mountains, we were ultimately unsuccessful—but the trip was breath-taking. Later we visited Shi Lou An, an ancient Jin period Buddhist “convent”; Cao Tang Temple where Kumarajiva translated the sutras; and Lou Guan Tai where legend has it that Laozi wrote the *Dao De Jing*. It was through Yan that I found myself at the Shaanxi Institute for Studies in Historical Calligraphy in Xi’an, where Zhang Yingqun welcomed us into his studio, wrote out a poem by Zhou En Lai, demonstrated Mi Fu’s technique, discussed classical calligraphy, and unveiled a rubbing of a Buddhist stele he had discovered in the mountains. Yang Mei, poet and translator of literature, took up the task of acting as both a guide and my translator in Xi’an. Her help and kindness were invaluable to me on so many occasions—but especially on several visits to the Forest of Stele. “Beilin, Beilin, Beilin,” she would say, attempting to explain why I hadn’t visited the Terra Cotta Warriors.

The roots of this project lie deep in my friendships with artists and poets. Jamelie Hassan’s fascination with China predates my own: “Seek knowledge even unto China” says the hadith that she eventually turned into an artwork. The influence of the poets, Roo Borson and Kim Maltman, the other members of Pain Not Bread and true students of China, has been immense. With them, I spent a decade immersed in Wang Wei and the other great Tang poets, attempting to write poems which had some hint of Tang poetry’s mixture of lucidity and allusiveness. My recent paintings could never have existed without them.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Certificate of Examination
Abstract and Key Words ii
Dedication iii
Acknowledgements iv - vi
List of Illustrations x
List of Tables xi

*Introduction* 1

*A Simplified Sequence of China's History* 16
*Major Figures in the Dissertation* 17
*Glossary of Key Chinese Terms* 18
*Major Calligraphic Scripts* 19

*Chapter 1: Elements of the Northern Song Aesthetic* 22

1. Calligraphy and Nature
   a: Nature and the Chinese Writing System 24
   b: Natural Metaphors and the Phenomenal World 27
   c: Calligraphy and Configurational Energy 31
   d: Nature and the Primal *Qi* 34

2. Calligraphy and Human Character
   a: A Portrait of the Person 35
   b: Characterology in the Northern Song 37
   c: Doubts about Characterology 39

3. Calligraphy and Human Relationships
   a: An Art of Social Relations 42
   b: The Human Media in the Northern Song 45
   c: Public and Private Address 49
   d: Matching Rhymes 52

4. Calligraphy as an Art of Time
   a: Unrolling Time 54
   b: Emotionalized Time 58
5. Calligraphy and the Place of Human Feeling
   a: Tears at Parting 63
   b: A New Ratio of Thought and Feeling 64

6. Calligraphy and Literature
   a: Gardens as Literature 67
   b: West Lake as Literature 73
   c: Dissolved in Literature 76

7. Calligraphy and the Convertibility of the Arts
   a: Wandering in the Arts 81
   b: Wang Wei’s Example 83
   c: The Role of the Material Culture 86

8. Calligraphy and Politics
   a: Factionalism in the Northern Song 90
   b: Su Shi’s Opposition to Wang Anshi 93
   c: The Political Role of Yan Zhenqing’s Calligraphy 98
   d: The Letter on the Controversy Over Seating Protocol 101

9. Calligraphy and the Pingdan Ideal
   a: The Bland and the Flavourless 104
   b: Pingdan and Naturalness 109
   c: Su Shi and “No-Mind” 112
   d: “It thins to nothing” 113

10. Calligraphy and Belatedness
    a: A Ruined Tradition 115
    b: The Great Archive of the Past 120

Chapter 2: Two Works of Northern Song Calligraphy 125

1. Su Shi’s Rain on the Festival of Cold Food
   a: Peonies 126
   b: Beauty and Defects 133
   c: Balance and the Doctrine of the Mean 135
2. Huang Tingjian’s *Scroll for Zhang Datong* 140
   a. Resonance 141
   b. Allusion and Transmission 147
   c. *Wen* 150
d. Method 151
e. *Ren* and *Li* in Written Form 154

*Chapter 3: Records of a Non-Historian*

1. *The Declining Year at Hangzhou* 156
   a. Hangzhou 157
   b. Translating Brush and Ink 161
c. Translating Space 164
d. Translating Time 166
e. Composing the Texts 169

2. Holes in the Roof 173
3. Stone and Metal Chimes 180

References 182
Bibliography 209
Dossier 221
Curriculum Vitae 235
List of Illustrations

A carving of a turtle, with great seal script inscription 25
Detail of Shang Dynasty oracle bone 26
An inscription on Taishan 27
Detail from Huaisu, *Autobiography* 31
Liang Shenqing, detail from the *Yu Shi Tai Tablet* 50
Su Shi, detail from the *Letter to Judge Xie Minshi* 51
Su Shi, detail of *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food* 52
Su Shi, *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food*, entire scroll 53
Yan Zhenqing, *Stele for the Temple of Guos* 54
Huang Tingjian, *Scroll for Zhang Datong* 56
Detail of the *Xiping Stone Classics* 59
*The Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician*, Suzhou 68
West Lake seen from Xiling Seal Carving Society, Hangzhou 74
Laifeng Pagoda, seen from Orioles Singing to Willows 75
Bao Yiu-ming, *The Fourth of Six Casually Written Poems by Wang Wei* 84
Su Shi, *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food* 126
Huang Tingjian, *Scroll for Zhang Datong* 140
A Tang Dynasty example of Seal Script 143
Andy Patton, *The Declining Year at Hangzhou* 157
Dragon Coffee in Hangzhou 159
Brice Marden, *Cold Mountain 6 (Bridge)* 165
Yan Zhenqing, detail from the *Yan Family Stele* 168
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Simplified Sequence of China’s History</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Figures in the Dissertation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Glossary of Key Chinese Terms</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Calligraphic Scripts</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

I set out to immerse myself in the calligraphy of China’s Northern Song period (960-1127)—in particular the work of Su Shi and Huang Tingjian—and the aesthetic understanding that sustained it. But my studies have not been art historical, nor are they “academic,” in the pejorative sense. I took them up in order to change my own understanding of art, and to make contemporary Western paintings out of this immersion in a long-vanished period of a culture I was not born into. I have tried, like Qian Zhongshu but more clumsily, “to strike a connection” between two very different times and two very different cultures—or use a nice Chinese expression, I’ve made a hole to borrow light from the next room.

That period and those great works seem like a possible world, a fiction, even though the works exist, even though I have no doubt that the Northern Song once existed. If they seem like something imagined, this is because the Song is populated by unfamiliar names, odd artworks, and a strange aesthetic, no truly global art history yet being available. But for this same reason, and because those works and that vanished period lie outside Western art’s history and presuppositions, what they can offer is a sense of possibility—a different model of art, and a way of dissenting from my own time.

I realize that the paintings I have made are simply one more moment in the long history of the the West’s encounter with the art of China. This began centuries ago, and has proceeded in fits and starts, discontinuous and unpredictable. Different moments in what seems like an almost incoherent history are works and artists as varied and disparate as Simone Martini’s 1317 Saint Louis of Toulouse Crowning Robert of Anjou, in which King Robert wears a robe decorated with a Chinese leaf and lotus pattern;¹ or Trecento Sienese painting in a wide sense, in which Paul Hills sees evidence of “a new sensibility...fostered by the Chinese silks that were finding their way to Italy in increasing numbers.”² There is the familiar Delft blue pottery, which began to be produced in 1620 when the export of
Chinese porcelain to Europe ended with the death of the Wanli Emperor;\(^3\) or Watteau’s reported viewing of Chinese paintings, together with his belief that he painted in the Chinese manner.\(^4\) Much more recent examples include the influence of Ch’\(\text{\textasciitilde}\)an Buddhist and Daoist thought on Ad Reinhardt’s black paintings of the 1960s and his writing; Pat Steir’s \textit{Waterfall} paintings, which were influenced by painters from the Yuan to the Ming; or Brice Marden’s \textit{Cold Mountain} paintings as the nineties began, which were conscious absorptions of the cursive calligraphic masters.

Looking back at the West’s encounter, it’s clear that the artworks themselves, not intellection about China, were the basis of that encounter. Exactly what could be absorbed was impossible to foresee in advance of the artwork actually being made. All the theoretical work in the world could not accomplish the work performed by these visual encounters, these material works of translation that changed our own culture. No study could have predicted precisely what elements could be taken up by the West. The artwork itself is the culture’s research, a kind of proof, in both senses of the word, that certain things, transplanted, will take. The complex visuality of material artworks mark out the limits of what is possible to bring across the border from one culture to another. This is a way of learning, and yet we tend to treat art as though it were not a form of knowledge.

Perhaps this is because the \textit{work} of art is concrete and empirical, and since the Enlightenment, reason has meant abstract thought. Perhaps it is because we worship the word; if language is the medium of knowledge, then concrete sensuous objects are not part of knowledge. But what we mean by “China” is, in part, a way of doing things visually. Just as Chinese food is eaten with chopsticks, not forks and knives, the visual culture is also organized differently. The uses of scale are not like ours; the space of paintings; the structuring of time, vision, and human feeling; the embedded values... Much of what can be learned from another visual culture can only be discovered in a visual practice.
Before I take up the works and the aesthetic understanding of the Northern Song, I should try briefly to answer a few obvious questions: what is calligraphy and why study it, and why study the calligraphy of the Northern Song?

Calligraphy is a text presented as visual art—generally, a visual art that presents nothing but a text. Unlike painting or poetry, it refuses to resolve, to settle into a visual or a verbal mode. Chinese calligraphy has no real equivalent in Western art, in part because the two visual cultures are such different projects: from a distance, they look like two different parts of an enormous cultural experiment. In the West, the visual culture was structured around the principle of keeping language from appearing in the visual field. In China, the visual culture was organized instead around the entwining of language and vision.

This entwining of language and vision was made possible by China’s material culture. Poetry, painting, and calligraphy—the “arts of the brush”—all were done with brush and ink on paper or silk. This made it possible for a painting to be made from calligraphic strokes, for a poem to be written on a painting that had been made with the same brush and ink, or for the writing out of a poem to be also a work of visual art. This made it possible for Wang Wei to be perhaps China’s greatest poet of the landscape and at the same time a great painter, the founder of the Southern School of landscape painting. This might be roughly similar to Dante also painting the Scrovegni Chapel, or Giotto writing the *Divina Commedia*. But Western material culture divided what China’s united; Velasquez’s oil paints, turpentine, canvas, and long brushes were useless to Gongora in writing his sonnets and odes. The tools and procedures of painting and poetry constituted such separate realms that no Western painter or poet could ever say, as the Ming poet, painter, and calligrapher Tang Yin did, “I’ve found a painter’s brush that also writes poems.” This was, and is, breath-taking to me.
There is a history specific to the Western visual reception of Chinese calligraphy, which began much later than that of Chinese ceramics, luxury goods, or paintings—largely in post-war and contemporary America art. Perhaps it began later because there was no real equivalent to it in Western art, and therefore nothing familiar that could be the basis for its digestion. It likely began in the late 1940s with Mark Tobey’s “white writing” abstract paintings, which in turn influenced Jackson Pollock’s all-over paintings. The influence of calligraphy has been seen in Franz Kline’s black and white gestural abstractions, though Kline disputed this. The reception continued in a deeper way in the earlier monochromes of Ad Reinhardt, where it was less the appearance than the aesthetic thought that influenced Reinhardt, who studied and later taught the history of Asian art. His polemics on art are clearly shaped by Asian thought, as a title such as “Cycles Through the Chinese Landscape” indicates. More recently, Brice Marden’s *Cold Mountain* (1989-1991) series of paintings follow from his study of the works of various calligraphers.

Although Tobey referred to his painting style as “white writing”, and though Marden’s *Cold Mountain* paintings are based on poems in couplets by Han Shan (Cold Mountain), there is little visual evidence that calligraphy was seen or valued as a linguistic form in any of the notable American works. The only exception seems to be Henri Michaux, the Belgian-born poet and painter, whose first experiments with calligraphy date from 1948. In his drawings, calligraphy is received and deployed in forms that appear to be “like language.” In 1975, this was made explicit when he published *Ideograms in China*, his study of the Chinese writing form. But even Michaux’s work only imitates the appearance of language; it does not actually present a text.

Marden’s *Cold Mountain* series makes a good point of contrast for making my project clear, since his focus was on making gestural abstract paintings, derived from his study of various calligraphers from a variety of periods. Rather than attempting to imitate the gestural appearance of calligraphy, as Marden did, I have tried to make Western paintings that could function like calligraphy in being simultaneously a visual object and


a literary object, a work which asks its viewer to shuttle back and forth between the radically different modes of seeing and reading.

Marden’s capacity to see calligraphy, to see it as valuable and to absorb something from it, was prepared by Abstract Expressionism with its commitment to gestural brushwork: his paintings can be understood as attempts to integrate calligraphy with Jackson Pollock’s uncoiling spatial webs. My own reception of calligraphy was shaped by Conceptual Art, in which text entered Western art for the first time as the dominant or even the sole visual element. Though my paintings of the eighties and nineties never used texts, like so many artists I had been deeply influenced by Conceptual Art. I was especially interested in the works of Greg Curnoe and Lawrence Weiner. I had been fascinated by Greg Curnoe’s stamp-pad paintings since I first saw one while haunting the art gallery in my teen-age years. In it, a verbal description appeared instead of an image of the view from his studio window. This amazed me; I had no idea that art could substitute words for images. Weiner’s work was entirely text, and yet often strikingly beautiful; it seemed to open up a breath-taking aesthetic space. Since the 1960s there have been scores of visual works utilizing texts, and even a considerable number of painters of texts. Besides Curnoe, in painting there was the example of Jasper Johns, then On Kawara, Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, Colin McCahon the New Zealand artist, more recently Christopher Wool, Glenn Ligon, Graham Gilmore, and Ron Terada. Ad Reinhardt once said that “looking isn’t as easy as it looks.” But I was prepared to see Chinese calligraphy; I had been readied by recent Western art.

Of course, my personal history played a role as well. Though I was an art school kid, as an undergraduate I suddenly veered off course and studied English Literature, not visual art. Poetry especially left a lasting mark on me; I used to believe I could give up painting before I could give up reading poetry. As long ago as 1989, I wrote of the Italian modernist poet, Eugenio Montale, that “I’ve saturated myself in Montale’s poetry for more than fifteen years, and I sometimes think that his work has influenced me more than that of any artist. Of the course the work of other artists has influenced me, in ways that
often have been very direct or practical, but what I’m thinking of here is more a tenor of thought and feeling, an intimate relation to life.” A year later I was writing poetry collaboratively with the poets, Roo Borson and Kim Maltman, as Pain Not Bread. We took apart critical introductions and translators’ forewords to the Tang poet, Wang Wei, reworking them, restitching them, reassembling them—and using those found but reworked or “reheard” sections as platforms, made poems from them. Others were sparked off by reading literal character by character translations, then inverting or extending the meaning, or by extending metaphors until they were stretched almost to the point of exaggeration. For a decade I was immersed in Wang Wei, and to a lesser degree, the other great Tang poets. Our experiments eventually became a handful of finished poems, then a manuscript, and finally a book, *Introduction to the Introduction to Wang Wei*. That immersion transformed so many of my ideas about art; it was there I learned that Wang Wei had been both poet and painter. I believe that the idea of working on Wang Wei was Roo’s idea; she no longer recalls whether this is true. But I owe to both of them the decade-long internship that was my introduction to China’s classical past.

The answer to “Why the Northern Song?” is simple. During the decade Pain Not Bread was at work, my wife, the artist Janice Gurney, found a remaindered copy of a book of Chinese calligraphy for me. This was my introduction: I had little interest in it. At the time I was much more interested in Chinese painting. But it grew on me, or rather, one day I suddenly saw it, and once I could see, I found myself moved by images of the calligraphy of the Northern Song—Su Shi’s *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food*, Huang Tingjian’s *Scroll for Zhang Datong*, Mi Fu’s *On A Gift of Szechuan Silk*. They seemed stunningly beautiful. I suppose the question then would be why it was these works that struck me, rather than something by Wang Xizhi, traditionally China’s greatest calligrapher. Why wasn’t it Zhao Mengfu in the Yuan or Wen Zhengming in the Ming that attracted me? Why not the great Tang calligraphers? Really, what does someone see? “There’s no explaining taste” is the commonplace non-answer. I would rather say that
seeing is decisive, and motivated by commitments largely unconscious and deeply rooted. But I would also argue that what is seen is rooted in the object, in how it organizes vision. To do otherwise is to deny agency to the material object.

I saw the calligraphy as stunningly beautiful. The problem of beauty is that decisions about the value of artworks are fundamentally discussions of aesthetic experience, not logical debates—that is, so long as artworks are addressed as artworks rather than historical documents or as elements of an anthropology or a sociology. In those latter cases, there seems to be some larger logic to which the work can be referred, but not as an artwork. “Art cannot impose its validity...its truth can neither be refuted by dogma nor ‘falsified’ by logic”, writes Hans Robert Jauss. What is even more important to me here, and what I cherish, is his contention that this resistance of aesthetic experience to the imposition of external criteria “is the grounds for the emancipatory chance its refractoriness provides.”

I saw a moment of emancipation in Su Shi’s calligraphy. I now know what I did not know then—that this was not some aberrant perception. Ronald Egan, for example, sees the period as one in which “in one area after another, we find an interest in pursuing ‘beauty’ or aesthetically pleasing objects across boundaries that had previously been viewed as inviolable.” While Egan’s study focuses on texts—Ouyang’s Tree Peonies of Luoyang, Su Shi’s ci poems, Qin Guan’s Preface to Temporary Lodgings among many others—I realize now that this moment of beauty was visible in the calligraphy, even to someone so ignorant as myself. Now I’d be prepared to argue that even after a brief acquaintance with classical calligraphy, Northern Song calligraphy visibly displays a freedom that Tang calligraphy does not, a flash of individual freedom on the basis of traditional rules that is not there in the periods immediately before or after; that is visibly saturated with feeling in a way that was not possible in the Tang or the Yuan.
Perhaps it seems absurd of me to study calligraphy, since I cannot read Chinese characters or speak the language. Perhaps even more oddly, my illiteracy does not rule this project out—not, at least, from the traditional Chinese perspective, which insists that it is how the text is written that is crucial. Often the text itself is not composed by the calligrapher who writes it out: the Stone Tablet of the Xuanmi Pagoda in Xi’an’s Forest of Stele is valued as a record of Liu Gongquan’s (778-865) hand. The language was composed by Pei Xiu, but the stele is honoured as the work of the great Tang calligrapher.

In the Northern Song, Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) as a good Confucian found it necessary to overlook the disagreeable content of Buddhist and Daoist texts when he found the calligraphy worth preserving. In our own period, Yu-kung Kao argued that, “the physical presence of the words, not their content, is the object of appreciation.” Many calligraphers and connoisseurs have insisted that the character of the writer is revealed in how the calligraphy is written. I found that in China itself, people were often curious about the seeming oddity of my interest in calligraphy—but this never became an issue so long as I was capable of recognizing the different styles of the great calligraphers.

My research in the end is a visual reception of Northern Song calligraphy, but the paintings I have made were shaped too by an immersion in the aesthetic thought of that period. It was necessary for me to try reconstruct that vanished aesthetic, because I wanted to confront a very different understanding of art and how it functioned. To simply assume that I could apprehend the works through visual study alone could leave me free to project onto it the understanding of art our period had inculcated in me.

Since I am not a scholar nor do I read Chinese, in trying to understand the aesthetic of the Northern Song, I’ve had to rely on the work of historians and art historians, so that I could sense it, see it, imagine the instinctive set of rules and expectations and practices that made the calligraphy possible. Through their work, I have tried to understand the “world” in which Northern Song calligraphy took place, since it is only as a world that this lost aesthetic could confront the still-functioning coherence of the world in which I
live and work. An aesthetic is necessarily a world—not a handful of principles, not a logical construct. I have been influenced, though not deeply enough, by Eugene Wang’s way of studying how the *Lotus Sutra* was depicted, and transformed. According to him, many different images, tales, hagiographies, beliefs and material practices—ones which we would see as having little or no apparent connection with the sutra—nonetheless played large roles in the making of the transformation tableaux. “They testify to the existence of an imaginary world that draws on not only the Lotus Sutra but a host of other domains of experience. The sutra provides not so much a textual source as a set of prompts or building blocks out of which a different architecture could be assembled. In some cases, it is all but a pretext for something else…To the extent that this something else involves a range factors that may cohere into a picture, it is aptly characterized as a ‘world,’ one that accommodates both heterogeneity and unity and that outgrows its textual source.”¹² A lived world surrounded the writing of calligraphy in the Northern Song, one made up of classical inheritances, poems, written and unwritten rules, strands of religious thought, a bad elbow, a fascination with peonies, the chance perhaps to advance in the imperial bureaucracy—a patchwork quilt, to use a thoroughly Western metaphor. And yet together these constituted a world, an understanding that seemed to cohere, which could be navigated and put to use. “The interconnectedness among different domains of experience in medieval China calls for a view of cultural continuity and coherence of the past world as a distant other, seen from a present perspective. To take the medieval Chinese world on its own terms and to stress its own web of interrelationships is a way of seeing how differently our modern perceptual categories organize cultural experiences so that what we perceive as unrelated domains of experience may be seen as having in fact cohered more cogently back then.”¹³

There is one more thing to note here. During the course of my studies, it became clear to me that what so much of I had understood to be the aesthetic of the Northern Song was in fact that of a small group, the Yuanyou reformers who briefly held power from 1086-1094.¹⁴ It seems to be routine to take this small group as representative of the
Northern Song, since they have come to typify it. Ronald Egan’s study mentioned above could serve as an example. *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in the Northern Song Dynasty* deals with a series of poets and prose writers, collectors, and calligraphers, all of whom belong to this circle gathered first around Ouyang Xiu and then Su Shi (1037-1101). Since the Southern Song, scholars in China have debated whether there was in fact a unified Yuanyou style. In practice, as Egan’s example shows, the assumption has been that there was a loosely unified style and that it constitutes the period’s highest achievement. This issue presents no real problem for me here, since it was Su Shi and Huang Tingjian’s (1045-1105) calligraphy and their aesthetic understanding that is the subject of my research. But nonetheless their accomplishment does not represent the generic Northern Song understanding.

Ignorant, “born late and worthless,” I have had to rely on the works of so many scholars: if we were not in the contemporary world, I should refer to them only by courtesy names. I have not stood on the shoulders of giants; instead, I have clung desperately to their pant legs while West Lake, the yellow dust of the Shaanxi plains, or the willows of the Han capital brushed past. There are two in particular to whom I am indebted, though neither is a scholar of calligraphy. The first is Qian Zhongshu, the great literary scholar, novelist, and, during the Cultural Revolution, janitor. He might possibly be the Walter Benjamin of China: like Confucius, his anti-systematic thought in the micro-essays of *Limited Views* appears not to invent but only to transmit. But of course, like Benjamin, he was a genius of citation. If there is any precision of thought anywhere in what I have written, it is the result of reading Qian and looting his work. The other is Li Zehou, the great Kantian and Marxist aesthetic thinker, and after Tiananmen, “thought criminal.” It was in reading *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* that I began, finally, to see and to feel how all these different works, these different periods, these different figures were linked, how they flowed together to form something like the great river of the Chinese tradition. Before reading Li, it was as though I had only a pile of artifacts, and after him, a culture. It will take me
many years to digest his thought; I genuinely regret that what follows is not more deeply influenced by his thought.

The written dissertation that follows is in three parts. First, I attempt to bring together what I understand to be the main elements of the Northern Song aesthetic that sustained calligraphy. While this has been done for painting and literature—both of which have counterparts in the Western tradition—this work of reconstruction for calligraphy does not yet seem to have been done in English-language scholarship.16 I have drawn from a wide variety of sources, looking into the mythological beliefs about writing, literature and commentaries on literature, treatises on painting, the politics of the time, Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist thought. Some were specific to the period, others much more broadly influential on Chinese history or Chinese aesthetics over vast periods. While staying focused on the Northern Song, I have tried to keep in mind Lothar Ledderose’s contention that because of the coherence of the calligraphic tradition over such a long period of time, “a knowledge of later phases…is a precondition for studying earlier phases and vice-versa.”17 I read poetry too: Confucius said of the Songs of the South (Chuci), “If you don’t study the Songs, you will have nothing to say.”18 Following the sage, I read the poetry of the Song, hoping that I might sense the structure of feeling of that moment in which the calligraphers lived. Equally important was viewing actual works—in Western museums and in China, and especially at the Forest of Stele in Xi’an—and through the purchase and study of rubbings, the traditional mode by which calligraphy was transmitted. Of course I spent an enormous amount of time in a more contemporary mode of transmission: studying photographic reproductions in books. I supplemented this as well by studying, when I could, objects from the period: ceramic plates, bronze mirrors, wooden benches, scraps of silk, temples ruined and rebuilt—the material culture that had been the world in which the calligraphy appeared. I thought my perceptions of a Chinese visual order might be honed if I trained myself by viewing a multiplicity of objects, if I could allow myself to be imprinted, for example, by the
amount and kind of detail that distinguished Northern Song visual culture. I do not claim that the set of elements I have dealt with is any way complete—only that it could suffice to sketch the broad outlines of the Northern Song aesthetic.

After outlining the aesthetic, I then turn to two of the period’s great works, Su Shi’s *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food* and Huang Tingjian’s *Scroll for Zhang Datong*. The aesthetic of a period is never expressed in any one work, just as no speaker or writer ever utilizes the entire English language. Instead, parts of the aesthetic are rejected while others are amplified, and new elements interjected. Both the work and the reconstructed aesthetic must be tested against each other, since they will never completely correspond, just as visual practice and intellectual logic never perfectly mirror each other.

Following this, I then turn, finally, to my own paintings, looking at one in detail, in order to make visible what was able to be translated from brush and ink to oil on canvas, from the Northern Song to contemporary painting and post-modernity. This is of course *post-hoc*: art proceeds by a combination of thought and feeling, labour, intuitions, perception, accidents, and trial and error. If it appears a rational enterprise, this is a misrepresentation. Taken as a whole, my research consists of the intellectual labour recorded here, and the visual and material labour of the paintings. Both were crucial: I could not have made the paintings without undertaking this immersion in the Northern Song. But I would not have immersed myself without the opportunity to put what I was learning to the visual and material test that a painting is. Like most artists, I learn by making; I am certain that Su Shi and Huang Tingjian would have understood.

The written dissertation ends in what is essentially a non-conclusion: a patchwork of thoughts, concerns, and doubts which this immersion has left me with. It would be ridiculous simply to conclude that the Northern Song was in some way better or worse than our contemporary aesthetic, or that it’s value lies simply in the light it throws on art today. It was a living culture, an atmosphere. But more importantly, I want to insist that
the written dissertation is only part of what constitutes my research, that it is, if anything, preliminary to the visual work, to the paintings themselves. As I said earlier, in the visual encounter with China it was artworks themselves, not intellection about China, that was the basis of that encounter. My own paintings are the record of what could be taken up and translated into a very different time, a very different culture. They are not appended to the written work. They are not illustrations of it, nor even a “practice” that could be opposed to the “theory” of the written dissertation. The visual work performs a very different kind of work.

Our program is “Art and Visual Culture” and visual culture is just that—visual. The interlocking of elements from different visual cultures, their self-assembly into complex new “molecules” of visual order, could only be accomplished visually and materially—as our history of art demonstrates.

China presents a few problems peculiar to its history: names in particular can be bewildering to Westerners. The Chinese convention is to place the family name first. Su Shi was from the Su family; his brother was Su Che; their father, Su Xun. What complicates matters is that Chinese figures were routinely known by several different names. Su Shi, like many, gave himself a nickname, “Su Dongpo,” which means “East Slope Su”, after the farm he worked while exiled in Huangzhou. Respected figures were usually not referred to directly by their given name, and so a “courtesy name” was used instead: Su Shi’s was “Zizhan.”

To add a further level of complexity, Chinese characters have had to be translated into the Western alphabet, in a process called “romanization.” None of the systems of romanization works perfectly, and several different systems have existed. The most well-known of these systems was the Wade-Giles system, which has now been replaced by pinyin. Each of these different systems offered its own spelling of Chinese words and
names, multiplying them further. None of these work terribly well for English speakers. “Su Shi,” for example, looks as though it might sound something like the Japanese food, but it usually is pronounced more like “Sue Sure.” I have provided no guide to pronunciation here, as the issue is complex—and since, illiterate, I am not the best guide.

As most do today, I have used the pinyin spellings. If a quotation contains a word or a name in an alternative romanization, it is followed immediately by its pinyin spelling, shown within square brackets. To impose some sort of clarity on the proliferation of names, especially for any non-specialist who might read this, I have limited each figure to one name: Su Shi, for example, appears only by that name. Where a quotation refers to someone by their nickname or courtesy name, I have followed that by inserting their name into the citation within square brackets. Thus, if Su Shi appears as “Dongpo” or “Zizhan,” “[Su Shi]” follows. I have translated the names of famous Chinese texts, except for the Yijing (the I Ching) and the Dao De Jing (the Tao Te Ching) which have become known by their Chinese names. For the opposite reason, I have continued to refer to the great sage of China, Kongzi, as “Confucius”, since by that name he happens to be known to the world.

I have also provided an extremely simplified chart of Chinese history, to outline the history out of which the Song emerged and the future that would interpret it. Many of the dates are open to dispute, and many brief-lived or competing dynasties, kingdoms, and periods of disorder are ignored in that chart; I have provided what is possibly the most reduced scheme imaginable. Whenever new historical figure appears in my text, I have provided their dates, if these are known, so that they can fitted into the larger history. A list of only the most crucial Chinese figures for my dissertation is also provided—a sort of dramatis personae.

Chinese terms are italicized, unless they appear in a quoted passage. I have also included a glossary of a few key Chinese terms. Though I remain illiterate in that language, a few
terms seem to be impossible to dispense with: the *Dao* or the Way, with which many Westerners have some familiarity; or the *shi*, for example, a class of scholar-bureaucrats for whom there is no exact equivalent in European history, or *wen*, a term which seems to open up the depths of Chinese culture. Finally, I have also provided images of only the main script types used in Chinese calligraphy. As with my chart of Chinese history, this list is greatly simplified. In the footnotes, since both “Ibid.” and “op.cit.” are falling out of use, I have dispensed with both, at the price of a certain repetitiveness, substituting abbreviated titles for the works cited. By way of example, Egan’s *Word, Image and Deed in the Life of Su Shi* appears as *Word, Image and Deed.*
## A Simplified Sequence of China’s History

(Note: Periods of disorder appear in italics.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
<th>Dynasty</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1700-1045 BCE</td>
<td>Shang Dynasty</td>
<td>oracle bones, ancestor worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1045-256 BCE</td>
<td>Zhou Dynasty</td>
<td>rites and music formalized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>722-476 BCE</td>
<td>Spring and Autumn Period</td>
<td>immense disorder: Confucius teaches, Daoism begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>476 -221 BCE</td>
<td>Warring States Period</td>
<td>consolidation of larger states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>221-206 BCE</td>
<td>Qin Dynasty</td>
<td>First Emperor, the terracotta army, burning of books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>202 BCE-220 AD</td>
<td>Han Dynasty</td>
<td>first of the “great” stable dynasties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>220-589</td>
<td>Six Dynasties</td>
<td>Han collapses, new aesthetic forms develop in reclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(265-420)</td>
<td>(Wei Jin)</td>
<td>scholars retreat; new aesthetic forms; Wang Xizhi, tears at parting, Buddhism in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>618-907</td>
<td>Tang Dynasty</td>
<td>the golden age of classical China, vast empire, An Lushan rebellion, Yan Zhengqing, Huaisu, Du Fu, Wang Wei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>907-960</td>
<td>Five Dynasties, Ten Kingdoms</td>
<td>war and famine, population shifts south to Yangtze</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 960-1127

#### Northern Song Dynasty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
<th>Dynasty</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1127-1279</td>
<td>Southern Song</td>
<td>Kaifeng falls to the Jin, northern territories are lost, Neo-Confucian thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1271-1368</td>
<td>Yuan Dynasty</td>
<td>Mongol conquest of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1368-1644</td>
<td>Ming Dynasty</td>
<td>new Chinese dynasty, Tang Yin, Wen Zhengming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1644-1911</td>
<td>Qing Dynasty</td>
<td>Manchu (Jurchen) conquest Taiping Rebellion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912–1927</td>
<td>Republic of China</td>
<td>Sun Yat-Sen. Lu Xun, Qian Zhongshu writes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927–1949</td>
<td>Chinese Civil War</td>
<td>The Long March, Japan invades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949-</td>
<td>The People’s Republic</td>
<td>Great Leap Forward, Li Zehou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966-1976</td>
<td>Cultural Revolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Major Figures in the Dissertation

#### Northern Song

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Su Shi</td>
<td>the two central figures of this dissertation; calligraphers and poets, Su Shi was also a statesman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huang Tingjian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mi Fu</td>
<td>great calligrapher of the Northern Song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ouyang Xiu</td>
<td>leader of the literati, collector of calligraphy, Su’s mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei Yaochen</td>
<td>poet of the Northern Song, close friend of Ouyang Xiu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Anshi</td>
<td>leader of the New Policies faction that exiled Su Shi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sima Guang</td>
<td>leader of the faction opposed to the New Policies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Figures from the Past

##### Calligraphers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calligrapher</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wang Xizhi</td>
<td>usually thought to be the greatest calligrapher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huaisu</td>
<td>a “wild” cursive calligrapher of the Tang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yan Zhenqing</td>
<td>Tang statesman and calligrapher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

##### Writers and Thinkers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confucius</td>
<td>the great teacher of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhuangzi</td>
<td>Daoist sage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sima Qian</td>
<td>the Grand Historian, Han dynasty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tao Qian</td>
<td>poet who retreated to the life of a farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Wei</td>
<td>Tang dynasty poet of the landscape, Ch’an Buddhist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Du Fu</td>
<td>Tang dynasty poet, chronicled the An Lushan rebellion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han Yu</td>
<td>great prose writer, initiator of the ancient prose movement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Recent and Contemporary Figures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lu Xun</td>
<td>modernist writer of the Democratic period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qian Zhongshu</td>
<td>literary critic of the recent period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Zehou</td>
<td>aesthetic thinker of contemporary period</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## A Glossary of Key Chinese Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ciyun</td>
<td>matching rhymes in poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dan</td>
<td>blandness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guwen</td>
<td>ancient style prose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>haofang</td>
<td>bold and uninhibited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>li</td>
<td>ritual, the rites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pingdan</td>
<td>flavourless, bland, plain, the even and the light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qi</td>
<td>configurational energy, energy flows in the body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ren</td>
<td>humaneness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shi</td>
<td>the scholar bureaucrat class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wen</td>
<td>prose, writing, literature, culture, (originally: patterned appearance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wuxin</td>
<td>“no-mind” (Ch’an Buddhist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xin</td>
<td>heart-mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xin hua</td>
<td>portrayal of the mind, or portrayal of the heart and mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yi</td>
<td>idea, intent, intention, meaning, thought</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MAJOR CALLIGRAPHIC SCRIPTS

Great Seal Script

ink rubbing of inscription by King Cuo of Zhongshan, Warring States Period, National Historical Museum, Beijing

Lesser, or Small Seal script

ink rubbing of Yi Shan Stele, made from Song dynasty copy of Qin dynasty engraving, Forest of Stele, Xi’an
Clerical script

Liang Shengqing, detail of the Yu Shi Tai, Tang dynasty
Forest of Stele, Xi’an

Regular script

Yan Zhenqing, detail from the Yan Family Stele, Tang dynasty
Forest of Stele, Xi’an
Cursive Script

Wang Xizhi, *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, Jin period
(Wang’s cursive calligraphy is the two rows in the centre.)
Princeton University Art Museum, Bequest of John B. Elliott

Wild Cursive Script

Zhang Xu, *Four Ancient Poems*, Tang dynasty
Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang
Chapter 1: Elements of the Northern Song Aesthetic

As for the things you are talking about—these people along with their bones have already rotted away! All that remains is their words.19

-Laozi, as recorded by the Grand Historian

An aesthetic is only a hypothetical construction. It can never be seen in its entirety: no one work displays it and no one person ever enunciates it. Only aspects of it or constituent elements are made visible; only parts of it are consciously thought. “Art is not the product of logical thought,” writes Li Zehou, “nor is aesthetic knowledge the same as rational knowledge.”20 Much of it is unconscious, part of what Bourdieu called the “habitus”—“the system of structured, structuring dispositions” that is inherited by individuals and passed on historically, as well as procedures to follow, paths to take, schemes of perception—that tends “to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time.”21 For this reason, an aesthetic can be felt, but not stated. As Bourdieu says, “This logic, like all practical logics, can only be grasped in action.”22 It is also something that wants to resist articulation. Qian Zhongshu writes that “Painting, in its delineation of scenery, does not assign highest value to skill and detail. Poetry, in its description of affairs, does not give priority to full articulation. In both, it is desirable to leave something out.”23 The Dao that can be spoken is not the true Dao: I can only betray the Northern Song aesthetic in my attempt to articulate it logically, and in trying to be reasonably complete.

But this betrayal was necessary. I had to attempt to reconstruct the Northern Song aesthetic, as though it were an object, simply in order for me to understand how calligraphy functioned, how it was approached, how it was valued. Without this, it would have been impossible for me to do what was most important to my project—which was to confront my own understanding, which is the contemporary understanding of art I have
inherited, with a very different one. A further problem is one that Li Zehou’s views bring up. Li argues that in China, the aesthetic is “more influential and the field broader than in the West.” If this is correct, then “aesthetics” refers us to a wider area of social experience in China, or even to something different. I think Li may be right—at any rate, this is my impression both of the Northern Song and China.

An aesthetic vanishes with its period. It may be that the aesthetic of a period is only visible when it cannot be grasped, because its moment has passed and the aesthetic has evaporated. At that point, it is no longer part of the habitus; the system of structuring dispositions has vanished, leaving behind written texts and artworks from which those dispositions now must be construed. What follows here can only be a misrepresentation, a reduction of something that must have been like the atmosphere the calligraphers of the Northern Song breathed. But that atmosphere has vanished, and so I have tried then to set out what I understand as the main elements of the aesthetic understanding that sustained Northern Song calligraphy. Some of these, like the idea that calligraphy displayed the writer’s character, were consciously held beliefs, just as pingdan, the favourless or bland, was unquestioned as the quality to be sought. Others, such a calligraphy being an art of time may have been largely invisible to the culture, as the structure of many things also being literature must have been, since the culture was soaked in the paramount value of literature. Some of these elements were specific to the Northern Song period—the convertibility of the arts, for example—while others, such as the relation between the writing system and the natural world were so deeply rooted in the past that they would have been shared across many or all periods.

I do not claim that each and every calligrapher’s work involved all these elements in more or less equal proportions. They did not form a recipe, as I hope my analyses of Su Shi’s Rain on the Festival of Cold Food and Huang Tingjian’s Scroll for Zhang Datong make clear. In those works, certain aspects of the aesthetic were deployed and amplified,
while others were cheerfully ignored. Yet these pieces of calligraphy are among the greatest achievements of Northern Song visual culture.

1. Calligraphy and Nature

a: Nature and the Chinese Writing System

Written in Response to Ziyou’s Poem About Days in Mianchi

A life touches on places
like a swan alighting on muddy snow—
accidental clay tracks left in the slush
before it soars east or west into the random air.  

-Su Shi

In European and post-European societies, the idea of “art” carries with it the sense of it being “artificial”, that human creative ability is displayed in its difference from nature. In the Chinese tradition, art emerges out of nature and is always most successful when it is aligned with nature. Cong Wenjun writes that “The ancient Chinese described nature as ben, which literally means ‘the root or stem of the plant.’ In their minds, nature was the source of all art.” The roots of the Chinese writing system lay in nature. Civilization began when the ancient Sage Kings saw in the shell patterns of the Divine Tortoise and in the scales of the Celestial Dragon the signs that became written characters. Zhang Yanyuan (ca. 815-ca.880) recounts the story that writing was based on observing the tracks of animals. In his version, the sage Cang Jie, who had four eyes, “by imitating the bodily prints of birds and tortoises established the forms of written characters.” A different version has Cang Jie seeing written characters in the constellations overhead. When writing was born, the natural world itself celebrated with miraculous events: grain fell in showers and demons were heard howling. In the Han, a more pragmatic view was put forward by Xu Shen (58-147), in the Origin of Chinese Characters. There he
stated that the first characters were pictograms, made by “drawing the objects according to their contours.”\textsuperscript{31} His account may be more plausible, but it is the legends that give the richest expression of this great cultural imagining.

A carving of a turtle, with great seal script inscription, Xiling Seal Engraving Society, Hangzhou

Those legends had a certain historical basis, preserved in transmuted form: the earliest evidence of writing in China are the “oracle bones” which the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600—ca.1046 B.C.E.) used for divination. Even before the Shang, the shoulder bones of cattle were burnt and the cracks in the bone caused by intense heat were “read.” The Shang appear to have standardized their use, adding turtle shells as instruments, accompanying each crack in the bone with an inscribed summary of the divination.\textsuperscript{32} The hexagrams of the \textit{Yi Jing} (the \textit{I Ching}) descended from this practice.
Calligraphy, as the art that celebrates the writing system, was tied to nature through this mythological structure. A better way of expressing the cultural understanding would be to say that writing was natural even though it required study. Something of this can be glimpsed in Su Shi’s poem above, written to his brother, which treats the sadness of the scholar-bureaucrat—the two so often widely separated, at first by postings and now by exile, their places never chosen. The swan’s tracks can be understood as writing; this too is accidental, the product of a brief occasion, written in a transitory medium, destined to vanish before they can be read. There is a sense here as well of failed divination; the swan’s tracks reveal nothing, or reveal that Su’s life has come to nothing. Between the human and natural worlds there is no divide.

That connecting of human and natural worlds is visible too in the inscriptions known as moya carved into the sides of sacred mountains. According to Robert Harrist Jr., “The most important thing to remember about any Chinese moya [polished cliff] inscription is that it is inscribed at some place, not on a man-made structure but on the surface of the earth itself.”33 It is apparent too in the shift of meanings of the character wen, which originally meant the patterned appearance of natural things. Over centuries, it came to
refer to human culture and institutions, then to writing or literature more specifically, and finally prose as opposed to poetry, as in *guwen*, meaning “ancient-style prose.”

b: Natural Metaphors and the Phenomenal World

Written script first derived from the tracks of birds, which Cang Jie adopted as his model... Its form embodies the marvels, and its ingenuity partakes of the daemonic. It may be tortoise-shell writing that is distinctly incised, like the teeth of a comb or scales of a dragon. The body is relaxed and the tail moves about freely, with long wings and a short body. The exposed strokes are like the dangling tips of millet plants, the turned-in forms are like the sloughed-off skin of snakes and insects. They waver and shake: the falcon crouches, the hawk flaps. Or the neck is stretched and the wings lifted, as if about to rise up on the clouds.”

-Cai Yong (133-192)
Several things follow from the idea that writing’s roots are in nature. The first is the idea that great calligraphy was shaped directly by the study of natural forms. In his essay, *On Calligraphy Models*, Cai Xizong (fl.750) wrote, “In constructing a character, the form must not be conceived in vacuo but should, instead, be representative of some material thing, such as bird formations, insect holes in wood, mountains or trees, or clouds or mists.” The idea of calligraphy based in observation was especially pronounced in the two great Tang experimenters in wild cursive, Zhang Xu (ca. 675-759) and Huaisu (737-785). Lu Yu records Zhang as saying, “‘The lone tumbleweed moves by itself, and sand is blown into the air without warning.’ I pattern my calligraphy on such events, and that’s why it is so strange and marvelous.” Lu also quotes Huaisu making a similar pronouncement: “When I had watched the strangely shaped peaks of summer clouds I always took them as my model. Floating with the wind they change their appearance and have no permanent form.” Yan Zhenqing reportedly studied the stains on a wall left by rain that had leaked through the roof. Nature provides the model in such a direct way: one observes and imitates, and in return, the calligraphy has the quality of apparitions. Du Fu himself wrote of Zhang Xu’s writing, “he wields his writing brush. Wonderful calligraphy soon appears on paper, like floating clouds and rising smoke.”

If one could learn by imitating nature’s appearances, it was also possible to learn from the patterns behind the always-changing surface of the world. Li Yangbing (fl.758), a calligrapher who was a relative of the poet Li Bai as well as his first editor, wrote in his *Letter to Grandee Li on Ancient Seal Script*, “From heaven, earth, and mountainscapes I apprehend the script’s square and round shapes; from the sun, moon, and astral formations I apprehend the complementarity of its organizing principles…from eyebrows, mouths, and noses I apprehend its distinctions of pleasure and anger and sorrow and ease; from fish, birds, and beasts I apprehend its rules for extension, diminution, and propulsion… The hand thus gives rise to a myriad transformations, as the mind creates what it will. The script fully manifests all the moods and images of Heaven, earth, and man, and it describes the appearance of the ten thousand things.” This
emphasis on both “rules” and the “myriad of transformations” seems to link Li both to the *Dao De Jing*, and looking forward, to Su Shi’s sense of the importance of the pattern (*li*) which runs behind the changing appearances of the phenomenal world.\(^{42}\)

What also follows from this logic is a connoisseurship of calligraphy that is communicated through metaphors of nature. In *The Appearance of Draft Scripts*, Emperor Wu of the Liang (464-549) made such a series of comparisons. “The slow brushmarks are walking crows, the quick ones like darting magpies. The elongated ones are like a pheasant’s beak, and the dots are like rabbit dropping.”\(^{43}\) In a beautiful passage from his *Treatise on Calligraphy*, Sun Guoting (ca. 646-690) wrote, “I have seen wonders in [brushstrokes like] hanging needles or dewdrops, or a shower of rock hailing down in raging thunder, or a flock of geese in flight, frantic beasts stampeding in terror, a phoenix dancing, a startled snake slithering away in fright, an embankment liable to break, a hilltop about to tilt, [a man] leaning against a withered tree…Some brushstrokes are as ponderous as threatening clouds; others are as light as a cicada’s wing… Its delicate trace is like a new moon rising on the horizon, its bright residue like a galaxy of stars across the sky.”\(^{44}\)

These descriptions may sound fanciful, yet over the centuries these metaphorical usages became a remarkably precise way of discussing calligraphy. By the Northern Song, they were so thoroughly internalized that Su Shi and Huang Tingjian could use them to make jokes at each others’ expense. Egan recounts a wonderful story in which, while drinking wine, the two discussed each other’s calligraphy. Su spoke of the strength of Huang’s writing, but also added that certain characters looked “like snakes dangling from treetops.”\(^{45}\) Huang laughed, and admitted that this was true. While saying that he would never presume to be disrespectful, he pointed out that Su’s characters were like frogs flattened under rocks.\(^{46}\) The humour can only be shared by someone who has studied their calligraphy—amusement follows from how remarkably apt both descriptions are. If they were reversed, for example, the descriptions would be merely baffling. Nor could
either description meaningfully be applied to Mi Fu, or Yan Zhenqing, or Zhao Mengfu, or any of a host of other calligraphers.

Su Shi was sceptical about claims of having learned calligraphy from a swirling river or fighting snakes, saying, “This is similar to the story of Zhang Xu learning the secrets of Draft Script from watching a porter argue with a princess on the road. People who subsequently wished to master Zhang’s style were always looking out for porters.”

Centuries earlier, the early Tang calligrapher Yu Shinan (558-638) had had similar doubts, arguing that “the knack [of calligraphy] lies in perception by the mind rather than the eye.” I find myself less sceptical about these anecdotes than Su. I’m not a fan of Zhong Xu’s wild cursive; perhaps I simply lack the eyes to see it—or the knowledge. Either it lacks sufficient structure, or I lack the ability to see the structure behind its apparent dispensing with the scaffolding supplied by characters even when they are no longer legible. But Huaisu’s wild cursive I find completely convincing. And as much as I admire Su Shi, about Huaisu I wonder if his doubts were so well-founded. Looking at the wild Tang calligrapher, I can imagine that certain characters were imbued with the lessons learned from distant mountains or smoke. Not that the calligraphy was a representation, say, of smoke, but that the calligrapher had learned from its way of changing. “What it represents,” Li Zehou says of Chinese art in general, “is not discrete situations, things or phenomena, but rather the natural universal law, order, and logic.”
c: Calligraphy and Configurational Energy

The relationship to nature led to an embedded series of metaphors in which calligraphy was understood as an analogue of the human body, and these involved calligraphy in what could be called Chinese medical theory. Calligraphy exhibited “bone”, “blood”, “sinews”, and “flesh”. Chang Huai-kuan (fl. 715-745) wrote “A horse is considered superior when it has much sinew and little flesh, inferior when it has much flesh and little sinew. Calligraphy is also like this.”

“Writing that has no breath is like a man who, although he may be able to see, hear, smell, and taste, has no blood and air coursing through his body,” wrote Li Zhi (1059-1109). “Shen (spirit), qi (breath), gu (bone), rou (flesh), and xue (blood) are the five components of calligraphy,” said Su Shi, who wrote a colophon titled The Bone Marrow of Seal Script. Even today it is possible for Peter Sturman to describe Ouyang Xun’s calligraphy (who was the ancestor of Ouyang Xiu) as having more bone than blood.
Again, these metaphors are not merely fanciful. To assert the opposite of Sturman about Ouyang Xun’s writing—that it displayed more blood than bone—would reveal an appalling inattention to his calligraphy. John Hay argues therefore that these metaphors are a form of knowledge; for centuries they provided both the mode of analysis for calligraphy and the framework for experiencing it. Together they directed the manner in which it was produced and valued. But “the body” has to be understood as it was in the Chinese context—not as an assemblage of organs as Western studies of pathology depicted it, but as a complex network of patterns of energy. Its active principle is $qi$, which Hay suggests can best be understood as “configurational energy.” Calligraphy too exhibits $qi$, and just as with a human body, its flow or blockage manifests itself as the health or sickness of the writing. In Hay’s view, “It is as a system of energy flow and transformation that Chinese medical theory was most distinctive in its achievements and most fundamentally integrated with the Chinese universe as a whole.”

Many terms used in assessing calligraphy take up different aspects of that configurational energy: “Force is the essence [of calligraphy],” wrote the Liang Emperor Wu. Many commentaries routinely speak of “brush-strength” for example, or the “hidden tip” brushmark, which literally means, “stored tip.” Examples can be multiplied endlessly. There is a fascinating exchange in which two Tang calligraphers discuss the transformation of energy into the outward body. In it, Zhang Xu is recorded as asking Yan Zhenqing, “Do you know that li [the power of the brush] means guti (bone and body)?” Yan’s reply was to ask in turn, “Isn’t it said that wielding a powerful brush transforms dots and strokes into muscles and bones?” There is really no distinction to be made between the body and the configuration of energy.

Because it is the basis of good health, the continuity of an unbroken flow is especially prized in life and in calligraphy. “The body and force-form, $t’i$-shih [$tishi$], of a character
is complete with a single stroke. There may happen [a passage] where [the brush line] is not continuous but the blood-artery, hsueh-mo [xuemo], is uninterrrupted. Where there is continuity, then the energy, ch’i-hou [qihou], communicates through one line to the next.”\textsuperscript{59} This is the basis for Mi Fu’s admiration for Wang Xianzhi, the son of the great Wang Xizhi, and especially his calligraphy in \textit{Twelfth Month}. In praising it, Mi noted that “The strokes are continuously connected with neither beginning nor end…This is the so-called one stroke writing.”\textsuperscript{60} John Hay explains that when the blood-artery can extend through a succession of characters, a line of calligraphy—that is, a vertical row of characters—forms one continuous passage and can therefore be more “bodily” than a single character. He also points out that these physiological metaphors are applied more often to cursive scripts, which is likely because their continuity of line embeds the body visibly in the writing more than do regular or clerical scripts. I also see this emphasis on the flow of \textit{qi} through the body in Huaisu. Perhaps Zhang Xu’s and Huaisu’s expansive calligraphy simply took an emphasis on the body that was so deeply rooted and ran with it, magnifying the bodily fact of the gestures, the continuity of line, until both were inescapable.

The energy—the \textit{qi}, not simply the style—of every great calligrapher is distinctive. In Su Shi’s work one can see characters which are tightly wound, like wire, in which energy is tightened and stored as though in a battery. Some, as Huang Tingjian laughingly pointed out, are squashed like frogs. To my eye, these are often cursive characters being forced into the space that a character in clerical script would inhabit—the tall and expansive compressed as though into a box, like someone doing deep knee bends. Again, energy is compacted and stored. This seems characteristic of his writing; in the most exceptional works, that energy is released in suddenly spacious characters, often with elongated tails, as in his \textit{Rain on the Festival of Cold Food} scroll. Or tightened characters like buds suddenly are followed by blossoms as in Su’s free copy of Yan Zhenqing’s \textit{Letter on the Controversy over Seating Protocol}. 
**d: Nature and the Primal Qi**

In Daoist thought, all that exists formed itself out of Primal Qi (yuan qi); the phenomenal universe in all its changes is nothing but the ceaseless transformation of yuan qi. As material things began to form themselves from the Primal Qi, each came into existence with a particular appearance. That appearance is wen, the marking or patterning by which the object or entity could be recognized. But literature too is wen, and is understood to be the outward sign of the writer’s qi, just as a leopard’s spots and shape manifests its qi.

David Palumbo-Liu makes the point that wen can also be understood more broadly as something like our “culture” (in the sense of “high culture”) or even as something so fundamental as Peter Bol’s translation of ssu wen—“this culture of ours.” It can encompass literature, art, painting, music—any high cultural production. Traditionally, it was thought that the health of the state was reflected in the health of its wen. A dynasty marked by poor calligraphy was therefore a dynasty with a troubled qi. “The manifestations of qi in time are an index to the ‘climate’ of the age, its moral character,” writes Palumbo-Lui. Similarly, a person’s wen is indicative of their inner qi. In this way, what the West usually understands as nature—one’s characteristic physiological energy—is connected with what is usually understood as artificial—literature and art, or larger culture in general.

“The Way of the superior man…is discerned in Heaven and earth,” states The Doctrine of the Mean. In the Laozi, it is written, “When my task is accomplished and my work done, the people all say that I did it naturally.” Both Confucian and Daoist thought provided the basis for wen to be understood as part of nature. As wen, calligraphy was also part of nature. But Qian Zhongshu points out that both the Confucian tradition and Daoist thought had its own “heaven and earth” and each therefore describes the Way differently. His larger point is not the incoherence of the inherited tradition, in which the two were twined together, but rather that in both Confucianism and Daoism the idea of
modeling oneself on nature follows from an idealized nature. “The myriad creatures are nourished together and do not harm each other”, says the The Doctrine of the Mean. Given such an ideal view, Qian’s retort is that “No one can ever really model oneself on Heaven, earth, and nature.” But that rebuttal lay in a distant future with Darwin and Western science, far from the Northern Song.

The Northern Song, however, was the period of a significant change in perception about what nature and being natural entailed. This shift can be seen in the reassessment of Tao Qian (365?-427), who is routinely considered one of China’s greatest poets. But it was not always so: his poems were dismissed as “the words of a mere farmer” in the Grading of Poets published during the Six Dynasties, the period during which Tao Qian lived. The reason for this critical assessment was his apparent lack of craft. Wendy Swartz notes that his poems often bypass a learned vocabulary in favour of something approaching oral language, that his parallel constructions are often imperfect. But in the Northern Song, these defects were reinterpreted as the signs of a writing that was natural instead of skilled, that was genuine instead of refined. Once Qian’s imperfection became the model, it meant that the most refined works of the brush, like Wang Xizhi’s calligraphy, now became dubious. The way was open then for other models.

2: Calligraphy and Human Character

a: A Portrait of the Person

The Emperor Huizong (1082-1135) wrote out many of his edicts in his own hand, in the distinctive “Slender Gold” style he had invented. Though his subjects rarely, if ever, saw the Emperor himself, his calligraphy acted as a portrait that could “make the imperial presence felt at a distance,” as Ebrey puts it. It was the belief that calligraphy revealed the writer’s character that made this structure of presence at a distance possible.
Confucian thought stressed the importance of the arts in the self-cultivation (xiushen) on which social harmony depended. This meant that even what we might understand as the private practice of the arts was seen as inherently social. In Li Zehou’s view, Confucian culture was built upon the earlier rites and music tradition which had stressed that proper forms (li) shaped the inner character.\textsuperscript{70} The Confucian tradition absorbed that valuing of external form, with the result that in calligraphy the inner character was seen to be expressed by outer forms, just as the inner character was shaped by those outer forms.\textsuperscript{71}

Characterology—the explicit belief that the inner person and their outer bearing are one—follows from this. “Looking at his writing alone will be enough to get to know the person,” wrote Sikong Tu (837-908) in the late Tang.\textsuperscript{72} Whether or not this was true is not the issue—Su Shi had his doubts. But the idea that this was so determined the place of calligraphy and the perception of its value. James Cahill has made the argument that the idea of the literati artist-amateur is a “social myth,” comparable to the invention of chivalry and romantic love in medieval Europe, and constituting a great cultural achievement. Characterology provides another example of such a social myth acting as an organizing principle for the larger culture.\textsuperscript{73}

This concept of characterology needs to be distinguished from the Western idea of expressionism in art, which could appear similar. Expressionism names both a movement and a larger and much more diffuse tendency. In the early twentieth century German Expressionism was typified by the distortion of represented forms as a sign of the artists’ charged emotional states. It radiated out over decades in the form of a large and diffuse cultural influence, appearing in the paintings of Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko as a “symphonic massiveness of affect”, as Jeff Wall puts it.\textsuperscript{74} The expressionist impulse springs from Romanticism’s belief that human feelings are at odds with industrial society; represented forms take distorted forms as signs of the distortion caused to human feeling. The Northern Song had quite a different understanding about the relation between the emotions and social forms. In an essay on the Doctrine of the Mean, Su Shi explained
that ritual forms accorded with human feelings. “The li [rites] had their origins in the emotions; then, in accord with what the people took comfort in, codes of conduct were written down describing rank and role. Whatever the emotions take comfort in and also preserves role distinctions is part of the li.” The Neo-Confucian thinker, Shao Yong (1011-1077), meanwhile, explicitly ruled out any central role for emotions. “To observe things in terms of those things [i.e. to ‘embody’ things]: this is to follow Nature. But to observe things in terms of the Self: this is to follow one’s feelings. Nature is impartial and enlightened; feelings are partial and blind.”

The expressionist impulse and characterology can also be distinguished in the question of intensity of feeling and the duration of feeling. Expressionism values something close to what appears to be an outburst, feeling that is intense but not enduring. By contrast, what is believed to be visible in calligraphy is something lasting and perhaps more fundamental: the inward person, their whole moral and ethical nature. Calligraphy is also understood as capable of expressing mood—and so the styles of Mi Fu’s letters vary—but this is secondary to the perception of the person’s character and their ethical worth. This is what allows Yu Shinan (558-638) early in the Tang to say that “Wonders emerge not from the brushtip, but from the mind.” Both heart and mind are expressed, in much the same way that Mencius emphasizes xin, uniting what Western thought divides. Karyn Lai points out that, “Mencius did not distinguish deliberative morality from emotion (in the way we might find, say, in Plato’s philosophy); hence the term xin is best translated as heart-mind.” Here again, Western expressionism functions quite differently—its focus is on feeling experienced either as having no connection to morality or being in contradiction to it. Its goal could thus be said to construct an art of the heart alone.

b: Characterology in the Northern Song

The kernel of the Chinese emphasis on character must have started to coalesce at least as early as the Han period, when the great Han historian Sima Qian (145-90 BCE) wrote, for example, “When I read the writings of Confucius, I can envision the kind of man he
It is unlikely that any calligraphy in Confucius’ hand had in fact survived, but Sima Qian may have believed he had seen the Sage’s script. Such early statements as Liu Xizai’s (53 BCE-18 CE), “Writing is a portrayal of the mind,” likely referred to the content of writings, later to their literary style, and only gradually broadened out to include the visual form. This had likely occurred by the Wei-Jin period (265-420) when calligraphy had clearly emerged as an art. By the Tang dynasty, the characterological view was solidly in place, as is clear from an anecdote about the calligrapher, Liu Gongquan (778-865). The story goes that Liu was asked by the Emperor about proper technique. His famous reply was that, “The use of the brush lies in the heart. If the heart is upright, then your brush will be upright.”

This idea was an article of faith for the Northern Song and in Su Shi’s circle. Su’s mentor, Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072), wrote of the Tang statesman and calligrapher Yan Zhenqing (709-785), “This man’s loyalty and righteousness emanated from his heaven-sent nature. Thus his brush strokes are firm, strong, and individual, and do not follow in earlier footsteps. Outstanding, unusual, and imposing, they resemble his personality.” Similarly, Zhu Changwen (1041-1100), who was recommended for office by Su Shi in the Yuanyou period (1086-1094), said of Yan’s work that, “[it] resembles a loyal minister or a noble-minded person, standing upright at the royal court and refusing to compromise on matters of principle. Yang Xiong said that calligraphy was a portrait of the mind. It proves to be true in Lord Yan’s case.” By the Northern Song, this seeing of character directly displayed in the visual form was firmly fixed, so much so that Cong Wenjun argues that, “in commentaries on calligraphy during the Song dynasty, the term xin hua (portrayal of the mind) appeared quite often, and was even sometimes used as a synonym for ‘calligraphy.’”

Seeing the character of the writer in the calligraphy seems of a piece with the historical Chinese tendency to not treat ideas abstractly, as is the tendency in the West, but to consider them instead through concrete situations and persons. Confucius is understood
as concerned not with articulating ideal ethical standards to which sages might aspire, but instead, with behaviours which could be lived out by ordinary persons. The Analects seem to be a series of anecdotes rather than a system of ethics, just as Pre-Han philosophy is often presented in the form of face-to-face debates between the historical persons promulgating the doctrines. Much more than is the case in the West, the actual person of the thinker has come to be taken as the embodiment of the ideas. We can think of examples such as Confucius, Zhuangzi, or much more recently and horrifically, Chairman Mao and “Chairman Mao Thought”—all of whom can be taken as “paradigmatic individuals” as Antonio Cua puts it. Karyn Lai describes this situation as the “conceptual blurring between a paradigmatic entity and its normative standard (the ideal mode of its existence).” In the calligraphic tradition, this same blurring is apparent even today in the figure of Wang Xizhi, whose “portrait” is reproduced in numerous odd contexts. The figure of the person comes to stand for the work; from a Western perspective, the work and person are confused. Rightly or wrongly, this leads to a thorough enmeshment of the writing with the historical person of the calligrapher; the admiration for Yan Zhenqing in the Northern Song provides one more example of this.

c: Doubts about Characterology

While characterology was an article of faith in calligraphic practice, the circle of scholars gathered around Ouyang Xiu, which included Su Shi, had begun to shift the cultural understanding. Doubts were raised about how certain the revealing of character actually was. In 992, the Song imperial house published the Model Calligraphy from the Chunhua Pavilion, fully half of which was made up of works by Wang Xizhi (307?-365?) and his son, Wang Xianzhi (344-388). Only a few decades later, Ouyang felt it necessary to criticize what he saw as the “slavish” writing that was dominant at court, which he believed had routinized Wang’s style and drained it of its vivacity. All his guwen (ancient style prose) circle would have been aware of Han Yu’s Song of the Stone Drums in which the Tang dynasty guwen proponent wrote that “[Wang] Xizhi’s vulgar calligraphy took advantage of its seductive beauty.” A generation later, Huang Tingjian
was complaining of the same narrowness and slavishness: “I cannot bring myself to act like the examination candidates, who use compass and square to imitate the Wangs.”

The danger for the idea of characterology is obvious. If it was possible to learn to imitate the Wang style, then it was possible to cloak one’s true character in an ingratiating style, a style to which one had been drawn solely by the desire for advancement. And this of course meant that character was being shaped by self-serving goals, which was the opposite of what the ancient style prose movement demanded. The proliferation of ingratiating or even dull writing threatened the vitality of the whole tradition, but this was not simply an aesthetic loss: the Confucian program of self-refinement leading to social harmony was threatened. (If this seems exaggerated from a Western perspective, the importance of the role of the writing system is startling clear in Xu Shen’s (ca.58-ca.147) declaration during the Han dynasty that, “writing is the starting point of the sovereign’s governance.”)

The fear that calligraphy was becoming deceptive must account for why Yan Zhenqing’s writing was so highly valued in Ouyang’s circle. Blunt and forceful, it was anything but ingratiating. Li Yu, the last emperor of the Southern Tang period (937-975) found it offensive, “like an uncouth farmer facing forward with arms folded and legs spread apart.” Zhu Changwen’s praise for Yan shares something with Li Yu’s criticism: “it is not that Yan Zhenqing was unable to be seductive, but that a sense of shame kept him from it.” Yan also had the virtue of not being included in the Chunhua Pavilion. In being excluded from the styles promoted by the court, the value of his calligraphy was made clear. It could be taken up by anyone resistant to the ingratiating court styles—and by extension, by anyone critical of imperial policy. “The mean-minded men of the world may write their characters skillfully, but in the end the spirit and feeling of their calligraphy has a fawning and obsequious manner,” said Su Shi.

It seems likely that this fraught context led Su Shi to a looser and more provisional understanding of the relationship between calligraphy and character. In two colophons on
calligraphy, Su refers to a famous story related in the *Liezi*, (which he misattributes to Han Fei (c.280-233 BCE); Han Fei is also called “Hanzi” by Su.) An axe was stolen from a man. The man observed the boy next door carefully, and saw in his behaviour the unmistakeable signs that the boy must have been the thief. Later the axe was found in the man’s own garden, where he himself had left it. Studying the boy again, the man now saw in the boy’s behaviour clear signs that he would never have stooped so low as to steal. Su ends one colophon by saying, “I do not know if one’s perception [of character] follows upon how one thinks about the calligrapher, as in the case of Hanzi’s axe thief, or whether the manner is really there in the calligraphy.”

In a second colophon, he explicitly writes that, “If from examining a person’s calligraphy one can tell what kind of man he is, then the character of superior men and mean-minded men must both be reflected in their calligraphy. This would appear to be incorrect.” And yet he admits that when looking at Yan Zhenqing’s writing, “It is as if I see him—so awe-inspiring…Why? The principle is not different from Han Fei’s argument about the man who stole the axe. And yet, each person’s calligraphy conveys, quite apart from its skill or clumsiness, a certain drift.” The tie between the writing and the inward character is loosened. The sense now is that through the hand, a certain flavour of the person is visible, a drift—but it is no longer the explicit and unmistakeable unveiling of one’s true character.

Su himself was deeply influenced by Ouyang’s collection of calligraphy, which was exceptional in being so much more inclusive than any before it. Far more extensive than the *Chunhua Pavilion*, Ouyang’s *Collection of Antiquities*—which Ronald Egan calls “the beginnings of epigraphy in China”99—included more than a thousand examples. For about four hundred, Ouyang had written colophons on their provenance or contents. The *Collection* was notable for including rubbings for a wide variety of reasons: their value for historiographic reasons, admiration for the person of the calligrapher, an interest in the style of the writing or its type of script, an antiquarian fascination with the obscure, or simply because the calligraphy was ancient. Egan points out that Ouyang had an unusual openness to unorthodox styles, and particularly to what the Han Chinese saw as the semi-
barbaric kingdoms of the fourth to the sixth centuries. Ouyang even included inscriptions whose contents or authors he saw as dubious or even reprehensible—an inscription by Yin Zhongrong for example, from the reign of the notorious Empress Wu, who had usurped the Tang throne. He included Buddhist inscriptions, among them a stele from the Shengui period of the later Wei (386-534), in spite of his distaste for the religion. “The prose may be crude and shallow, and speak mostly of Buddhist doctrine, but the calligraphy, and that alone, is frequently skillful and marvelous.” By collecting so widely, Ouyang allowed a degree of dissonance between the style of the writing and its content, and between the calligraphy and its writer. Perhaps it was this that not only allowed Su Shi to doubt that character was directly revealed, but also opened social space for the striking individuality of Su Shi’s, Huang Tingjian’s, and Mi Fu’s calligraphy. It was not simply that a wider range of models for writing was offered by Ouyang, though that alone must have helped reinvigorate Northern Song calligraphy. It seems to have allowed a relaxing of the Confucian rectitude that once had been required—since Buddhists, Daoist, and even “barbarians” were now seen as part of the ancient past to be taken up and transmitted.

3. Calligraphy and Human Relationships

a: An Art of Social Relations

Calligraphy was a relational art, by which I mean that the aesthetic object was used to bind individuals together. Northern Song calligraphy took place within a very different social matrix than Western painting, in part because of China’s material culture and in part because of the way its social history had formed both individual persons and the values that structured their social lives. The simplest way to put the issue is to say that calligraphy took place within a society that saw value as deriving primarily from human interrelatedness. Western artworks also took place within networks of persons—artisans and patrons, individuals and the church, and later, artists and their publics. But in China, the relations between persons were much more consciously a part of the work, and had
much more impact on how calligraphy was produced and valued. Craig Clunas has mapped out in detail how art functioned in a network of social obligations in *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming*. Wen lived during the Ming period, but many of Clunas’s lessons can plausibly be applied to the Northern Song, since the relation of gifts to *guanxi* (which Clunas translates as “connections”) may have persisted through very long periods of Chinese history, just as the importance given to reciprocity in the Confucian classics is still visible today.

In the case of calligraphy, something of that social functioning, reciprocity, and *guanxi*-building persists even today. I think I can make this clear through two anecdotes from my own experience, the first concerning the reception of calligraphy, the second its production. When I visited Princeton in May of 2009 to study Huang Tingjian’s *Scroll for Zhang Datong*, I expected to be taken to the storage area where I would see the scroll under glass, partially unwound—as calligraphic scrolls are conventionally displayed today in the museums of both China and the West. Instead, Cary Liu, the curator in charge of the collection, met me and I followed him to a room with cabinets and a large table. From one of the cabinets, he pulled out a long box and carrying it to the table, opened it to reveal Huang’s great scroll. He unrolled it at the table, asking what section I would like to see first. I was stunned. I had not expected this; I felt as though I walked into a painting in which scholars savour scrolls together.

The occasion was social: a Western painting does not require someone to display it, roll it, unroll it. Even in viewing a Western painting that is not on display, one is usually taken to the secure vault, and the work simply set up against a wall. A Western painting is, in a certain sense, “always on.” It merely requires being taken out of the vault or from the storage racks. By contrast, a scroll is a “rarely on” format—it requires someone to take it out, unroll it, advance it along from one section to another while rolling up what now would extend off the table, and finally rolling it back up again to store it. This necessarily results in a social occasion, even, as I found, when conducted within the nonpublic areas
of a museum. Since it was necessary to guard the priceless scroll, and to roll and unroll it for me as I asked to see different sections, Liu was there with me for the whole time. This results in a far richer situation than, say, having a security guard present to ensure that a painting is not damaged. I was in the room instead with someone skilled in the handling of ancient scrolls, and more importantly (and stunningly), an immensely knowledgeable person who was at least as invested in the work as I was. Liu pointed out different aspects of the scroll to me, and I could discuss certain questions with him. He pointed out, for example, a spot where the brushwork had been retouched—though the myth of calligraphy is that it is performed and never retouched. I was able to ask whether the long scroll would have been assembled from sheets into one long paper and then painted, or written on separate sheets that were assembled into a scroll after the text had been written. We looked at the various seams where sheets were joined, and could see that the scroll suggested later assembly at certain points, and prior assembly at others. Later, Liu showed me a favourite brushmark, a striking diagonal with a scalloped lower edge, which fascinated him because he could not understand how it had been done. He was enormously proud of the work, and seemed pleased that I was not completely ignorant of its stunning beauty—the blackness of the ink that seemed not to have faded in more than nine hundred years, the ivory whiteness of the paper, the power and weight of the brushmarks. If there had been wine to share, the occasion would have mimicked those of a thousand years ago.

The functioning of calligraphy in drawing persons together was made clear to me by another incident a few years later. In Xi’an in March 2012, I was invited to visit Zhang Yingqun at his studio in the Shaanxi Institute for Research in Historical Calligraphy. After being introduced to various members of the Institute and sipping tea, Zhang took up his brush and wrote out a poem by Zhou Enlai for me on suitably red paper. This gave me an opportunity to study his brush technique, but it was more than a demonstration. The calligraphy was a gift for me, in honour of my visit. I felt terribly awkward, since I could offer nothing comparable in return.
Trapped by the material culture of which I was part, I had nothing to offer. It took about ten minutes for Zhang to produce this lovely work. In ten minutes, I would be unable even to stretch a small canvas. To produce a small painting would take me at least three months: my process is slower than many contemporary painters, but it is by no means an extreme. Ink dries in a matter of minutes; oil paint mixed in the mediums I use takes a week or more to set. The time spans are incommensurate, and these make it impossible to produce a gift of an artwork during the short span of a visit. Another obvious point is that if I can produce at most four paintings in a year, I’m less likely to give one as a gift. If Zhang can make four works in a single day, he is more likely to give one to an undeserving visitor from abroad. Something similar follows from the cost and availability of materials. The cost to Zhang in paper and ink is relatively small; this allows generosity to take root in the social setting. The cost of canvas, a stretcher, and paint to make a small painting must be at least several hundred times higher. This encourages a certain miserliness, or at least an awareness of the need to limit one’s generosity.

I think both anecdotes show a predisposition towards social situations in the material media of calligraphy; they encourage the possibility of it acting as a kind of social glue, encouraging the sort of discussions and gift-giving that Western painting inhibits. But it would be foolish to argue that the social interactions that spring up around calligraphy are simply determined by the material media themselves. “The human media”, which is Li Zehou’s sly term, obviously play at least as large a role.

b: The Human Media in the Northern Song

The Confucian tradition established a very different social matrix for cultural activities than did the European tradition, a very different sense of what it is to be an individual. Much of that difference is apparent in The Classic of Filial Piety (the Xiaojing), the Confucian classic that establishes relationships within the family as the model for all relationships in the wider society. (This text, preserved in the Forest of Stele in Xi’an,
decorates the cover of Pain Not Bread’s *Introduction to the Introduction to Wang Wei.*) In their discussion of the *Xiaojing*, which they translate instead as *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, Henry Rosemount Jr. and Roger Ames argue that it founds “role ethics” as central to China’s culture, rather than the “virtue ethics” visible in Aristotle. These radiate outward from the experience of family life, and carry into the larger social world both a sense of oneself as defined with reference to others rather than being defined autonomously, and the sense that “as other members of your family flourish, so do you flourish.”¹⁰⁴ The success of the group and the success of the individual are entwined. Because of role ethics, “Confucian persons…are relational selves.”¹⁰⁵ Other Confucian classics, such as the *Li ji* (*The Record of Rites*) reinforce this. *The Record of Rites* states, “In the highest antiquity they prized (simply conferring) good; in the time next to this giving and repaying was the thing attended to. And what the rules of propriety value is that reciprocity.”¹⁰⁶ Those values endured for centuries and still make themselves apparent today. In *Elegant Debts*, Craig Clunas writes of Wen Zhengming, who lived almost four hundred years after the Northern Song, that, “a good proportion…of Wen’s total output may well have had its origins in gift practices.”¹⁰⁷ Obviously, gift-giving and reciprocity matter to all human cultures, but they structured calligraphy in a very different way than did donor paintings in Western painting.

The relational aspect of calligraphy seems to have been amplified in the Northern Song. It continued to perform its routine duties for the court and bureaucracy, disseminating imperial edicts, providing memorials and funerary inscriptions and the like. But the prized calligraphy of the literati became more than ever before an art of interpersonal relationships—an intimate art rather than a public art, produced for social groups of friends or friends often bound together as a political faction. While contemporary museums display works of calligraphy as though they were autonomous art objects like contemporary paintings, calligraphy was often intended to draw individuals together. It took place largely, if not entirely, in the extensive social network that was fostered by studying for the imperial exams and in the vast bureaucracy populated by the *shi*. 
Because of the relative equality of status among the scholar elite, calligraphy could be written in order to establish a friendship, to maintain the relationship, or to encourage the support of an influential person. Unlike the European model, where works were produced on order for wealthy patrons by artists who needed to earn their living, calligraphy was routinely produced and exchanged between members of the scholar elite whose income was secured by their position in the bureaucracy.

I have seen no careful study of the social uses of calligraphy in the Northern Song, but Colin Hawes’ volume, The Social Circulation of Poetry in the Mid-Northern Song, has been very valuable to me, in spite of its subject being poetry. But the distinction between these two categories of art work can not be sturdily maintained in that period. We can conceptually distinguish between them, but the material culture rendered the distinction problematic; it enmeshed what European material culture made distinct. No one ever mistook one of Michelangelo’s sonnets for one of his paintings—they did not look remotely similar and were produced in completely different materials. But in China, as F.W. Mote points out, these distinctions became problematic because poetry, painting, and calligraphy all were done with brush and ink on paper or silk. This made it possible for a painting to be made—I could almost say, “written”—from calligraphic strokes, for a poem to be written on a painting that had been made with the same brush and ink, or for the copying out of a poem to be simultaneously the making of a work of visual art.

The collision of Western categories with China’s very different material culture shows up in odd moments in the work of Western scholars. In discussing poetry, Hawes writes, for example, of “the conscious echoing by Mei Yaochen of Wang Xizhi’s much more famous… ‘Preface to the Orchid Pavilion.’” The Preface to the Orchid Pavilion is indeed a work of literature, but it is also the single most famous work of calligraphy in all of Chinese history—something of which Hawes’ text gives no indication of being aware. It is not that Hawes is wrong; it is simply that he has imported a distinction between
literature and calligraphy that does not hold. In the Northern Song itself, Su Shi’s great poem, *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food*, is also the period’s most prized work of calligraphy. What to the West would be a confusion of genres was so central to China’s culture that Clunas could write of Wen Zhengming, five centuries later in the mid-Ming, “every text that Wen Zhengming wrote, every letter, every funerary text, preface or poem, was in its origins also a work of calligraphy.”

So Hawes’ study of poetry can be understood as shedding light on the practice of calligraphy. His argument is that something had changed by the Northern Song, that there was an intensifying of the role played by poems (and, I would argue, calligraphy) in creating and maintaining social bonds. I quote him here at length.

Reading through the titles in virtually any Song poet’s collected works, one cannot help noticing the vast numbers of compositions directly addressed to other people. To provide some representative statistics, 867 poems (*shi*) survive in the collected works of Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072), the renowned Song statesman and writer. Among these, the titles of 557 clearly state they are addressed to, or exchanged with, a friend or acquaintance; in other words, almost two thirds of his poems. The proportion rises to about three quarters if we also include poems that reveal their social function in the main body of the work, and poems Ouyang mentions as having been sent to friends. As for Ouyang’s contemporary, Mei Yaochen (1002-1060), the proportions are even higher, especially for his mature works. Taking all the poems in the standard modern edition of Mei’s works, over twenty-four hundred of his approximately twenty-nine hundred poems, or 83 percent, are directly addressed to other people in their titles. Counting only the 586 poems that survive from the last four years of Mei’s life, 564 or over 96 percent, are addressed directly to other people.

Among the collections of other major Northern Song poets, the proportion of poems addressed to friends and acquaintances remains similarly high, whether we examine Ouyang’s and Mei’s contemporaries, such as Su Shunqin (1008-1048), or more famous poets of the succeeding generation, such as Su Shi (1037-1101) and Huang Tingjian (1045-1105).
Statistics alone make Hawes’ point. Perhaps the tidal wave of books that flooded the late Northern Song gave poetry and calligraphy a more personal intensity. Perhaps the sudden predominance of printed materials gave the trace of a person’s hand a fresher sense of intimacy than it ever had in the now-vanishing manuscript culture. Perhaps it was inevitable, as the shi were scattered across the empire in far-flung bureaucratic posts, that friendships forged in studying and writing the imperial exams together would be maintained through some means that both reinforced and made poignant the literacy on which their careers depended.

This is not to say that calligraphy was never bought and sold. There was obviously a thriving market, since Su Shi and Huang Tingjian could mock the wealthy men who spent small fortunes on works those collectors could not reliably authenticate or even appreciate. Mi Fu “lambastes ignorant wealthy collectors,” as Egan puts it, pointing out that Mi’s History of Calligraphy is full of references to the prices he and others were willing to pay for important pieces.\(^{113}\)

But if the sustaining of human relationships, the personal address, was always something essential to the calligraphic tradition, it seems to have waxed and waned in its importance over time. Wang Xizhi (303-361) is by convention China’s greatest calligrapher, the figure around whom much of the tradition is constellated. Robert Harrist Jr. points out that his fame rests primarily on personal letters, not the formal calligraphy commissioned by the emperor or the bureaucracy that was intended as a form of public address. His work was valued instead for its delicate intimacy. Its contents reflect as much: complaints of ill health, an expression of his longing to visit a friend, or a gift of oranges are among his subjects.\(^{114}\) In his own time, his calligraphy was something of a contradiction—an actual communication and, at the same time, an object valued for its aesthetic qualities.
By the Tang, Wang had become the model for the calligraphic tradition, yet it seems that this sense of personal intimacy diminished during the period, as calligraphy’s role as public address came to the fore. Perhaps this is simply the result of the order the great Tang empire imposed on so much of China. Wang wrote during the Wei-Jin period (265-420), a time of disorder and upheaval; like the poet Tao Yuanming, he wrote “in lofty reclusion,” having withdrawn from holding office. By comparison, the great calligraphers of the Tang—Chu Suiliang, Yu Shinan, Ouyang Xun—were routinely members of the court, administrators of the mandate of heaven. One of my favourite pieces of Tang calligraphy, the beautiful Yu Shi Tai tablet in the Forest of Stele, was written by Liang Shengqing for the Yu Shi, the prison administration.

With the advent of the Northern Song, the situation had shifted once again. With the exception of Cai Jing, the great Northern Song calligraphers provided an alternative to the court-sponsored style; many scholars see the emergence of calligraphy that was consciously anti-court in style.115 It is striking that many of the great works of the Northern Song were written in exile—as were both Su Shi’s Rain on the Festival of Cold
Food and Huang Tingjian’s Scroll for Zhang Datong. Obviously, this would push calligraphy back towards the intimate, or to a more relational role, since publicly sponsored roles were closed off.\textsuperscript{116} The court itself must have shared this sense of there being an anti-court style. The Xuanhe Calligraphy Catalogue of the Emperor Huizong’s collection included not a single piece by Su Shi or Huang Tingjian, though Cai Jing—Huizong’s Chancellor—was represented by an astonishing seventy-seven examples, three times more than anyone from the Song, and more than any Tang calligrapher with the exception of Huaisu.\textsuperscript{117}

Su Shi, detail from the Letter to Judge Xie Minshi, 1100, Shanghai Museum

Two examples seem typical of the Northern Song sense of calligraphy as an art of sustaining relationships. The first is the Shanghai Museum’s Su Shi, the Letter to Judge Xie Minshi (Yu Xie Minshi Tuiguan Shu), which is described in the pedagogical panel as “his answering letter to his friend, Xie Minshi.” It must have been seen, like Wang Xizhi’s letters, as an art work and not simply a reply, since Su Shi was aware that his calligraphy was greatly valued.\textsuperscript{118} And yet it is important to stress that it is a letter, an intimate mode of address, not a public art like the Yu Shi Tai. I think too of Huang Tingjian’s Scroll for Zhang Datong. Huang’s scroll seems to have been written to provide his nephew with an example of his uncle’s prized writing, which would have opened
many doors for him. Here calligraphy would have functioned in exactly the way that
Hawes argues poetry did: “Poetry acted as a vital channel for initiating and sustaining
close relationships with people in positions of power, forming mutually beneficial
alliances and support groups with those of one’s own social status, or even doing favors
to those at lower levels of the social hierarchy.”

d: Matching Rhymes

Northern Song poetry provides yet another insight into how calligraphy functioned.
Yugen Wang stresses the enormous number of Huang Tingjian’s poems which match
rhymes with another’s poem; about forty percent of his surviving works are of this
type. The important point for my purposes is that one cannot understand *ciyun*
(matching rhymes) poems without reading the poems to which they are tied. Because of
this structure, poems of the *ciyun* type make it obvious that they are not autonomous
objects capable of existing on their own. In their dependence on previous poems, they
offer evidence of the existence of other people.

Su Shi, *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food*—detail showing seals
Works of Northern Song visual art are often structured as though analogous to *ciyun* poems; the work makes it impossible to ignore the field of other persons in which they took place. Su Shi’s *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food* scroll, for example, bears ninety-four seals on it. These record the important figures who once viewed the piece or owned it. The value of the work is displayed by the profusion of seals, not, as in the West, by the artist’s signature.

---

The scroll itself is now what James Cahill has called “a composite work,” a work assembled from the contributions of many artists. Colophons, for example, written by another artist to praise or explain a painting or a piece of calligraphy, were routinely attached to the work on which they commented. Many of Su Shi’s ideas about calligraphy are in fact collected from colophons Su wrote, which were of course attached to the original to which he referred. The vast majority of Su’s own *Cold Food* scroll is now made up from colophons written for Su’s calligraphy. On the far right, after characters on silk that give the title, is Su’s actual writing. (Classical calligraphy was read from right to left, in vertical rows.) To the right of Su’s calligraphy is Huang Tingjian’s, in the form of a colophon. This is followed still further to the right by seven additional colophons. This work, which the world understands as Su Shi’s, refers us to nine different authors, including Su, and a small army of important figures who left their seals upon it. The scroll functions as a focal point at which many disparate figures are drawn together. I could not help but think of the contemporary critic Benjamin Buchloh’s charge that “the ultimate subject of painting is always a newly centralized subject.” The subject of classical calligraphy could not have been more different.
4. Calligraphy as an Art of Time

a: Unrolling Time

Written in Response to Ziyou’s Poem About Days in Mianchi

The old monk is dead, interred beneath the new pagoda, and on ruined walls the poems we brushed are illegible. Do you still remember the rugged path, the endless road, our tired bodies, how our lame donkey brayed.\textsuperscript{123}

-Su Shi

The poems brushed on ruined walls, like Su’s \textit{Rain on the Festival of Cold Food}, are at once poems and calligraphy. Illegible now, like so much of Yan Zhenqing’s eroded writing for the Temple of Guos, even art is transient. It does no good to protest against life’s fleetingness, no more than a donkey’s braying.

Yan Zhenqing, \textit{Stele for the Temple of Guos}, 764, Forest of Stele, Xi’an
There is no way out of time. Legends tell of how the writing system was derived from nature—the scales of fish, the plates on a tortoise shell, the tracks of birds. A swan’s tracks on muddy snow are illegible calligraphy, signs that can no longer communicate, written on a surface that itself will melt away. “Time becomes deeply entangled in the sensuous emotions of nostalgia, yearning for life, and attachment to existence,” writes Li Zehou.

Calligraphy is deeply entangled with time and so it fills with feeling. When Cary Liu unrolled the scroll across the long table, I felt a shock. It was as though a glass of time had spilled out across the tabletop. This was my first, unforgettable sight of the Huang Tingjian Scroll for Zhang Datong in Princeton. I was stunned, even though I’d studied reproductions of it before. What I saw was a very long series of large characters, almost as big as my open hand, following one another rhythmically down a very long scroll—it is eighteen feet long. An enormous sequence of brushmarks was unfurled, one after another after another after another down the length of the table, where they disappeared into the still rolled up rest of the scroll. It was as though I saw time; I experienced the scroll as an enormous pouring out of time.

Later, after I had spent an hour studying it, I went out into the Princeton Museum of Art to rejoin my wife, Janice. I found in her one of the galleries, looking at a Gerhard Richter painting and the others that accompanied it. I was completely out at sea: they all looked senseless, like visual jibberish. I had to sit and gather myself over coffee. Eventually it dawned on me that the scroll had left me unable to see Western painting until I could reboot my poor brain.
The problem was that the way of organizing time was so completely different. Until then, I had never realized that a Western painting is “always on.” That structure, that way of organizing vision, had been invisible to me. In Western painting, whether it is Simone Martini, Velasquez, or David Reed, everything to be seen is offered to sight at once; everything is available simultaneously. But Huang’s scroll was never completely available to sight—and this is the norm. In a private situation, as at Princeton, or in the viewings depicted in paintings of scholars gathered, the scroll would be rolled and unrolled, one section vanishing as another appears. The characters themselves must be read—or in my case, studied visually—one after another, in their sequence, down the vertical rows in their long sequence from right to left along the length of the work. In Huang’s scroll, the characters themselves were each a sequence of brushmarks, each capable of being read in their still-visible stroke order. Sequences were overlaid with sequences. Even when Chinese paintings were intended to be mounted flat, they were usually painted in such a way that the viewer was elicited to follow an intricate path traced out in viewing the painting—from the tiny boat for example through the woods to the thatched hut beside a waterfall. This is the experience to which James Elkins refers, “When I am imaginatively wandering in a painted Chinese landscape… I am not experiencing the work as an object in history.” Wandering in the painting unfurls the temporality embedded in it.

In “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past”, Pierre Ryckman has offered some striking ideas about China and time, and with it, observations about the West. Much of his thinking is addressed to understanding China’s relative lack of ancient architecture. “Chinese architecture is essentially made of perishable and fragile materials; it embodies a sort of "in-built obsolescence; it decays rapidly and required frequent rebuilding.” This embeds the architecture in time in a very different way than, for example, did Imperial Rome, whose walls and monuments still protrude through the fabric of the modern city. Ryckman’s conclusion is that, “The non-Chinese attitude — from ancient Egypt to the modern West—is essentially an active, aggressive attempt to challenge and
overcome the erosion of time. Its ambition is to build for all eternity by adopting the strongest possible materials and using techniques that will ensure maximum resilience.” Delacroix stressed that a crucial aspect of painting was that “the most gigantic picture can be seen in an instant.” Frida Kahlo famously said, “I paint flowers so they will not die.” It seems plausible to consider the “always on” structure of European painting as the counterpart of this particular way of attempting to overcome time.

This “always on” structure mirrors the very different nature of imperial collections in the West. Patricia Ebrey compares Huizong (1082-1135), the last Emperor of the Northern Song, to Philip IV of Spain, calling both of them “megacollectors.” Each of these monarchs collected both for quantity as well as quality, amassing truly enormous collections by any world historical standard. Huizong, for example, collected 6,397 paintings. But Chinese and Western collections functioned very differently. Chinese Imperial collections likely began as collections of sacred objects that revealed the mandate of heaven. The rites and music tradition meant that even in the Song, ritual objects in the collections were used to bring the state into alignment with the heavens. More recent concepts, such as the understanding of calligraphy as a form of comportment, meant that having great works within the Imperial collection testified to the Emperor’s own worthy behaviour. Ebrey notes that as early as the sixth century, scrolls of paintings and calligraphy formed the largest part of imperial collections and were understood to manifest heaven’s favour. Except for occasions when bronzes, for instance, were used in certain rites, Huizong’s imperial collection functioned then simply by being gathered together. It did not need to be displayed. Like most Chinese collections, it was largely kept stored and out of sight. Unlike the great European collections, it was not displayed to create awe in audiences. The European collection, like the paintings in it, was “always on” because of the particular demands on its visibility. The Chinese collection, like the scroll I saw in Princeton, was never fully visible because it did not need to be seen.
The ‘line’ is time unfolded in space. Whether in calligraphy, painting, poetry, prose, sculpture, landscape gardening, or architecture, the flow of emotion-filled time is apparent in the music and dance of the line continuously moving on paper, cloth, or other object.136

-Li Zehou

Eugenio Montale, the Italian Modernist poet, once said that he wrote in order to make the reader feel time. Reading that, I understood why I’d been so drawn to his notoriously difficult verse. I felt time in Huang Tingjian’s scroll—in part because of what seems like the distension of it. Calligraphy is notably faster to write than a Western painting is to make. But one of the obvious things about the scroll, for anyone who has worked with a brush, is just how long it would have taken to write. It is a very slow calligraphy, far from Wang Xizhi’s alert quickness. The pace for each brushstroke is clearly displayed; the rate at which his hand must have moved was surprisingly slow and deliberate, much slower for example than the pace of any calligrapher I have seen at work. I could feel how tired his elbow must have been, constantly elevated above the paper for so long. Later, back at home in my studio, I tried to copy one of his distinctive marks that had an odd scalloped edge. It was possible to imitate this by tilting the brush forward, so that the handle was further from my body than the tip of the brush, then to return the brush to the upright position again. The rate at which the brush could move while doing this is extremely slow. I think that the whole scroll was written in such a way as to display time, to make an issue of it.
The value given to time differs from culture to culture, often quite radically. I sat one afternoon reading about the *Yijing* (the *I Ching*) and its place in Chinese philosophy. At a one point, it seemed I could have been reading about calligraphy.

As one line changes into its other (yin into yang or vice-versa), the hexagram changes…movement from trigram to trigram represents changes in phase. This picture of continuous time that ‘flows’ is compatible with a synchronic understanding of time ['‘the bringing together of past and present’"] in divination because the latter is a concept of time that underlies each process of divination. In the light of constant shifts and changes, it is important to respond appropriately. Here, again, time is a critical issue, for timeliness in large part determines the appropriateness and success of a particular response.137

The connection between the *Yijing* and calligraphy seems obvious now—though after the period of the oracle bones calligraphy officially played no role in divination.138 Like the *Yijing* which so deeply influenced it, calligraphy manifests ceaseless change.139 The line of ink changes endlessly, is always varied. Each new character must respond to what has
just been written. In the great Northern Song works in cursive script, characters are never written twice the same way. There are constant slight changes of brush weight, or the way the brush leans or is centred, the load of ink, the size of the character, the degree to which the character is legibly articulated. The repetition of identically-written characters would reveal an inability to live with ceaseless change. “I see only the long river seeing off the flowing water” reads Zhang Ruoxu’s famous poem, *Spring, River, and Flowers on a Moonlit Night*. “Continuity”, says Ryckmans, speaking broadly of China’s cultural past, “is not ensured by the immobility of inanimate objects, it is achieved through the fluidity of the successive generations.”

It would be too much to say that in calligraphy, each character is a concept of time—but in certain works, each one is an articulation of time, a compression or expansion of it, a continuous adjustment of pace, a response to what has just occurred. Adorno argued of music that the temporality of a piece is not the same as the exterior clock time during which the musical performance takes place. “There is no mistaking time as such in music, yet it is so remote from empirical time that…temporal events external to the musical continuum remain external to it and indeed scarcely touch it.” Classical calligraphy took place within an aesthetic that still carried with it some sense of being rooted in the rites and music tradition; perhaps its sense of time follows from that inheritance of regulated musicality.

Li Zehou believes that “precisely because it is a tradition rooted in music, Chinese art seeks to shape and mold humanized emotions directly, rather than to represent the visual world.” Whatever the reason, time in Huang Tingjian’s scroll is not simply a regulated sequence of moments that could be measured out by a clock; it is a musical performance that organizes time in such a way as to separate it out from what could be called “administered time.” Rational time, the time measured out by clocks, time that is administered separately from human subjectivity, is exterior to the calligraphy. By taking part, or creating a time like the time of music, the calligraphy comes to be
completely saturated with feeling. “Time here is no subjective rational concept, nor is it an objective material attribute, nor even the epistemological intuition of an a priori perception. Instead, time here is emotional.”\textsuperscript{146} This is Li Zehou’s large point about the Chinese aesthetic after Qu Yuan, so often so deeply poignant, in which time is always soaked with the poignance of human passing, as in Zhang Ruoxu’s lovely poem.

From my point of view, Li’s observation is one of the most crucial insights into calligraphy, though his subject was not calligraphy alone. Time sped up or distended is one of many ways in which the calligraphy of Huang Tingjian and Su Shi is distinguished from more conventional works that proceed with a rote pace. But this pace is not a formal device or simply the display of superior skill; it is both a record of the emotional experience of time and a temporal opportunity for an empathic viewer. The finest calligraphy occurs in time but also works on time, modeling it, qualifying it and reshaping it. The objective time taken and the time expressed or released in the calligraphy are not the same, and this asymmetry is one of the contents of the finest works. But as Li stresses, this temporal experience is not only one of life’s fleetingness, it also involves a sense of mission which follows from consciousness of the brevity of human life. There is nothing beyond this one existence, and so ”We find this deep lamentation over the brevity and transience of life, and on the other hand a serious sense of history and an intense sense of mission.”\textsuperscript{147}

Li’s concern is to understand the sequence in which different aspects of China’s aesthetic understanding were put in place, on what foundation new layers were laid down, or where a new direction appeared. In his view, time and mortality were ordered by the rites and music tradition—music inevitably being a way of giving shape to the perception of time. Over the rites and music matrix, a Confucian understanding is deposited like a cultural silt. “If one hears the Way in the morning, one will be ready to die in the evening.”\textsuperscript{148} The ritualized time inherited by Confucius was “reformatted” as a way of aligning oneself with nature’s way, which always involves the passing away of living
beings. This attitude was still visible in the Northern Song, when Zhang Zai (1022-1070) wrote, “If I am to live, I will yield to things as they are; if I am to die, I am at peace.” The effect of this alignment with the Dao is to dissolve away the deep emotional intensities of living in time, or to feel them as distributed over time’s great expanse.

In Qu Yuan (c.340-c.278), the poet often believed to have written the *Songs of Chu* and the renowned *Encountering Sorrow*, Li sees a turning point for Chinese culture, a rejection of the Confucian and Daoist mode of acceptance. “I would rather face sudden death or oblivion/ Than adopt this attitude [of crookedness and flattery],” he wrote. I would rather jump into the River Xiang,/ And be buried in the belly of a fish/ Than allow my pure whiteness/ To be sullied by the world’s dust.”

In his poems, death does not appear as the inevitable passing away of all beings, but instead as a decisive end point whose nearness radically increases the intensity of lived experience. Zhuangzi believed that life and death are no different; for Qu Yuan, this was nonsense. His suicide was his rebuttal, in despair over his exile engineered by his rivals, his repeatedly ignored warnings about the threat posed by the State of Qin, and finally the fall of his beloved state of Chu. In a life grown intolerable, he chose death over life. According to Li, it is at this point, in Qu Yuan’s famed poem *Encountering Sorrow*, that “emotionalized time” opened up as a path within the Chinese aesthetic tradition. In both Qu Yuan’s example and in his poetry, time was packed with intensity, and crucially, this intensity was allied with his Confucian sense of mission. A human lifetime is a blink of an eye; one must serve humankind while one still can. After Qu Yuan, a particular despair issues equally from life’s fleetingness and being blocked from service—both of which bore upon Su Shi and Huang Tingjian as they wrote their great scrolls, which like *Encountering Sorrow* were written in exile.

By the Northern Song, the poignance of emotionalized time had become even more powerful and more pervasive, as Ch’an Buddhism added to it its focus on the centrality of
suffering. This seemed to wind together on a single thread the Confucian insistence on service, Qu Yuan’s despair and poignance, this new focus on suffering, and the sense of life as, in some way, illusion. Together these result in the emotionally torn situation that Li explains so well, that “although Su never did withdraw from the world, no earlier poet was as disillusioned with it.” In spite of his attempts to dwell in non-attachment, Su’s poetry and especially the Cold Food scroll contain an intensity of temporal experience that recalls Qu Yuan.

5. Calligraphy and The Place of Human Feeling

a: Tears at Parting

Many of Li Zehou’s insights illuminated an entire landscape that had been hidden from me by darkness. A particularly crucial one is his articulation of the change in poetry that occurred from the Wei-Jin to the Song. Imagery was slowly freed from the role it had played in a literary structure of moral analogy, where plants such as pine, plum, and bamboo had stood for human ethical qualities. In that structure, emotions were habitually passed through the mediation of conceptual thought; through what amounts to almost ritualized responses, emotional intensity was dissipated or diluted. As images gradually freed themselves, poetry lost its ritual aspect and grew in intensity. Images became capable of functioning as glimpses of an individual’s emotional state, perceived in the phenomenal world. Li sees this historic change rooted in the cultural contributions of the South, and particularly in the culture that had survived from the ancient state of Chu, which according to Li had never entirely internalized the rites and music tradition or the Confucianism of the North.

The culture of Chu had remained shamanistic for a much longer period of time, which allowed it to resist those influences: it remained more explicitly emotional. Over many centuries, the effect of the South on the larger aesthetic tradition was to lend its own emphasis to “history and a time frame defined by deep emotion.” It was only in the
Wei-Jin period, for example, that the expectation that tears would be shed at parting became widespread. The stoicism of the Han had been superseded by Chu displays of feeling: “When we parted, your display of love was like that of Zou Wen and Ji Jie, so that your eyelashes were soaked with tears.” What is important here is simply to realize that this is the same moment in which calligraphy became recognized as an art. That recognition depended on the development of cursive scripts with their air of intimacy and informality, and the fact that this allowed several strokes to be linked in one swift uninterrupted motion of the brush. But if its status as an art seems to follow from a new capacity for the brush to trace out the passing of time, this was also twined together with the flowering of a new type of intimacy, as friends shed tears when parting.

**b: A New Ratio of Thought and Feeling**

China’s aesthetic history can be charted as a series of alternating periods of more collectivist and more individualist emphases. Han collectivism, for example, gives way to the more individualist Wei-Jin, which gives way to the Tang in a new period of relative collectivism. If history continued this pattern of alternation, another individualist period would follow the Tang, in the form of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, which would be followed in turn by yet another more collectivist period, the Song. And yet, in many ways, and particularly in calligraphy, the Song seems anything but collectivist. In Peter Sturman’s eyes, “Song dynasty calligraphy represents a revolutionary departure from the tradition that preceded it. Long accepted standards of beauty and practice are suddenly replaced by something much more personal and human.”

According to Li Zehou, the Wei-Jin was a crucial moment for the Chinese aesthetic tradition— not a turning point, since the rites and music foundation was still carried forward, but a new depth of emotion saturated all forms of art. This was enabled by the growing prominence of Daoism, especially those strains that followed from the Zhuangzi, which encouraged individual expressions of feeling as opposed to the communal or “universal emotional forms,” as Li calls them, that had been inculcated by the rites and
music and Confucian thought. The confluence of the Zhuangzi’s turning away from Confucian rectitude together with Qu Yuan’s emotional intensity, in a period in which the Han order had collapsed, resulted in the striking Wei-Jin mix of abstruse thought and deep emotion.

Zhuangzi’s radical scepticism about the ability of rational thought to grasp the world reasonably undermined reason. “Saying says something: the only trouble is that what it says never stays fixed. Do we really say anything? Or have we never said anything?”

Or: “There is nothing that is not the ‘that’ and there is nothing that is not the ‘this.’ Things do not know that they are the ‘that’ of other things; they only know what they themselves know.” At the same time, Qu Yuan’s depth of feeling flooded in, and in poetry, freed images from their role as minor functionaries with the task of advancing larger moral analogy. Philosophy and poetry were both transformed—and transformed in turn the nature of persons.

Li argues that this new “ratio” (as McLuhan might have called it) of thought and feeling is quite different from the “group sentiment” of the Han, but also unlike the personal liberation of desire typical of recent capitalist societies. Feeling is individual, but it is at the same time, a form of thought, “a kind of thought that cannot be expressed in conceptual language.” What might seem an unlikely comparison could be made: the Wei-Jin, like the Enlightenment, redefined what reason was—though the Enlightenment narrowed the definition in making reason subject to method, where the Wei-Jin enlarged it by fusing it with human feeling. “Reason here no longer refers to the moral sense, nor can it be known conceptually,” writes Li Zehou. In the Wei-Jin, then, reason became something that grasps what cannot be grasped only through rational thought—and in this way, it moved much closer to what we in the West would normally think of as an aesthetic, much closer than Western thought ever would.
The outcome can be seen in Xie Lingyun’s poems, in which descriptions of nature act as expressions of the poet’s feeling—while at the same time, in those same descriptions, abstruse Daoist philosophical thought “masqueraded itself in the guise of mountains and waters.” Much the same could be said of Wang Xizhi’s calligraphy—elegant, moving, written in reclusion, the work of a practicing Daoist who transcribed both the *Dao De Jing* and the *Scripture of the Yellow Court*. Of the Daoist influence, Li writes that, “What keeps the metaphysical emphasis on infinitude...from becoming mere polemics is this element of emotional realization.” The outcome then is not mysticism, but this different form of reason, a different relation between what we understand as “thought” and “feeling.” In the Wei-Jin, these are fused—but the feeling is deep as the thought is abstruse. These two human modalities do not meet on some middle ground; they do not mitigate or dilute each other.

In Li Zehou’s view, the Wei-Jin formation was also strengthened in certain directions while being diluted in others by the growing influence of Ch’an Buddhist thought and ways of structuring experience—such as its meditation practices. The Wei-Jin reshaping of reason and feeling was reinforced by Ch’an experiences in which “nonconceptual understanding...overwhelms the imagination and the senses and merges with the emotions.” At the same time, the earlier period’s intensity of feeling was slightly dispersed through the Ch’an emphasis on “subtle awakening,” which together with Daoist inheritances gave rise to the *pingdan* ideal with its treasuring of blandness, tranquility, and flavourlessness. Ch’an teachings stressed the necessity to give up the clinging to one’s self: the effect is that even one’s own sufferings and vicissitudes can be set aside—though Su Shi’s poems, taken as a whole, testify to all the human strains and difficulties involved in trying to set aside one’s own suffering.

My impression is that, at certain points, the emotional atmosphere of the Northern Song looks more like a reanimation of the Wei-Jin than a successor to the Tang—if I think of the Tang with its military order and its calligraphy “too restrained by method.” Su and
Huang were both Buddhists, and their highly individual, even eccentric, styles seem to have been rooted in that subtle awakening—of which Li writes, “there is no fixed methods whatsoever, only the individual’s own perceptual ‘subtle awakening.’” Like Ch’an Buddhist Enlightenment, “Art and aesthetics have as their basis individual intuitive realization, and as such are neither completely conscious nor completely unconscious.” Though the direct emphasis may have been Buddhist, it seems to accord with Zhuangzi’s individualist emphasis and the value given to eccentricity within Daoism in general. There is a certain lightness of step to this. And yet in calligraphy, that lightness of step is more apparent in Wang Xizhi than in Su Shi or Huang Tingjian. The first noble truth of Buddhism is the centrality of suffering. Is it possible that when this lightness finally gives way, that this Buddhist emphasis ramps up the place of human feeling?

6. Calligraphy and Literature

a: Gardens as Literature

When I first saw images of the Cold Food scroll, I was astonished to realize that it was both a visual artwork and a literary object. Visiting China, and in particular visiting West Lake, made it clear to me that other Chinese objects share this same structure of being also literary objects, of refusing to resolve into one category or the other.

This may be true of Chinese gardens, for instance. As usual I’m reliant on the work of scholars, and here, particularly on Craig Clunas’ Fruitful Sites, his study of the Ming garden. His research makes clear that the kind of site we see unproblematically as a garden, The Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician in Suzhou for example, was not a naturally given type of object. Instead, he argues that in classical China, “gardens are not a thing transcendentally existing before they became objects of representation.” They were created through various types of representations, including maps and surveys (such as the “yellow registers” and the “fish scale map registers”), “functional paintings”, illustrations in gazetteers, numerology and geomancy. My concern here is with
literature’s role, since what results is a type of object, like calligraphy, for which there is no real Western equivalent—a garden which is also literature.

The Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician, Suzhou

A garden would seem to be an unproblematic entity, and similarly unproblematic the statement that gardens existed in Europe and China. In both cultures, gardens were made by laying out plants and trees and encouraging their growth, but Clunas’ point is that in Ming China this material work alone was not sufficient to constitute a garden. To achieve that status, the site required being recorded, praised, and redistributed through a literary text, such as Wen Zhengming’s *Record of the Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician*. That text established the physical site as more than soil, plants, trees, and buildings; it also demonstrated that it was worthy of being the subject of literature.
But such a text did more than bestow literary credibility. In much the same way as Foucault’s understanding of how discourse functions, the garden record created the object it viewed. It broke up the apparent unity of the site into a number of separate features worthy of delectation. In the process, it also instructed its reader in what to attend to and what to value. Clunas writes of these texts that, “The garden is presented not as a single coherent site, with boundaries and consistent internal features, but as a bundle of scattered characteristics, each one of which is subject to the types of discrimination on the grounds of taste that are the main purpose of the ‘Treatise’ [Wen Zhengming’s Treatise on Superfluous Things]. The key distinction is the one between ‘elegant’ and ‘vulgar.’”

His point is not that an uneducated person could not recognize a walled enclosure with plants and flowering trees as a garden (yuan), but rather that they would not be able to take part in properly recognizing it as the aesthetic object it was in the culture of Suzhou. The medium of that participation was literature. More exactly, it was the literature of these garden records, which “consecrated” it, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s way of speaking, by enlisting important literary figures such as Wen Zhengming to treat the site. The text also took up the physical site and broke it up conceptually, in order to reconstitute it through a different, and explicitly literary, order. Clunas sees in various records, “this ‘disintegration’ of the garden as a coherent property in favour of commentary on its individually considered parts.” The disintegration allows the multiplication of possible foci for discriminations of taste, and not surprisingly, that multiplication of points of focus mirrors the way in which individual persons held cultural power during the Ming. As a result, the garden in the literary text is not the same as the garden as the actual physical site: the gate to The Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician was the Record of the Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician.

The importance of the garden as a subject for literature is evident in the great number of Wen Zhengming’s poems and prose writings devoted to the subject. Or, to turn this around, what is apparent is the importance of literature for the garden. Of course, all this
is four hundred years after the height of the Northern Song. But the roots of this literary constitution of gardens lay centuries in the past.

The literary figure most likely to spring to mind in the context of gardens was Tao Yuanming (365–427), the great poet of reclusion, who called himself Tao Qian—“Qian” meaning “hiding.” (Or, Tao Qian, “the hidden Dao.”) Clunas points out that the name of The Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician (zhuo zheng yuan) would have called up the figure of the poet. Zhuo apparently means “unsuccessful”, or “clumsy”, “artless”, “humble”—all highly valued qualities because they emphasized naturalness, a lack of straining after social position. The idea of Shou zhuo, “preserving one’s artlessness,” is forever associated with Tao Qian, and the allusion to it would have established the garden not merely as a retreat, but as a place of lofty, and literate, reclusion.183

Poetic descriptions of the gardens of the literati seem to begin in the Western Jin, which is not coincidentally the period when calligraphy begins to be valued aesthetically and collected. Shi Chong’s (249–300) writings about his Golden Valley Garden may be among the earliest examples; like Wen’s garden records, they mix descriptions of immense wealth with ideas of being a Daoist hermit wandering alone in the mountains.184 Pan Yue (247–300), who visited the Golden Valley Garden, wrote of his own garden in his “Fu on My Idle Life”—a fu being a type of poem that treats one object extensively and even obsessively. Numerous other figures would populate the literate mind when thinking of gardens. Wang Wei’s (701?–761?) Wheel River Poems, written with Pei Di, established the convention of linking poems that take up different sites in a garden or estate.185 The Wheel River Estate already alluded to the literary past simply by virtue of having been owned previously by the poet, Song Zhiwen (c. 660–710.)

The earliest examples of garden records (yuan ji) per se seem to be those written by the poet, Bai Juyi (772-846), who was once governor of Hangzhou. “Record of my Thatched Hall”, ‘Preface to “Essay on Dwelling by a Pond’ as well as “Touring Pingquan in Drunkenness” are several examples.186 Li Deyou’s (787-850) “Record of the Flowers and
Trees While Living in the Mountains at Pingquan” joins Bai’s as the earliest of these, and addresses the same site treated in Bai’s Pingquan poem. Li wrote many poems on Pingquan, among them one with the charmingly disingenuous title, “Many of the Gentlemen in Luoyang Have Come to Call Me Pingquan. I Felt Ashamed About Acquiring Such a Name of Transcendence. Therefore, I Wrote This Poem in Response, Sent to Advisor Liu.”

In a fascinating article, Xiaoshan Yang intricately unwraps the literary history of Pingquan, which was originally intended to show Li’s filial piety. Li’s “Record of the Flowers and Trees” explicitly connects itself to the Confucian classics and the Songs of the South, and in this way, like Han Yu’s call for “ancient prose”, rooted his garden in the unimpeachable literary past. “Mindful that those who study the Classic of Poetry learn much about the names of plants and trees and that those who work on Encountering Sorrow always thoroughly comprehend the beauty of fragrant grasses, I decided to compose a record of their indigenous mountains and rivers so as to expand the knowledge.”

Pingquan turned into an obsession for Li, and by the Northern Song was interpreted as an example of a dubious attachment to external things, and more particularly, to aesthetic objects. In Su Shi’s circle, it surfaced explicitly as an issue. The great historian, Sima Guang (1019-1086), head of the Yuanyou faction of which Su Shi was part, wrote a poem, “Touring the Pingquan Villa of Duke Li of Wei”, which depicted the now-ruined garden as a site for meditation upon how swiftly power vanishes. (Was this a veiled warning to Wang Anshi and his reformers, who held power throughout most of Sima Guang’s lifetime?) Ouyang Xiu, Su’s mentor, wrote a series of three poems on Li’s garden record itself, “Reading Once Again ‘Record of Flowers and Trees at Pingquan’”. These stress Li’s failure to withdraw soon enough from his official position at court, as well as his corruption. (Are these poems a form of praise for Sima Guang, who withdrew entirely from the court in 1070?) Wen Tong (1019–1079), Su’s friend and the famed painter of bamboo, wrote a Colophon to the Transcription of “Record of Plants and Trees
at Pingquan," Two Poems, which synthesized Sima’s poem and Ouyang’s, and treated both Li’s corruption and the vanishing of his power. For Su’s circle, then, this garden was not simply a garden; it was the locus of debates about the ethics of power and the attachment to objects.

Like all gardens though, it was an object saturated by literature and drawing much of its value from it. Clunas’ argument is that, by the Ming, what we see as a garden was something which required being founded in literature as much as it required being founded in soil, trees, and water. It required, for instance, a reference to the literature of reclusion, since this saved the garden from being an example of an obsession with luxury. Clunas shows that this necessity of being founded in literature had been formalized and made explicit by the Ming, but all the elements this were in place by the Northern Song and perhaps earlier. A “garden” in classical China could not be imagined existing apart from literature. Like calligraphy, it was a literary object—even if the presence of literature was not visible.  

I know of no more astonishing admission of this state of being absorbed into literature than an example from the Ming that Pierre Ryckmans recounts.

It was a fashion among intellectuals and artists to write records of beautiful gardens, but in the case of our writer, there was a new dimension added to the genre. The garden which he described was called the Wuyou Garden—which means "The Garden-that-does-not-exist." In his essay, the author observed that many famous gardens of the past have entirely disappeared and survive only on paper in literary descriptions. Hence, he wondered why it should be necessary for a garden to have first existed in reality. Why not skip the preliminary stage of actual existence and jump directly into the final state of literary existence which, after all, is the common end of all gardens? What difference is there between a famous garden which exists no more, and this particular garden which never existed at all, since in
the end both the former and the latter are known only through the same medium of the written word?\textsuperscript{190}

\textit{b: West Lake as Literature}

\textit{Sixth Month, 27th Day: Written While Drunk on Lake Prospect Tower}

Swirled ink of black cloud has not yet covered the hills,  
Jumping pearls of white rain riotously enter the boat.  
A wind to curl the earth up comes, in an instant blows them away,  
And under Lake Prospect Tower water seems sky.

The fish and turtles it's forbidden to catch come as near you as they please,  
The lotus blossoms no one owns open wherever you go.  
Pillowed on water you can order the hills to tilt up, tilt down.  
The boat in the breeze has got the knack of ambling round the moon.

Come, take from time the leisure's share you will.  
Semi-retirement is retirement still.  
Where better could I settle and find a home  
Than such a place with peerless lake and hill?\textsuperscript{191}

-Su Shi

In Hangzhou, I went to visit the Xiling Seal Carving Society and the attendant museums on Solitary Hill. I had been told by friends that this was one of the finest views, and that I must savour it. Climbing the steps and looking out from Gu Shan, I thought it was a wonderful place for a temple to calligraphy. Without really thinking, I vaguely assumed that the Xiling Society had chosen the site for its beauty. Only later did it dawn on me that the site was as much literary as real, that its literary beauty matched or even surpassed its visible beauty.
One can take a boat out on Hangzhou’s famed West Lake and gaze upon the hills that, toward sunset, look as though they are a wash of ink. It is a real lake—where swimming is illegal because it is the city’s water supply—and yet it was and is also a literary object. In discussing the Leifeng Pagoda (which is visible in the photograph above on the far side of the lake), Eugene Wang writes that it is a famed landmark on West Lake, but that “a landmark alone, however, does not make a site. No site in China is without an overlay of writing. To make a site is to cite texts.”192 The degree to which the actual lake itself has been the reason for this citing of texts, and has been sedimented in them, has been so dense and rich that that it has been said that “West Lake represented and evoked…at times would seem to obliterate, or at least occlude, its very reality.”193
I won’t rehearse here the long history of writings about Hangzhou, except to point out a few of the most notable texts. During the Northern Wei period, Li Daoyuan in his *Notes on the Water Classic*, Li Daoyuan (469?-527) recorded the Han dynasty miracle of the Golden Cow, which took place at West Lake. (If I remember correctly, the legend says that during a terrible drought, the lake dried up. After conducting rites to align the realm with the cosmos, a golden water buffalo that had been hidden in lake bottom, suddenly rose up, and the rains came and filled the lake.) In the Tang, Bai Juyi was governor of Hangzhou in 822 and wrote many poems about West Lake; Su Shi continued this, during his time there as vice-prefect in 1079 and prefect from 1089-1091. Both of the poets still have causeways named after them, along which people stroll and view the lake. The poet, Lin Bu (967-1028), refused to serve the Song dynasty after it annexed the Wuyue Kingdoms, and lived instead as a hermit on Solitary Hill. Legend has it that his only companions were cranes and plum blossoms; he still serves as a symbol of unstained...
purity and quiet resistance. During the Northern Song, or more likely, the Southern Song, the famed Ten Views of West Lake were codified. (Orioles Singing to Willows is one of those ten views.) The poet, historian, and prose writer Zhang Dai (1597?-1689) visited West Lake several times, writing poems for each of the Ten Views. He later wrote *Searching for West Lake in My Dreams*, which may be the most famous literary account of the lake. “Born at an evil hour, I have been separated from West Lake for twenty-eight long years. Not a day passes however that West Lake does not enter my dreams.”¹⁹⁴ By the Ming, but likely much earlier, West Lake was a dream as well as a site, or a site where literature gave permission to dream. I have been unable to think of any comparable European site, one to which Western literature has returned with the same astounding frequency or transmuted and absorbed it to this degree. If Wordsworth’s poem on Tintern Abbey joined centuries of similar poems, that might begin to be equivalent. If all the major poets in English since Wordsworth had followed him in writing on the abbey, that heritage would still be so junior and so dilute in its effects that it could not be compared to West Lake.

**c: Dissolved in Literature**

*Listening to Orioles Amidst Billowing Willows*

Deep within the willows the yellow orioles cry,
Their crisp notes echoing in the empty greenness.
If you truly are a poet by nature,
Then you will not compete with drum and pipe.¹⁹⁵

-Zhang Dai

Until I had visited Hangzhou, it had never occurred to me how much of “China” is a literary construction. But I don’t mean here to speak simply of a nation or a people’s self-imagining: something of this exists in many, and perhaps every, nation and culture. What is at issue here is something else, something which it seems cannot or at least has not
occurred in our culture—that a geographical feature, such as a lake, could be literary as much as it is geological; that a garden would be as much literary as botanical. This seems of a piece with calligraphy, a visual art that is at the same time, literature.

In an earlier section, I quoted from Lu Yu’s biography of Zhang Xu, in which Zhang is recorded as saying, “ ‘The lone tumbleweed moves by itself, and sand is blown into the air without warning.’ I pattern my calligraphy on such events, and that’s why it is so strange and marvelous.” Huaisu is similarly remembered, saying, “Whenever I observe ‘numerous strange peaks amid summer clouds,’ I always imitate them in my calligraphy.” Qian Zhongshu, surely among the most knowledgeable of commentators of any period, comments that, “In such statements of course, the references are to real tumbleweeds, sand, and clouds—not to textual descriptions of the same, as in Bao Zhao’s ‘Rhapsody on the Overgrown City’ or Gu Kaishi’s ‘Emotions of the Goddess’, even though their language is borrowed from such texts.” It is very striking that, if real tumbleweeds, sand, and clouds had been intended, the Chinese commentator would have had to make this point explicitly, labouring to distinguish them from the literary texts to which calligraphers would typically be understood to be alluding.

I set out to read Chinese poetry because I was so deeply moved by it; I also thought it would be useful in allowing me to glimpse the Northern Song structure of feeling. It seems to me now that it is the one indispensable thing—the medium in which Chinese objects float, or the atmosphere they breathe. It is typical of the Chinese aesthetic tradition that in Ching Hao’s (fl. 907-923?) Bifa ji (A Note on the Brush), which recounts the story of young man being taught the art of the brush, the young painter proves his grasp of the art by composing a poem. A garden and a lake seem to be different from calligraphy in some rather obvious way: calligraphy always presents a text, and so it displays the fact that it is both a visual art and a literary object. But gardens and lakes too are literary objects even though they don’t present themselves as texts. West Lake is not a text, nor is a garden. And yet, after Clunas—and especially after having sat, reading Su’s
poetry about West Lake, while sitting at Orioles Singing to Willows—I have to wonder if this distinction isn’t one which would have made less sense to the literati of the Northern Song than it makes in our culture. A well-educated person would know immediately upon seeing the lake that it was literature. Its different features would call up poems, essays, legends as though they were written upon it.199

This effect, of the actual site being dissolved in literature, also plays a role in the way that the past exists for China—unless it is the other way around, that the relation to the past follows from the centrality of literature and the writing system. F.W. Mote wrote, after comparing Suzhou’s apparent lack of historical ruins with Rome’s abundance of them, that, "Chinese civilization did not lodge its history in buildings.” His point was not that China lacked a sense of history— which would be absurd, especially in a nation so deeply concerned with recording in detail the histories of the various dynasties. Instead, he argued, “It studied its past, and drew upon it, using it to design and to maintain its present as has no other civilization. But its ancient cities such as Soochow [Suzhou] were 'time free' as purely physical objects. They were repositories of the past in a very special way—they embodied or suggested associations whose value lay elsewhere. The past was a past of words not of stones.”200

Before I leave this topic, there is one other point I want to address, which follows from literature’s effects and reveals something crucial about the aesthetic tradition in which calligraphy took place. If the Wei-Jin did in fact change the relation of thought, feeling and imagination, this too is in large part the effect of literature as well as Zhuangzi’s “nonconceptual insight.” If the imagination became more central, and was less confined by what we would understand as “rational thought, “ this alters the weight given to what we would consider the “real” and changes the role of the senses in apprehending it. Li describes its effect in this way.
Over the centuries both the creators of literature and art and their audiences have applied their imaginations to a hazy and nonspecific external world of scenes and images. Imaginary reality gives Chinese art and literature the ability to move freely across time and space, cause and effect, objects and phenomena, and through fiction to expand or contract, add to or even change the original aspect of all these things. In this way, time and space, cause and effect, and so on, are freed even more from common logic, so that the fortuitous nature of the thinker’s newly revealed emotion becomes more pronounced.\footnote{201}

I believe that it is the interlacing of literature with objects as diverse as gardens, lakes, and visual art that allows this imaginary reality to take place, something which is so apparent at West Lake. To repeat Eugene Wang’s point once more, “West Lake represented and evoked...at times would seem to obliterate, or at least occlude, its very reality.” Literature allows counter-factuals; these are only possible in language. That would be true of any language and could be said of any work of fiction. But West Lake is an actual lake, not a work of fiction, and what the quotation speaks of are representations which seem almost to dissolve the real. The relation between the fictional and the real that Li outlines is not the same as in the West. At West Lake, the site is dislodged imaginatively from what is actually given; the site coalesces partly in the senses, partly in the literate imagination.

“The text altered the scene by shaping the perceptions of later travellers,” writes Richard Strassberg about texts inscribed at the sites that inspired them.\footnote{202} West Lake too was altered by the literature it inspired—which befits a lake that was in fact man-made. Literature doesn’t simply supplement or ornament what exists. Instead it acts as a fog might: everything that actually exists, appears and disappears within it. With respect to West Lake, a distinction between fiction and the real no longer seems acute enough: something seems to have happened in China’s aesthetic tradition that left it with a way of dreaming things into existence.
Am I imagining this? Not long after the Wei-Jin that looms so large for Li Zehou, Kong Yingda (574-648) was noting that there are points in the *Book of Changes* where “there is no reality that corresponds to the words.” Since the *Book of Changes* was not taken up as fiction, what could this mean? Was Kong already reading the *Changes* in the light of this hazy and nonspecific imaginary reality? Could this also explain why Su Shi placed his *Red Cliff Odes* at a site near Huangzhou where it seems he knew the famous battle had not taken place?

The great modernist, Lu Xun (1881-1936), lived briefly in Hangzhou, and despised this dreamy imagining. He was more than dubious of West Lake—meaning not the lake, but the lake as a literary object. He warned his friend Yu Dafu, the writer, not to move to there, because the lake “undermined a person’s sense of purpose.” Lu Xun’s dream was of a modern and democratic China, and it required a very different kind of literature.

But I want to argue against him, while recognizing that my goals are different ones—though who am I to argue with Lu Xun? My friend, the artist Yam Lau, once said that I was fascinated by an ideal China. A year or so later, after he had travelled to Suzhou to study the gardens there, he told me on his return that he too was fascinated by an ideal China. Before visiting Hangzhou myself, I took Yam’s words as a warning not to fall prey to my own imaginings. Now, after Li, I would argue that dreaming of China is important to understanding it—I am certain Zhang Dai would agree. In certain crucial respects what China “really” was, at least in what had been the ancient state of Chu, was what it wasn’t.

In his *Red Cliff Odes*, Su Shi describes the red cliffs at Huangzhou as “sheer banks rising a thousand feet”, though they’re not close to that. It’s hard to imagine falcons nesting there: obviously poetry isn’t the best place to find the truth of history. In Chinese poetry, even a young poet’s temples had “turned to frost”—meaning that their hair was white with age, that they had grown old and suffered much, and so the poem could call forth the
reverence with which age should be treated. Su’s Red Cliff Odes are like those temples turned to frost, but made into conscious tropes that display and undo themselves. They are set where the Battle of Red Cliffs likely didn’t take place, by cliffs which tower only in the written text. Departing from the real is the issue; each of his Odes produces the sensation that “I had left the world”—though the writing recognizes that only the feeling was real.

The Ming historian Yuan Zhongdao (fl. ca. 1603) wrote that Su’s cliffs were a grassy knoll, and that “‘Precipitous nests of roosting falcons’ and such phrases are words spoken in a dream.” In the Qing, Lu Ciyun (fl. 1662) wrote that “when I try to retrace his tracks, it is as elusive as clouds and mists. I want to listen to the flute’s melody, but its sorrowful longing cannot be heard…Su Shi, at this place, was filled with nostalgia for Cao Cao. Those who come here after the poet-immortal’s time are, in turn, filled with nostalgia for him.” This seems central to a certain part of China’s aesthetic, or at least to its pre-modernist but post Wei-Jin aesthetic: pleasure comes through seeing the real imagined almost to the point of dissolving away, and so it fills with yearning. There is a way in which China is a dream of China; but perhaps this is no longer true? Jay Xu makes a similar observation about Huang Tingjian, one that suggests how powerful this was in the Northern Song. “An objective past was not really important to Huang T’ing-chien; what mattered was the past he chose to imagine.” (Emphasis mine.)

7. Calligraphy and the Convertibility of the Arts

a: Wandering in the Arts

In the late Tang, Zhang Yanyuan (ca. 815- ca. 877) wrote of Wu Daozi (680-740) that “when the act of painting came to an end, the meaning did not.” In the Northern Song Mei Yaochen stated that “Poetry should contain inexhaustible meaning beyond the words.” Extending this, Su Shi believed that in painting and calligraphy, “marvellousness lies outside the actual brushmarks.” Because this idea of ceaseless
meaning held within it a dilution of the importance of the material medium, it led to a redefinition of the arts that had enormous effects on Chinese art for centuries. According to James Cahill, it led to the “amateurization of Chinese art”—a diminution of craft skills which is perhaps comparable to the “de-skilling” in Western Art brought about by Conceptual Art. This devaluing of the work of professional painters greatly weakened painting in China, in Cahill’s view. But it also allowed a marvelous convertibility of the different arts in which the qualities of one seem to flow into another, like a liquid being poured from one vessel to another, back and forth.

This process tended to collapse the difference between calligraphy and painting, in spite of the fact that calligraphy was much more highly valued than painting as the Song began. Fu Shen quotes Huang Tingjian’s insight into Wen Tong’s practice: “‘When Wen Hu-chou [Wen Tong] paints bamboo and trees, his brushwork is simply wonderful, but his calligraphy doesn’t match up to his painting: if he could use his painting method to write calligraphy, then no one could match him.’” Clearly painting methods could be used to write calligraphy, and by implication, calligraphic methods could be used to “write” paintings—as Zhao Mengfu later did in the Yuan.

In the Northern Song, and particularly through Su Shi’s influence, it became crucially important for each painting to be founded in a “picture idea” (huayi), just as great calligraphy was seen to be rooted in a “brush idea” and not simply brushmarks. But rather than rooting painting in anything like the modernist sense of the specificity of the medium, this tied it tightly to poetry. In Eugene Wang’s understanding of the issue, “a painting is considered to display a ‘pictorial conception’ only when its formal mechanism produces certain ineffable effects that evoke suggestive moods, conceptual overtones, or extralinguistic flavors comparable to those inspired by poetry.”

The roots of this ease of conversion between the arts seem to lie in the *Analects*, where Confucius is recorded as saying, “Devote yourself to the Way, depend on Integrity, rely
on Humanity, and wander in the arts.” This is not simply more of the emphasis on the refining of the self that becomes so central in Confucianism; it suggests something else, the granting of permission for an aesthetic freedom beyond deliberate intention. “Wandering” clearly is not the same as assiduous study; it is far from our sense of being professional. And like the contemporary American artist Dan Graham’s declaration that “the artist as professional is the worst idea I’ve ever heard about”, it opens paths that lead to Su Shi’s multi-dimensional non-mastery.

**b: Wang Wei’s Example**

Su Shi’s great example was the Tang poet and painter, Wang Wei (699?-759?). None of Wang’s paintings survive to this day, though he is often seen as the founder of the Southern School of landscape painting. But one of Su’s poems recounts seeing murals by Wu Daozi and Wang Wei at the Kaiyuan Monastery west of Xi’an. Of Wang’s paintings there, Su wrote that he “captures what lies beyond the image,” extending Mei Yaochen. Just as important was the distinction that the two murals allowed Su Shi to make between what he called “scholars’ painting” and that of a “painter craftsman”—where Wang Wei’s exemplifies the virtues of the former and Wu’s the latter. In Su’s view, Wu’s paintings are too focused on the issue of representational likeness rather than on the perception of the inherent pattern of things in their mutability. (“Its meaning ample, it does not seek a resemblance in appearance,” wrote Chen Yuyi (1090-1138) in the generation after Su. But the issue also seems to be that Wu’s evident skill suggests that it is mired in one material practice, attempting to master it instead of wandering in the arts in the Confucian manner. This also contradicts the Buddhist teaching of non-attachment which was so crucial to Su—though it will lead eventually to the amateurization that Cahill laments.

One of Wang Wei’s poems, the fourth of his “Six Casually Written Poems” is crucially important here. Though I have found no record that Su read it, I find it difficult to believe he did not know it thoroughly.
Old age comes: I’ve grown weary about writing poems.
Old age visits; we follow each other around.
In this long life, mistakenly a poet;
In a past life, mistakenly a painter.
Unable to give up these habits,
I happen to be known to the world.
There are those who know my name,
But not this heart.\textsuperscript{219}

There are so many levels of interpretation to this apparently simple poem, far too many to mine here. But the surface layer is clear. Wei was a practitioner of Ch’an Buddhism (which we call “Zen”), and in the poem he is playing with the idea of birth and rebirth. The somewhat sly conceit is that he was a painter who was reborn as a poet. (What karmic sins caused a painter to be reborn as a poet, we’ll never know.) But we do know, as those who knew his name knew, that he both wrote poetry and made paintings throughout his life.

About art and identity, the little poem involves a conception so far from modern Western ideas of professionalism. The director Michelangelo Antonioni said in 1985, “I am not a painter, but a filmmaker who paints.”\textsuperscript{221} In doing so, he made it clear that his identity lay
in a commitment to one medium, even if he dabbled in another. Wang Wei’s view is quite different; it does not favour painting over poetry or vice-versa. More importantly, it can be read as saying that both painting and poetry were “mistakes”, that is, that neither was the way to what Ch’an Buddhism calls “the heart of matter.” Unlike Antonioni, Wang Wei refuses to declare an identity through medium. The poem can also be read still another way, as saying that people mistook him for a painter, and later, mistook him for a poet—and that therefore what he truly was, was nothing that could subsumed by either of these names. “Those who love study penetrate the ever-constant categories. Thus they hear one and know one [thing],” says the Zhuangzi. It was on the basis of such an understanding that Su Shi could construct an understanding of the arts as sharing something essential amidst their apparently different forms.

Su wrote in a colophon, "Written on Mo-chieh's [Wang Wei] Painting of Misty Rains at Lan-t'ien", that "If you savor Mo-chieh's poetry, there is painting in the poetry; if you view Mo-chieh's painting, there is poetry in the painting." Of Li Zhiyi’s (1045?-1125) painting of a withered tree, he wrote, “Painters since ancient times have not been common fellows; their marvelous thoughts really have the same origin as poetry.” What that origin was, Su to my knowledge never made clear. It seems likely that the source for both poetry and painting—and calligraphy, which took part in both the visual and the verbal—was understood as beyond comprehension like the Dao itself, and so was beyond the specifics of any one medium. All of this is reminiscent of Su in another context, where ontology and enlightenment were discussed. His friend, the monk Foyin, once pointed out that when viewed with the “dharma eye”, every needle hole in his robe contained numberless worlds. Su took the thought in a different direction, saying that when the ceremonial robe was in its case, he saw the robe but not Foyin. When taken out and worn, he saw Foyin but not the robe. The robe and the monk were neither one thing nor two. Poetry and painting must have been like Foyin and his robe.
Though a Buddhist, Wang Wei wandered in the arts as Confucius had instructed. Su seems to have found two crucial concepts allied to this, both of which aided his understanding of how to proceed in the arts. These were yu, which Egan translates as “to lodge or put up temporarily in”, and ji, “to lodge, to avail oneself of, or to make use of temporarily.” Both allow the translation of the Confucian imperative into the terms of the Buddhist doctrine of non-attachment. “Lodging” provides a way, even the Way, for Su to engage with things—the materiality of words in poetry, of brushmarks in painting and calligraphy—and yet not to be bound to them, which would be to be bound to the material world. If Antonioni’s identity was bound to his being a filmmaker, Su’s by contrast was not bound in the same way to being a calligrapher, poet, or painter.

The great painter, Li Gonglin, was part of Su’s circle. Of Li, Su wrote that, “When this lay Buddhist is in the mountains, he does not allow his mind to abide in any one thing, and so his spirit commingles with the myriad things and his knowledge is the equal of that of the hundred artisans combined.” Li’s practice exemplified the idea of merely “lodging” which was so central to Su; he was able to comprehend the ten thousand things because his mind is not lodged in any one thing. This relative non-attachment allowed things to approach. And so, like Guanyin who seems never to be far from Su’s mind, if one could allow the ten thousand things to enter one’s awareness, then one could deal with the multitude of things, something that would have required a hundred artists working in the conventional way. “Lodging” leads to an unfettered responsiveness, distinguished by a consciousness that was no-mind (wuxin). “Even though you are in the midst of the six dusts, you do not stand apart from them, yet are not stained by them, and are free to come and go,” says the Platform Sutra.

**c: The Role of the Material Culture**

China’s material culture played a very large role in creating this convertibility of the arts of the brush. Poetry, painting, and calligraphy all were done with brush and ink on paper. This made it possible for a painting to be made from calligraphic strokes, or for a poem to
be written on a painting that had been made with the same implement, or for the writing out of a poem to be simultaneously a work of visual art. In Europe, the tools and procedures of painting and poetry constituted separate realms, and so no Western painter or poet could ever say, as the poet, painter, and calligrapher Tang Yin did, “I’ve found a painter’s brush that also writes poems.”

But if this was a possibility inherent in the material culture, it was made explicit in the Northern Song. In earlier calligraphy the two different arts had existed as though they were different specialties: the norm was that calligraphers applied their skill to existing texts. In the Han period for example, the *Xiping Stone Classics* were produced when Cai Yong and other celebrated calligraphers wrote out *The Book of Changes*, *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Analects* and the allied classics. In the Tang, the lovely *Yu Shi Tai Stone Tablet* in the Forest of Stele in Xi’an is Liang Shengqing’s calligraphy of a text composed by Cui Shi (671-713). By the Northern Song, the *shi* calligraphers had come to reject that role, which was essentially that of an illustrious scribe. Cai Xiang (1012-1067), perhaps the best-known calligrapher of the generation before Su Shi’s, transcribed a memorial inscription written by the emperor Renzong for a deceased relative. Yet he refused when asked to write out a text written by a court official.

Recently I was ordered by imperial edict to write out a stele text composed by the emperor. Those who make a living doing inscribed tablets for palaces and temples have a shallow understanding of calligraphy, so an emperor’s orders particularly should be requested of very meritorious and virtuous masters. But when the court issued this order for my calligraphy, I said: “In recent times, the transcribing of stele inscriptions has customarily been done for a fee. There is an officer retained for just this kind of order by the court; this is a task for an editorial assistant.”

On the other hand, Cai Xiang did write out Ouyang Xiu’s *Account of the Tree Peonies of Luoyang* in his hand for himself, and had it engraved in stone, which Egan calls “a mark
of respect which normally would be accorded only to the most ‘literary’ of prose compositions.”231 Cai Xiang had earlier rejected the role of scribe, but in copying out Ouyang’s text for himself, he had asserted in practice a bond between works of literature and works of calligraphy. In essence he had argued that these two were equals, and further, that calligraphy of the highest order should be reserved for writing of the same worth.

This prepared the ground for the convertibility of the arts, but the gap between poetry and calligraphy—or literature and calligraphy—still remained until Su’s appearance. “I make these lines of draft script to append to this painting,” Su wrote in the poem, ‘Guo Xi Paints the Autumn Mountains Level and Distant.”232 In this instance the colophon he wrote, which we could call “art criticism”, is at the same time both a poem and a work of calligraphy. But if there is a single work in which the two arts of poetry and calligraphy converge, it is Su’s Rain on the Festival of Cold Food scroll—here the two arts fuse as they never had before, because of Su’s astonishing capacity in both forms. The two fields could only be brought together with the arrival of someone like Su, a great poet who was also a great calligrapher. Huang Tingjian was explicit about this, noting that Su’s calligraphy was cherished in part because literary men had never before been celebrated for their calligraphy. Su was obviously a model for the younger Huang, who would also be known for his both his poetry and calligraphy. But there may no work in which the two are so completely fused as the Cold Food scroll, and in this fusion, the convertibility of the arts seemed to be convincingly demonstrated. On that basis, Huang Tingjian could see and value Li Bai’s calligraphy, which was to my knowledge, not noted during the great poet’s lifetime during the Tang dynasty. “When I had the opportunity to look back at the drafts of Li Bai’s calligraphy, I found that his style of calligraphy is very much like his style in poetry, which made my thoughts fly far.”233

Perhaps calligraphy seemed as though it could dissolve into other arts because of the material practices by which it was produced, preserved and transmitted, since these seem to make the calligraphy exist as though independent of any one material means. If it was
written with brush and ink on paper or silk, many of the most valued works were preserved through tracing copies. Calligraphy was also preserved by being carved in stone stele, and from those stele, through ink rubbings on paper. (The making of the Xiping Stone Classics apparently gave rise to the making of rubbings.) The rubbings in turn were presented as scrolls or cut up and made into the form of a book. In doing so, black marks on white paper became white marks on black, reversed like photographic negatives. Calligraphy was also preserved and transmitted by being copied onto wooden blocks, which were then carved and printed. All of these forms were widely used in the Northern Song, and the works of the great calligraphers appeared in each of these ways. (In the preface to a poem, Su Shi mentions having a rubbing of Li Bai’s calligraphy.234) All counted as calligraphy, and a student of calligraphy was likely to have poured over many works in each form. It was this that allowed works like the Preface to the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion to influence the tradition even though the original had long ago been lost.

In the same way, Yan Zhenqing’s calligraphy was a Yan Zhenqing whether it was a stele, a tracing copy, a rubbing in scroll form, or a printed book. In the stanza from the poem below, Huang Tingjian writes of finally seeing Yan’s Paean to the Resurgence of the Great Tang Dynasty, a work which he nonetheless says he’d known all his life.

Written on the Cliff After the Stele

Spring rains have blown my boat to Wu creek
And leaning on a briar staff, I read the Resurgence Stele.
A middle-aged man, all my life I’ve looked at the ink rubbing;
Stroking the stone engraving, the air at my temples become silken again.235

In some odd way, this seems similar to our contemporary world, in which images travel as though free of any particular cultural foothold or known incarnation. So, one may finally see a work they have known all their lives. It may be the circulation of calligraphy
through such different states—that is, its circulation as an image of itself—that was one of the factors leading to the convertibility of the arts. The idea of the art being bound to one material medium, in the way the West has thought of painting as being oil on canvas, appears ultimately to have dissolved away.

8. Calligraphy and Politics

a: Factionalism in the Northern Song

I said farewell to my wife and children, and left a letter for my brother Che, instructing him about my posthumous affairs, since I was certain I would die. When we crossed the Yangzi, I wanted to throw myself into the river. But the soldiers guarded me closely so that it was impossible. When I was first put in prison I intended to starve myself to death.236

-Su Shi

If calligraphy was immersed in literature, and if it functioned as a medium for human relationships, it also took place in a political dimension as well—a very highly charged one which resulted in Ouyang Xiu and Mei Yaochen both being exiled. Su Shi was tried for treason and probably tortured, eventually exiled three times; Huang Tingjian was sent into exile twice and, like Qian Guan, died in exile. The entire Yuanyou faction was exiled and their works proscribed, with orders for the printing blocks for their writing and calligraphy to be destroyed, along with all rubbings and stele. The intent was to erase them from the cultural record.237 Calligraphy, along with poetry and painting was understood to be political, and in the Northern Song, it was especially so, within a period marked by intense and bitter battles for court power. Today it seems possible only to imagine a culture in which aesthetic choices were also political commitments—since art today occurs in the radically different social circumstances of personalized consumption, a situation which has been summed up in cheerfully blunt terms by the philosopher of
aesthetics, Arthur Danto. "Today everything is permitted; artists have never been more free. We live in an atmosphere where only History, that tyrant in whose name categorical imperatives of art were issued, is dead. Dead as well is the language of artistic obligation." The Northern Song calligraphers were not free, though the power of the court to determine what calligraphy was taken up as a model was breaking down. Nor was history dead; neither it nor the language of artistic obligation could be stilled within a Confucian society.

The politics of the Northern Song and its controversies are still topics of heated debate today; here I can only present a very simplified outline of the political situation: my focus at this point is less on the political debate itself than on its effects on how calligraphy was seen and practiced.

The Northern Song was beset by pressing problems. Threatened by powerful military enemies to the North, it required the maintenance of an enormous standing army that numbered about one and a quarter million men. Its tax revenues were eaten up by this; by 1065, military expenditures consumed 43 percent of the government’s total income. The need for reform was obvious, and was first attempted by Fan Zhongyan, who led the guwen (ancient prose) faction. The leadership of this faction, which Su Shi was to join, was later taken up by Sima Guang.

In Su’s time, there were two leading factions, one directed by Wang Anshi and the other by Sima Guang; the first, a classicist, and the second a historian. Comparisons are often misleading, but I will advance some here in order to sketch out what was a very complex situation. Wang Anshi and his New Policies could be compared with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal in calling for a great expansion of the government and its role together with a corresponding expansion of the imperial bureaucracy, a greater intrusion of the government into daily life. Wang’s policies would likely be labelled “tax and spend” in today’s political rhetoric. Sima Guang on the other hand might reasonably
be compared to Edmund Burke—favouring a limited role for government, a suspicion of
decisive action and a corresponding trust in the organic development of tradition, as
opposed to the drafting of new laws or the writing of constitutions. But other
comparisons would have to be layered onto these in order to bring other aspects of the
situation into view. In power, Wang Anshi’s faction displayed much of the vindictiveness
shown to intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, though without the trashing of the
past that accompanied it. Another comparison is suggested by how the wider populace
responded to each leader’s death, where Wang’s death was received with what appears to
have been a quiet relief like that at the death of Mao, while Sima Guang’s was attended
by a spontaneous outpouring of grief, like that which reportedly followed the death of
Zhou En Lai.\footnote{243}

The policies of both factions followed fairly directly from each leader’s area of study.
Wang Anshi believed that in the \textit{Classics} were found solutions that were always
applicable. From his study of history and the problems confronted by the various
dynasties, Sima Guang had come to believe that the always-changing circumstances
required constantly renewed adaptation.\footnote{244} Wang’s view of the \textit{Classics} was that, “If one
writes it on wooden slips and it is good, then when it is applied to all people, it will
always be good…Under different circumstances it will also be good.”\footnote{245} By contrast,
Sima’s understanding of history had taught him that, “The sources or order and disorder
have the same structure”, and therefore flexibility was required in understanding the
situation and in taking action.\footnote{246} Each of these scholars followed one of the two paths
inherited from the Tang scholarship that provided the intellectual foundations for the
Song. The first, which Wang took up, was to reverse the decline of the culture and unify
the realm by compiling and synthesizing the correct cultural forms. The other was the
\textit{guwen} path following from Han Yu, which Sima Guang and the Yuanyou reformers took.
This meant establishing the independence of the \textit{shi} (the scholar bureaucrats) so that they
were capable of opposing the current of the times when the times were in error, and could
oppose unjust policies, in speaking for the common good.\footnote{247} The faction could look back
to the example of 986, when the Song was still being established. The shi then had joined
together to argue for civil interests against the expansion of the military, remonstrating
with the Emperor against new military campaigns to recover prefectures in the north
which had been lost to the Liao.248

b: Su Shi’s Opposition to Wang Anshi

The reasons for Su Shi’s opposition to the New Policies were complex—far too complex
for me to do them justice here. In his study of Su Shi, Ronald Egan focuses instead on
what was most distinctive in Su’s opposition—his criticism of the reforms as threatening
the “ordering principles” of the realm.249 What is distinctive in politics is not necessarily
what is most crucial—it may well be that what was shared and what united individuals
was more important. But I have chosen to follow Egan here, since, in looking at
calligraphy, what is valued is what is distinctive. These aspects of Su’s opposition seem
more likely then to shed light on his calligraphy and his aesthetic understanding. (Here, I
treat Huang Tingjian as subsidiary to Su, attendant on his position, rising in the
bureaucracy and being sent into exile as Su and the Yuanyou faction rose and fell.)

Su saw two crucial organs of the government being threatened. These were the Censorate,
through which policy was evaluated, criticized and rectified, and the Imperial
Examination system, through which the government recruited its bureaucrats and
refreshed its understanding of policy. If these were corrupted, then the government’s
ability to function with some sense of justice was gone—and the Mandate of Heaven
could be withdrawn. Behind Su’s criticisms loomed the example of the mythical Duke of
Zhou, who had believed that that the mandate of heaven had been passed from the Shang
to the Zhou people rather than to the Emperor, and more specifically to those who
advised the king and instructed him in virtue.250 Su’s view is characteristic of one stream
of the Northern Song literati—emerging from newly powerful local elites, many believed
that only they could comprehend the intricacies of the political realm, and should
therefore instruct the Emperor.251
To consider the examination system first, Su saw Wang Anshi as dangerous to learning. Wang believed that the disorder from which the Song had only recently emerged was caused by too much diversity of viewpoints. “The ancients unified morality and made customs the same [for all]”, he wrote. “How can difference of opinion be fully repressed?”252 The Classics provided correct and final teachings, which required submission to their wisdom. The education system was crucial to his reforms since it was primarily through that system that the shi could be unified in their beliefs. The Confucian Classics were still the object of study, but since there was so much divergence in how they were interpreted, texts guiding their interpretation had to be limited, controlled, and standardized. To pick a characteristic example, Wang Anshi wrote his Explanation of the Characters to provide a dictionary of sorts that provided the supposed historical roots for many characters, with instructions on how they should be interpreted. By the late 1070s, this was required reading for students. The marking and grading of the written exams also reinforced uniformity—divergent views were not rewarded.

Looking back at the Northern Song from the city of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, Wang seems to be addressing a situation created by the advent of printing. By the mid-eleventh century the Northern Song was inundated by printed books; according to some scholars the effect of printing is to promote a multitude of views and to create scepticism.253 For centuries, the officially sanctioned versions of classical texts had usually been studied through rubbings taken from a version carved in stone, made under government supervision. But this was being undercut by the sudden wide availability of variant editions and commentaries critical of the sponsored version. Textual errors, erroneous transcriptions of characters, and misleading interpretations were pointed out and became subjects of learned and heated dispute. The number of printed books expanded exponentially while the book-buying public grew correspondingly, and both threatened the ability for canonical interpretations to be imposed.254
Su Shi seems to have embraced the diversity of thought that printing brought about; he was clearly horrified by Wang’s repression of diversity. In the “Ten Thousand Character Memorial” written against the New Policies, Su wrote that “The learning of Mr. Wang is exactly like striking prints; they come out according to the block.”\textsuperscript{255} It is telling that Su compares Wang’s learning explicitly to the \textit{manufacture} of books, not to their composition. But this was no exaggeration of Wang’s views, as is obvious from the earlier quotation about the repression of different opinions. Even before coming to power, he’d written that “the words and actions of the sages are uniform; of course [our friends and teachers] will resemble each other.”\textsuperscript{256} To Su, Wang’s learning looked like a distortion of nature’s way. “Mr. Wang’s \textit{wen} is not necessarily bad... Mr. Wang would make all under heaven the same. The goodness of the earth is uniform in bringing things into being; it is not uniform in what it brings into being. It is only on barren, brackish soil that there are yellow reeds and white rushes as far as the eye can see.”\textsuperscript{257} Su’s own political credo appears in his commentary on the \textit{Book of Changes}, which was written in exile: “If people want only sameness and dislike difference, they will end up with disunion.”\textsuperscript{258}

From this distance, it’s hard not to see Wang’s program as a tyranny—though this is to project the West’s history onto it. But it seems difficult to imagine that Su, in the faction headed by the historian Sima Guang, did not see in Wang Anshi something of the despised first Qin Emperor. The great Han period historian Sima Qian wrote that the First Emperor had a stele on Langya Terrace inscribed with praise for the virtue of his dynasty. “All under Heaven are of one mind, single in will,” it read.\textsuperscript{259} Chao Yuezhi (1059-1129), a poet and friend of Huang Tingjian, wrote a response that expressed the vehemence of the opposition to Wang’s examination reforms, and explicitly makes the comparison to the First Emperor. “The Qin burned the Songs and Documents and buried the scholars [alive], intending to stupefy its people, and thought its method was a good one, But later ages came up with an even more effective method. A single interpretation was devised for the Songs and the Documents and passed on to all who studied. Scholars were honored or
humiliated according to their handling of this interpretation. Those who mastered it were elevated, in order to feed the flames of its popularity. For those in the political faction that supported it, fame and high rank became hereditary. Thus men of talent were made to be narrow and crude, and men of wisdom became inflexible and stupid.”

Wang’s policies appear even more oppressive in his treatment of the Censorate. Traditionally, the role of the censors was to remonstrate with the Emperor and his advisors over policy. If policies were failing, memorials, letters, and even spoken criticisms (“complaints borne upon the wind”) could be lodged with the Censorate, which would take these to the ear of the Emperor himself so that policies could be adjusted. Su’s “Ten Thousand Word Memorial” is based on the social memory of a well-functioning Censorate. “I remember hearing my elders say when I was young that what the censors said usually accorded with public opinion throughout the empire. What public opinion favored the censors also favored, and what public opinion attacked the censors also attacked.”

In this way, the Mandate of Heaven might respond to the suffering of the people and avoid another period of social disorder. But Wang had gutted the Censorate, believing that unity at court was necessary to allow his policies to be carried out. Seventeen censors were replaced by his loyalists, as well as four policy critics, and three proclamation writers. These replacement figures could be counted on to block rather than relay criticism. Su’s “Memorial” compared the current situation with its gutted Censorate to the courage of those who served in the past. “From Qin to Han times through the Five Dynasties several hundred censors lost their lives because they spoke out against an imperial policy. However, from the Jianlong reign period until today not a single censor has been incriminated for speaking out.”

A few more examples will serve to give the flavour of that period, and Su’s involvement in it. A few years after Su wrote his Memorial, a young Zheng Xia (1049-1119), a judicial inspector in Guangzhou, saw the disastrous consequences of the New Policies for the common people of the region. Having already seen how ineffectual it was to send a
memorial to be intercepted by Wang’s loyalists, Zheng submitted a request for an audience with the emperor, and accompanied it with a gift, a painting of refugees filling the roads and government officials brutalizing merchants who had defaulted on the newly implemented trading fees. The request was intercepted and rejected. Zheng then labelled the painting as a “confidential and urgent” message and sent it by mounted courier. In this way, it found the emperor at last. The Emperor Shenzong then questioned Wang Anshi about the situation in Guangzhou. As a result Shenzong authorized reductions in the trading fees, ordered the army to distribute grain to alleviate the famine, and cancelled the Green Sprouts Policy of agricultural loans which were impoverishing many farmers. This led to Wang’s resignation from the government that same year, 1074. In response to Wang’s efforts on behalf of the people, two of his ministers, Lu Huiqing and Deng Guan, brought charges against Zheng for having improperly gained access to the Court, a breach of protocol for which he was incarcerated and threatened with execution.264

Five years later Su was arrested for continuing his criticism of Wang’s New Policies, under charges that could result in the death penalty, which were laid by the censor He Dazheng (fl. 1079). Much of the evidence against him was taken from his poetry.

Lament of the Farm Wife of Wu

We sold the ox to pay for taxes, broke up the roof for kindling:
we’ll get by for a time, but what of next year’s hunger?
Officials demand cash now—they won’t take grain;
the long northwest border tempts invaders.
Wise men fill the court—why do things get worse?
I’d be better off a bride to the River Lord.265

(In ancient times, each year a young woman would be sacrificed to the River Lord of the Yellow River. She was floated downstream on a bed, which would capsize, drowning her.) Su had for years written of the suffering resulting from Wang’s policies. Interrogated at length about the meanings of poems and prose pieces—some of which were criticisms,
but many of which had nothing to do with politics—and repeatedly beaten, Su eventually confessed. Some of the interpretations put upon his poems were so patently absurd that Shenzong himself remarked, “How can you read poetry like that? He was just describing junipers. It has nothing to do with me.”266 I wonder if Shenzong was not trying to soften the possible punishment.

“Men of letters have extraordinary destinies, and poets are particularly ill-fated”, said Bai Juyi.267 “Poetry’s duty to criticize is lost,” Ban Gu (32-92) wrote a millenium before the Song.268 Wang Anshi had dropped the study and writing of poetry from the imperial exams; it was one more way in which a uniformity of views could be enforced. In Su’s case, the “Poetry Trial at the Raven Terrace,” printing was central to the issue. Ronald Egan argues for example that “Book printing was a key part of this case and the court’s decision to prosecute Su Shi. It comes up in the indictment memorial against him by He Dazheng who tied the heinousness of Su Shi’s offense directly to how widespread his writings are among the populace now that they exist in printed editions.”269

c: The Political Role of Yan Zhenqing’s Calligraphy

No earlier calligrapher was more central to the Yuanyou circle’s understanding of the art than Yan Zhenqing (709-785), and it was through their efforts that Yan, the Tang dynasty statesman, became known as a great calligrapher.270 While he lived, the court calligraphers, Yu Shinan, Ouyang Xun, and Chu Suiliang all were more celebrated; so too were Zhang Xu and Huaisu, the wild cursive “performance calligraphers” (as Sturman calls them.) But in the Yuanyou circle he was especially admired, and it is because of their reception of his work that Yan is to this day often seen as second only to Wang Xizhi in calligraphy. Ouyang Xiu played a major role in this reevaluation, devoting half of his collection of rubbings to Yan’s writing.

His work became crucial for reasons that were simultaneously aesthetic and political. Like Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi, and virtually all of their circle, Yan was a member of the shi
rather than the aristocratic military clan, having taken the imperial exams in 734. He quickly rose through the bureaucratic ranks, and became a censor—something which must have mattered to Su Shi, given his criticism of the Song censorate. It was during the An Lushan rebellion, in his post as commandery governor at Pingyuan, that Yan emerged as a major figure. In the first months of the revolt, An Lushan took most of the north-eastern provinces of China, sweeping down to capture Luoyang, the Eastern Capital. Hebei (the northern province which surrounds Beijing) and the nearby Shandong Peninsula collapsed quickly, as one after another the local Tang officials swore obedience to An Lushan. It is said that hearing this, the Emperor Xuanzong cried out, “In all twenty-four commanderies of Hebei is there not one loyal official?” But Yan in fact had remained loyal and led the resistance to the rebel armies from Hebei and Shandong. Later, when the main Tang army defending Chang’an was destroyed, Yan and other loyalists in Hebei provided virtually the sole active military resistance, as the remnants of the Tang court and main army retreated south from Chang’an across the mountains into Sichuan province. After the restoration of the Tang court in Chang’an, as a victim of more court intrigue, Yan was sent at seventy-six (!) on a mission from which those at court believed he would not return. He was sent to confront yet another rebel, Li Xilie, who was intent on founding a new dynasty. Yan was taken prisoner. When eventually asked for his knowledge of the rites for ascending the throne, he refused, saying “I am an old man now, but once I did know state ritual. Now all I can remember is the ritual for a feudal lord’s audience of submission to the emperor.” He was hung for his refusal, having been sent to his death by the Tang court to which he had remained loyal.

To the Yuanyou reformers, Yan’s upright character was apparent in his almost rigidly upright standard script. The calligraphy is quite striking, seeming to have dispensed with every trace of elegance. This would have provided the guwen adherents with a calligraphic model with which to counter the flattering or “slavish” writing promoted by the court, which they saw as one with ornate parallel prose and the elaborate Xikun style of poetry. Yan’s bluntness of style was also a type of writing that functioned well when
carved in stone. Mi Fu believed that only the study of works in brush and ink was worthwhile, since “Stone engravings preserve only a rough impression [of the original brushwork].” This is usually correct: most calligraphy, because it is written in ink, relies on the subtle lifts and turnings of the brush. Imitated in stone, at times it can look almost foolish. But when I viewed Yan’s calligraphy at the Forest of Stele in Xi’an, it struck me that Yan’s writing was so well adapted to being carved that he may have adjusted his writing to suit being preserved in stone.

In his study of the texts carved into the sides of sacred mountains, Robert Harrist Jr. notes that there were two different traditions of carving into stone. One came from the south and attempted to imitate the brush: “the carver’s chisel was placed in the service of the brush, transcribing…the minute inflections generated by the motions of the calligrapher’s wrist and fingers.” The other, which derived from Han, Wei, and Jin period stele, displays “visual effects generated by the chisel—squared off dots and sharply defined “heads” of strokes—rather than those easily generated by the brush.” This same squared off, chiseled rectilinearity marks Yan’s style, except when he wrote in cursive script, and this drew Mi Fu’s criticism for too much “kicking and flicking.” “One cannot learn from stone engravings” said Mi, but Yan’s calligraphy appears to have learned from just that source. I believe that this rectilinearity, his kicking and flicking, show both the adaptation of his writing to stone carving, and the influence of the stele on his writing.

Here too, Yan’s calligraphy may have offered an alternative. If it was in the hands of Wang Xizhi that calligraphy really attained the status of an art, it attained this status through writings that were in the form of personal letters, with the result that the aesthetic experience of calligraphy in the Wang tradition was founded in a sense of intimacy. By contrast, what was emphasized in Yan’s calligraphy was the taking of a public stance—and the guwen adherents insisted that the shi must take up public roles. Ouyang Xiu had explicitly complained that the Wang style was inappropriate for the writing of state documents. Together with the adaptation of his writing style for use in stone stele, what
Yan’s calligraphy offered was a mode of public address or “broadcasting” that was something very different from the private address of Wang’s writing that the court encouraged, and which Ouyang had dismissed as “slavish writing.”

Yan’s style could be deployed for political reasons, and the contents of a text understood through the fact of it being written in his style. When Su Shi once transcribed Ouyang’s “Record of Enjoying Rich Harvests Pavilion”—in which Ouyang had written of the good conditions and contentment enjoyed by the people of Chuzhou when he was governor there—Su wrote out Ouyang’s text in the style of Yan’s *Lidui Record of Mr. Xianyu.*

The *Lidui Record* recounts the good governance of Yan’s friend, Xianyu Zhongtong, a national-level official who once served as a local governor, much like Ouyang. But Ouyang had been accused of factionalism, and exiled. In using Yan’s style, the implication was that like the loyal Yan, Ouyang too had been peerlessly loyal, and that like Xianyu, the people had prospered under Ouyang’s governance. Su’s own calligraphy can also be read in this light, and thinking of Su’s repeated exiles, these resonances carried the implication that his own uncompromised loyalty had been poorly treated, while under his governance the people of Hangzhou had prospered.

d: *The Letter on the Controversy Over Seating Protocol*

The best example of the political and aesthetic use of Yan’s calligraphy is his *Letter on the Controversy Over the Seating Protocol*, which seems to have been the single most discussed piece of calligraphy in the Northern Song. A beautiful piece of writing, nonetheless it seems implausible that its importance could have been the result of the writing style alone. The matter of the letter is the issue of rank in Tang society. There were nine ranks, with each rank divided into civil and military, and with each rank having different legal rights and obligations. At this point in China’s history, each rank of military officials followed after the corresponding rank of civil officials. A certain general, who had also been a loyalist during the rebellion, was accused by Yan of breaching proper court etiquette by seating a military official of the third rank with the
civil officials of Rank Two. This act egregiously breached protocol since a member of the Third Rank was seated with those of the Second. Worse, it seated a member of the military among the civilian ranks, and reversed the order that always placed the civilian before military.\textsuperscript{281}

If the \textit{Letter} mattered to the Yuanyou circle, was this breach of protocol three hundred years ago really the issue? It seems much more likely that it was what followed from the \textit{Letter}. No answer to Yan’s charge is recorded, but approximately a year later, the Chancellor, Yuan Zai (d. 777) began a policy which required that all memorials must first be reviewed by his office. This protected the Emperor from all written criticism of the policies instituted by his ministers. Yan replied with a memorial demanding that all written documents presented at the court should be published—and was promptly exiled.\textsuperscript{282} The comparison to Wang Anshi’s gutting of the Censorate is obvious.

Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, and Mi Fu all had studied ink rubbings from a stone stele of the \textit{Letter}; Su Shi himself made several rubbings from the stele, and Huang Tingjian copied it. Su Shi made his own free copy of the letter; it looks nothing like Yan’s writing, which appears, as McNair describes it, “quite lacking in dramatic visual effects.”\textsuperscript{283} By contrast, Su’s free copy—a gorgeous piece of calligraphy—is exuberant and pictorially dramatic. In McNair’s view, the style of Su’s copy is based on the most unrestrained style Yan ever showed—his \textit{Poem to General Pei}. (If indeed the \textit{Poem to General Pei} is actually Yan’s calligraphy.) McNair describes the \textit{Letter} as being in “exemplary pingdan style” and the \textit{General Pei} style as “dubious, exciting”: there is an enormous contradiction then between the \textit{Letter} and Su’s copy. In Yan’s \textit{Letter} the brush is held upright, and the writing is skeletal, all bone. Su’s hand by contrast is strikingly slanted even by his usual standards, dramatic, full of flair, and often shows more flesh than bone.

In using the \textit{General Pei} style, Su Shi was overthrowing the model style, and with it the binding of the aesthetic realm to the ethical realm that Confucian thought had
accomplished. It is as though Yan’s uprightness was being left behind even while it was extolled. The text that most exemplified Confucian rectitude was copied in the General Pei style, a style that, as McNair writes, most conveys “individualism and stylistic innovation.”

As his mentor, Ouyang Xiu had, Su Shi seemed to use Yan’s rectitude as a cover for what now appears to be a type of aesthetic rebellion: a place for the proliferating of individual sensibilities through calligraphy. McNair comments on the generational difference between Ouyang Xiu and Su, writing that “Where Ouyang seemed often to speak programmatically for the Qingli reformers, Su Shi expressed his emotions more as an individual.”

This new emphasis on the individual and on a visibly emotional calligraphy is nowhere clearer than in the Cold Food Festival scroll—especially when compared with the Tang predecessors who had been held up as models: Ouyang Xun, Chu Sui-Liang, and Yu Shinan.

McNair’s view is that “Su Shi’s relationship to the style of Yan Zhenqing reveals that the most important symbol of political identification was not the faithful reproduction of the ideal style, but the expression of affiliation in one’s critical writings with the accepted patriarchs of one’s political group.”

I find myself growing somewhat doubtful about this, since Ouyang and his circle had complained about so much slavish writing, meaning writing that imitated Wang Xizhi. Mi Fu complained about the same cultural landscape of imitations:

At the beginning of our dynasty all the lords and ministers, following the predilections of the emperor studied Zhong You and Wang Xizhi. Then Li Zonge dominated the literary scene for quite some time, and consequently scholars began to study his style of calligraphy, which was fat, squat, and awkward. All cast in with his likes, using his style of calligraphy for the writing of examination papers. From this time on the only interest was in whatever calligraphy was popular at the moment. Long Song Shou became vice grand councillor and the court all studied his style…Once Cai Xiang was enfeoffed all the scholars studied him, and when Wang Anshi was made minister everybody then
studied his style. From this point on no one spoke of the methods of antiquity\textsuperscript{287}.

Obviously the faithful reproduction of an ideal style did count for something in the factional struggles at court, on the imperial exams, and within the bureaucracy. For Su Shi and Huang Tingjian, the issue must have been to embody, in each brushmark, the guwen stress on renewal and diversity that was at the same time, a way of being rooted in antiquity. Su Shi wrote of Yan’s writing that “Yan Lugong’s [Yan Zhenqing] calligraphy is robust, elegant, and entirely his own. All at once it transformed all earlier models.” That perhaps was the key, since transmission meant transformation, not imitation.\textsuperscript{288} I believe that Su saw a model in the striking difference of Yan’s calligraphy from the Wang tradition, a way of proceeding that gave both him and Huang permission to differ, often radically, from the prescribed models—so long as their writing was rooted in the study of other ancient models. Only in this way could the tradition once more be made vital. As unique and beautiful as both Su’s and Huang’s calligraphy was, it was unique and beautiful (or “resonant” in the terms of the period) not only as an individual accomplishment, but in its capacity to save “this culture of ours”, that is, to preserve and transmit the past.

9. Calligraphy and the Pingdan Ideal

a: The Bland and the Flavourless

The Dao is insipid and flavorless:
it cannot be perceived,
it cannot be heard,
but it is inexhaustible\textsuperscript{289}

-Dao De Jing

I have been struggling to understand the meaning of pingdan, and still it eludes me, though it is possible that this illusiveness is a glimpse of it. “You meet it by not trying
deeply. It thins to nothing if you approach”, was the poet Sikong Tu’s (837-908) understanding.290

The literati aesthetic is often equated with the pingdan aesthetic. I have some doubts that the two can be completely equated; perhaps Peter Sturman’s idea that pingdan is “a foundation block” of literati art might be a better way of looking at it. In any case, there is little doubt that the pingdan ideal was central to the Northern Song. Sturman devotes an entire chapter of his book on Mi Fu to it, not simply because Mi Fu’s calligraphy emerged from that matrix of values, nor even because Mi Fu himself played a role in establishing it as something fundamental for the literati, but because, as Sturman says, “no other aesthetic term in China may be quite as misleading or misunderstood.”291 To understand the aesthetic requires understanding the pingdan, even though the two may not be synonymous.

The term itself covers a wide semantic area. It has been translated variously as “the even and the light;”292 “even and bland;”293 “calm and easy;”294 “bland” or “flavourless;”295 “blandness;”296 “straightforward and bland;”297 “placid and plain;”298 and “plain-tranquility.”299 Whatever it means, pingdan must refer us to this overlapping region of what appear as related but still quite distinct areas of meaning; it must occur in the intersection of the bland, even, flavourless, tranquil, and plain.300

If this suggests that pingdan is comparable to our sense of “understatement,” then my introduction to it has been misleading. The semantic area is so much larger and more subtle, and seems to twine together several distinct threads of meaning. It finds value in qualities which in our cultural understanding are simply flaws. In English-speaking culture, ”flavourless” and “bland” are always qualities to be avoided, but here they are prized. The roots of the sensibility lie in the Dao De Jing and the Zhuangzi. In the former, the Dao is described as flavorless, calm, bland, silent, and inactive301. Zhuangzi wrote, “Let your mind wander in simplicity [dan, blandness], blend your spirit with the vastness,
follow along with things the way they are.” If the sensibility is rooted in Daoist quietism, by the Northern Song it had long since been assimilated by the Confucian tradition. In an essay on character, Liu Shao (220?-280?) wrote, “In a man’s character, it is balance and harmony that are most prized. A character which is balanced and harmonious must be even, bland, and flavourless…Such a man is able to develop in equal measure the five virtues and adapt himself flexibly to the situation. For this reason, in observing a man and judging his character, one must first look for the ‘even and the ‘bland’.” Once calligraphy was understood as a revelation of the writer’s character, this emphasis on the even and the bland must have been transferred to the writing itself.

Many commentators draw parallels between pingdan and the ancient-style prose (guwen) movement in literature, which is helpful in trying to grasp the ungraspable pingdan. The guwen champion was Han Yu (768-824), the great Tang writer of prose; it developed in opposition to the ornate and contrived style of the day, the parallel prose emphasized in the Imperial exams. In Han Yu’s view, outward style had come to eclipse meaningful content; his demand was that writers should look to the Classics and antiquity for better models that utilized direct and unvarnished modes. Tu-ku Chi (725-777), who influenced Han Yu, wrote of the ornate parallel prose that had become so dominant that, “The wen was not adequate to the language. The language was not adequate to the will. It was like using a magnolia petal as a boat, kingfisher feathers as oars.”

In the Northern Song, Han Yu’s complaint and the guwen ideal had become crucial to the literati, especially those of Ouyang Xiu’s circle. Su Shi in particular owed his success to the movement. When Ouyang Xiu was appointed chief examiner in 1057, he required ancient style prose in answering questions dealing with the Classics. The result was that Su and his brother Su Che did remarkably well, becoming celebrated among the intellectuals for their guwen acuity.
If *guwen* and *pingdan* are understood as similar cultural gestures, then this could be helpful since the *guwen* style and its set of values seem possible to grasp. The writing must follow from a real immersion in historical models, not merely a nod to the past, and it must involve a plain and direct style. But *pingdan* seems more elusive than this; it summons up a range of qualities rather than a specific relation to the past. I often imagine that I recognize it in the poetry of Mei Yaochen (1002-1060), especially in the sense of being plain or flavourless. It seems much more difficult to grasp in calligraphy or in the larger visual and material culture of the Northern Song, and this may have something to do with the fact that these terms were first used in the context of literature. I once wrote Peter Sturman to ask whether it was possible to see Northern Song *ding* ware as *pingdan*, given its whiteness and its relative lack of decorative detail, together with a certain quietness in how this lack was declared. His answer was that outside of literature, the meaning of *pingdan* remains uncertain. “The plainness of many Song ceramics can perhaps be related to a general aesthetic of understatement that in turn might suggest ‘pingdan.’ The problem, however, is that there is no real definition of pingdan as it relates to the visual arts, only what people make of it (especially later), and this is far from the original philosophical meanings.”

Zhang Yanyuan (ca. 815-ca.877) had said in *Famous Paintings Through History* that “Only when you realize that there are two styles of painting, the sparse and the dense, may you join in discussions about painting.” In studying the Beyuan Monastery, Eugene Wang noticed that the visual contrast between the tableaux located there corresponded to Zhang’s opposition between the dense (*mi*) and the spare (*shu*). Wang’s point is that “since medieval times, artistic taste in China has increasingly gravitated towards the ‘sparse’ (*shu*) style. The ‘sparse’ is often considered a staple of good taste that operates by way of denial of easy gratification, restraint as opposed to excess, understatement as opposed to overblown hyperbole.”
The contrast between the sparse and the dense appears in other realms as well. In tomb architecture, Dieter Kuhn sees a marked difference in visual culture between the Tang and Song: in the Song, it became visibly less elaborate and embodied notions of economy, modesty and simplicity, drawing explicitly on the model of Zhou dynasty tombs.\textsuperscript{310} The tombs return to ancient models in \textit{guwen} fashion, and turn away from the ornate elaboration of elements favoured by the Tang aristocratic families. Interestingly, the majority of the occupants of the tombs were scholar-officials rather than aristocrats. Perhaps this can be understood as parallel to Han Yu’s turning away from the ornate prose style of the Tang. Kuhn himself does not explicitly use the term \textit{pingdan} in this context, though he does suggest that this change in architecture can be seen as the victory of the cultural and political ideas of the scholar-official class. But Sturman’s point still stands—that this type of material understatement doesn’t appear to spring from the same philosophical roots. Perhaps the issue is that a work of literature is much more closely tied to philosophical thought simply because the medium of philosophy is language.

Calligraphy must surely be closer to literature than tomb architecture, so it stands to reason that the \textit{pingdan} should be easier to understand in the context of calligraphy. Nonetheless, it continues to elude me. To take one example, Su Shi explicitly saw his own late calligraphy as \textit{pingdan}, writing to his nephew that “all you see is that your great uncle’s [Su Shi] writing is pingdan.” But how could Su’s \textit{Cold Food} scroll ever be seen as “even and bland”, “light”, or “flavourless”? \textit{Haofang} (bold, untrammelled) seems a much better way of characterizing it.\textsuperscript{311} Even Su Shi’s own words befuddle me at this point.

When it comes to writing, a youth should work at making his style lofty and daring, so that the feeling is rich and dazzling. The older one gets, the more mature one becomes, and then one creates pingdan. Actually, it is not pingdan, but rather the culminating stage of ‘dazzle and richness.’ Today, all that you see is that your great uncle’s writing is pingdan, so you straightaway study this style. Why don’t you have a look at my writings when I was preparing for the
examinations? With its highs and lows, dips and turns, it is just like the ungraspable dragon. This is what you should study. With calligraphy it is also like this.\textsuperscript{312}

This passage seems to help, and then does not. Su seems to be saying that pingdan results from maturity, that as one ages and can discard what once dazzled, the result will be the even and bland. I can picture this as a certain plainness or flavourlessness, an even tranquility whose surface is never disturbed. Yet his \textit{Cold Food} scroll seems closer to the ungraspable dragon.

Perhaps, once again, Peter Sturman is right. “Although attitudes expressed by Ouyang Xiu and others concerning prose and poetry are useful and often relevant to understanding changes taking place in the sister art of calligraphy, differences in the traditions and practices if these arts should caution against attempts to press the parallels too specifically.”\textsuperscript{313} Yet it seems that Su Shi is arguing the opposite in saying, “Why don’t you have a look at my writings when I was preparing for the examinations?…With calligraphy it is also like this.”

\textbf{b: Pingdan and Naturalness}

I do not know whether your ambition is to learn from contemporaries and try to surpass them, or to aspire to the reach the standard of the ancients. If the former is the case, you are sure to succeed; but you can not expect quick results if you want to reach the standard of the ancients, nor must you be obsessed with the desire for gain.\textsuperscript{314}

-Han Yu

For the Northern Song literati of the \textit{guwen} movement, the genuine was something crucial. In calligraphy it functioned as an ideal in opposition to what Ouyang Xiu had seen as “slavish writing”, the sort that followed from the court endorsement of Wang
Xizhi’s style. Since there was every reason to take up that style in order to advance one’s career, it threatened to destroy the idea that calligraphy was—or should be—a demonstration of the writer’s character. To repeat an important passage from Su Shi, “The mean-minded men of the world may write their characters skillfully, but in the end the spirit and feeling of their calligraphy has a fawning and obsequious manner.”\(^{315}\) The opposite of both guwen and pingdan was not simply the ornate but that which strove for personal advancement—since this was in itself a disruption of the harmony that must prevail between heaven and earth, calligraphy being a form of comportment. Perhaps it was no accident that Su Shi’s and Huang Tingjian’s greatest works—the Cold Food scroll and the Scroll for Zhang Datong—both were written in exile. It may be that they came to be understood as pingdan because they were written late in life and in exile—and so they were seen to display both the casting off of youthful excesses and to be untainted by any desire for personal advancement. Or the reverse may be the case, that they were pingdan because they were written by the type of person who would find themselves both respected and exiled.

But this emphasis on genuineness leads to a problem like that which arises from the Ch’an Buddhist emphasis on one’s “original nature.” Calligraphy is clearly a practice requiring years of study. Can one practice genuineness? Or do all the years of study slowly accrete and cover one’s true or original nature? Huang Tingjian’s late style was assiduously created over decades of study; Mi Fu was the period’s great student of calligraphy. Evaluating the writing of either calligrapher necessarily entails addressing this issue.

The Ming calligrapher, painter, and theorist Dong Qichang (1555-1636) addressed this in Mi Fu’s case. “I find fault with his lack of ‘blandness.’ Blandness is carried forward by natural structure. It is not something that can be learned. This is what the sutras refer to as knowledge attained from no teacher.”\(^{316}\) Sturman goes on to explain regarding “natural structure” that, “What it literally means is the skeletal structure with which one is born
and, by inference, one’s basic personality and character.” According to the learned Ming calligrapher then, Mi Fu’s work was not pingdan because his work showed so much evidence of learned behaviour, and this disrupts the quiet displaying of one’s given character.

This much I do understand. Of Mi Fu’s work, what I admire most is his Poems Written on a Gift of Szechuan Silk, written in 1088 when he was thirty-seven. The calligraphy is sometimes criticized for attempting to integrate too many models in one work, as Sturman admits: “Sudden morphological shifts between styles are still discernible if one looks closely enough.” Yet the work is, in some quite apparent way, gorgeous—which I suppose would disqualify it from being pingdan. I wonder whether Mi Fu himself might have disqualified it. “With my old age my writing has become even more remarkable. [Whenever I come across] a work of my youth I immediately try and make a trade—some new characters for the old letter. Often, however, people will not allow it. They do not realize that my old-age writing, which lacks those beautiful, graceful airs, is natural. People say that one’s old age calligraphy has bone structure and does not convey refinement and beauty, but few are capable of recognizing the spontaneous and natural.”

Perhaps I admire the Szechuan Silk calligraphy because I am one of those incapable of recognizing the spontaneous and the natural. Mi’s scroll does not lack those beautiful, graceful airs; it has a bit too much “flesh” to properly display the “bone structure” that Mi later attained. There is a straining after cultural richness, too much of an attempt to synthesize whole chunks of the tradition in a single work, and therefore it cannot be pingdan. But if pingdan requires manifesting one’s basic character, then perhaps it should be rightly be considered pingdan because it shows Mi Fu’s straining after greatness, his yearning to sum up the whole of the tradition. But this is too cute a line of reasoning. Clearly, pingdan requires something spare, a pruning away of everything inessential until what remains is bone, not flesh.
I often find Peter Sturman to be the most immediately useful commentator on this sensibility in calligraphy; his provisional conclusion is that it is less a style than an attribute. Taking it as style, he argues, requires a certain fixity of definition—the “even and light” would refer us to Jin style writing such as Wang Xizhi’s. But as an attribute, pingdan, like the Dao, evades definition. As an attribute, it manifests itself less in the visible style of one’s writing than in what is antecedent to style, a mentality more fundamental than appearances. From this perspective, as Sturman says, “pingdan becomes practically interchangeable with the concept of naturalness: what emerges without reflection from a state of equilibrium.” What is natural in the writer will emerge without intention, flowing from a state of balanced rest: Huang Tingjian often reserves his praise for writings which are “examples of not resorting to the marking lines and chopping axes and yet fitting naturally.”

c: Su Shi and “No-Mind”

Su Shi’s answer was the Buddhist doctrine of wuxin (no-mind): “In calligraphy it is when you have no intent to produce excellent work that it turns out to be excellent.” His clearest explanation for the necessity of having no-mind is the inscription written for the sculpture of the thousand-armed Guanyin (who had an eye in each hand) in the Pavilion of Great Compassion at Chengdu.

If I tell someone to wield an axe with his left hand and hold a chisel in his right, use his eyes to count geese in flight and his ears to keep track of a beating drum, and nod his head to a person beside him and use his feet to climb a ladder, no matter how intelligent he was he would leave something undone. So how could a thousand arms each wield a different implement, and a thousand eyes each watch a different object? But when I sit at leisure and remain quiet, my mind and thoughts grow still and silent: everything appears as clearly to me as in a large bright mirror. People, ghosts, birds, and beasts are arrayed before me; sights,
sounds, smells, and flavors come in contact with my person. Although my mind does not arise, there is nothing it does not receive\textsuperscript{323}.

In the poem that follows, Su continues:

The bodhisattva has a thousand arms and eyes,  
Yet it is like having but one.  
When things arrive, the mind meets them;  
The Bodhisattva never engages in thinking…

If there were still a mind,  
A thousand arms would mean a thousand minds.  
If a single person had a thousand minds,  
They would fight with each other inside him.  
What time would he have to respond to things?  
But when a thousand arms have no single mind,  
Every arm attains its proper place.\textsuperscript{324}

The goal then was not to strive, but simply to respond; not to fill one’s head with learning, but instead to learn and forget; to have no thought and no goal, only responsiveness to the changing nature of things as they appear. I have found no better way to explain the freshness of Su Shi’s writing, which often looks, not dry or bland, but like new blossoms. Is this pingdan then—one’s original nature appearing without intention?

d: “It thins to nothing”

But the pingdan cannot include the ingratiating, the seductive. It offers instead the qualities of being “dry” or initially “flavourless.” Ouyang Xiu and Mei Yaochen made this aspect of the aesthetic explicit in a pair of poems which matched rhymes.
Of late, his poems have taken a certain ancient astringency, 
Harsh and hard to chew; 
It is, at first, like eating olives, 
Whose flavor grows more pronounced with time. 325

-Ouyang Xiu

I compose my verses in keeping with my basic nature, 
Attempting to attain the plain and bland. 
My words are harsh; neither rounded nor softened, 
And sting the mouth even more than water chestnuts or lotus seeds 326.

-Mei Yaochen

I can see this asperity, or I believe I can, in Huang Tingjian’s Zhang Datong scroll. But Su Shi’s Cold Food scroll, or his free copy of Yan Zhenqing’s Letter on the Controversy Over the Seating Protocol, seem anything but dry and hard to chew. It has occurred to me that Su’s assessment of the poetry of Du Fu and Li Bai could be taken as his own self-assessment, displaced. “By the brilliance of their talent, they surpass all other generations…But at the same time, that air of having risen slightly above the world of dust, which we find in the poetry of the Wei and Jin, is ever so slightly lost.” 327 The brilliance of these poets still mires them in the dusty world; the most accomplished poetry, then, is tarnished by its being accomplished. Accomplishment binds it to the world. Instead, the bland, the artless, the less accomplished, by virtue of this slight disconnection, rises above the world of dust. Su Shi must have been thinking of Tao Qian when he made his comment; there was no poet he admired more. 328 Tao’s poetry was noted for its apparent artlessness: Wendy Swartz comments that “The lack of craft in Tao’s farmstead poems blatantly opposed contemporary aesthetic taste [in the Jin], which prized artful refinement.” By the Song this quality was understood as evidence of his poetry as ziran, which is “natural or spontaneous” in Swartz’s translation. 329
One last point about pingdan follows from this issue of detachment. According to Jullien, “This blandness, as experienced in things, corresponds to man’s capacity for inner detachment. That same Chinese word—dan—signifies both, without distinguishing between subject and object, invites reflection.” Wang Guowei (1877-1927), a critic during the Qing, found this same structure in Tao Qian, whose poetry Su Shi held in such esteem. In Tao’s “On Drinking Wine, No. 5,” a much-discussed couplet writes of catching a glimpse of distant mountains while picking chrysanthemums. In it, Wang Guowei believed he saw a momentarily selfless state, one in which—and here I am relying on Wendy Swartz—wu (object) and wo (self) can no longer be distinguished. Perhaps this is the heart of the matter, that in the pingdan ideal, the distinction between subject and object is overcome, or is felt as possible to overcome, so that it is impossible to know whether the qualities experienced are the properties of the object in the world or the subjectivity of the perceiver.

Perhaps pingdan involves everything mentioned above. As a very provisional conclusion, I might propose that the core of the aesthetic understanding is found in the Dao De Jing in the injunction to “manifest simplicity, embrace the genuine.” But I’m still chasing smoke. It seems easier to say what pingdan is not than what it is, and for every definition of it, there seem to be works taken as examples of it in which I cannot grasp that quality. Both Sturman and François Jullien see this as the nature of that ideal. “Pingdan by definition defies any such characterization. Like the Dao, it is literally empty, black, and formless”, says Sturman. Jullien writes of “this quality of blandness, whose sole characteristic is to elude characterization.” If so, then chasing smoke is recognizing the pingdan. “You meet it by not trying deeply./It thins to nothing if you approach”, wrote Sikong Tu (837-908). Yet this doesn’t reassure me about my own capacity to recognize it.
10. Calligraphy and Belatedness

a: A Ruined Tradition

This is the only example I have of Chuntuo’s calligraphy. His output as a calligrapher cannot have been limited to this one piece. It is just that the others had the misfortune of being lost or destroyed. If I did not by chance acquire and record this piece, his work would never again be seen in the world. How could they ever be fully enumerated, such gentlemen as this man, who were outstanding in their time for their exceptional learning but through misfortune did not have their names transmitted to posterity.\(^{336}\)

-Ouyang Xiu

China is routinely seen as a unitary culture that has maintained itself over millennia. The argument is also made that China’s history is more often one of upheaval than stability, with periods of stability punctuating long and frequent periods of chaos. The Northern Song looked back to the glories of the Tang across a history torn up by two such eruptions. The first was the An Lushan rebellion, named after the general who rose against the mandate of heaven in 755. His death in 757 did not mean an end to war and disorder. The catastrophe could be said to have ended officially in 763 with an amnesty granted to rebel generals, but with new rebel leaders and warlords taking advantage of Tang weakness until 820 or so. The Tang, terribly weakened, never really recovered its control of the empire. A measure of the disorder is that fully two thirds of persons listed on the census rolls before the rebellion disappeared from them.\(^{337}\) The poetry of Du Fu is treasured in part because it survives as a record of the suffering of those who survived the chaos. “No one these days to work the millet fields, wars and uprisings that never end,” he wrote. “Ever since Tianbao [in 769], silence and desolation, fields and sheds mere masses of pigweed and bramble. My village, a hundred households or more, in these troubled times scattered east and west, not a word from those still living, the dead all gone to dust and mire.”\(^{338}\) The Tang eventually reconstituted itself, but greatly weakened,
having lost large chunks of its territory, and survived another century before finally collapsing. “The state is ruined, mountains and river survive,” reads Du Fu’s great poem.

What followed was the period known as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-979), which may have been even more devastating. The north was ruled by five different dynasties in quick succession, each overthrown in its turn, while the south was divided into several warring kingdoms. The social upheaval was especially widespread in the North, where virtually continuous warfare resulted in the collapse of the irrigation system, the silting up of canals, the failure and sabotage of dams, and devastating floods. These created widespread famine, which together with the ongoing violence, caused enormous numbers to flee as refugees to the south. Where most of China’s population had been in the north along the Yellow River, it now shifted to the south along the Yangtze. The period now routinely appears as one of the most fearful eruptions of social disorder following from the breakdown of the state.

If China is often seen as a unitary culture, the veneration of the past is also seen as in some way fundamentally “Chinese”. But Ouyang’s antiquarianism was the sign of something new. Pierre Ryckman argues that this antiquarianism in a large sense—the desire to preserve and venerate the material past—only began to emerge after An Lushan, and that it only become entrenched as an enduring cultural attitude during the Song. In Ryckman’s view this relation to the past resulted from a situation so dire and unusual that it constituted a “spiritual crisis” requiring the redefining of Chinese cultural identity. “The Song empire was a menaced world, a mutilated empire.” The vast empire of the Tang had shrunk precipitously; its “barbarian” enemies had become literate and developed political institutions of some genuine sophistication. This meant that the military threat now was accompanied by a cultural one: the Chinese faith in their own cultural superiority was profoundly disturbed. “From the 11th century, the Chinese faith in the universality of their world-order seems to have been deeply shaken by the permanent politico-military crisis resulting from the foreign menace, and it is in this
particular context that, for the first time in Chinese history, a massive cultural escape took place backwards in time: Chinese intellectuals effected a retreat into their glorious antiquity and undertook a systematic investigation of the splendours of their past.”

If the literati attempted to retreat into China’s past, from the newly re-established stability of the Song, they looked back at the heights of Tang culture across a historical divide which threatened the continuity of the cultural tradition. A famous letter, written in 1025 to the Dowager Empress and the Emperor by the reformer Fan Zhongyan (989-1052, who was later Chancellor and mentor to Ouyang Xiu), called on them “to save this culture of ours.”

Ouyang and his generation had set about trying to save it. But for the generation following, the Tang itself constituted a problem. According to Su Shi, all the arts of the brush had reached their heights during the middle Tang. “When poetry reached Du Zimei [Du Fu], prose reached Han Tuizhi [Han Yu], calligraphy reached Yan Lugong [Yan Zhenqing] and painting reached Wu Daozi, all the transformations of ancient and modern times and all possible excellences in this world were completed.” How could “this culture of ours” maintain itself as a vital culture by continuing to transform itself? Su was separated from the Tang achievements by more than two hundred years; though the Song resurrected many of the traditions through which the Tang promoted social stability, it must have constituted an entirely different world. The structure of feeling of the Northern Song—or at least, that of the Yuanyou reformers—is saturated by this poignance, seeing the towering accomplishments of the Tang and being cut off from them, living out the sense that the continuity of the culture was in danger of being completely lost.

Calligraphy in particular was marked by a great decline; it could not simply be reconstituted by imperial decree: virtually no pre-Tang calligraphy by the acknowledged masters had survived. Ouyang Xiu’s widely-shared lament was that “The practice of calligraphy was never stronger than during the Tang, and never weaker than today.” To
the degree that the Song still shared some of the Tang view of culture, this meant far more than a weakening of the art. “The new had been built upon the old in a cumulative fashion that stretched back to the beginning of civilization under the Former Kings,” writes Peter Bol.\textsuperscript{344} The weakness of calligraphy was visible proof that the inherited past could be lost.

The Tang calligraphers were closer in time to the fourth century Jin masters and had had access to examples of their writing. But many of the famed pieces of calligraphy had been lost; even the Song’s new stability was not enough to allow the tradition to be revitalized. The practice of calligraphy required both teachers and models which could be studied if it was to continue as a living tradition. Both had vanished. Ouyang’s picture was likely accurate: “With the wars of the Five Dynasties, schools and academies declined. This is what is called the time of the disintegration of the gentleman’s Dao… The dynasty has been established now for one hundred years, and the realm is at peace. Studies flourish again. Only calligraphy remains in a state of decay, to the point where it is practically cut off from the past.”\textsuperscript{345} If Ouyang was correct, this domain of what we would call “visual culture” was in a much more precarious position than was the scholarship of texts.

Ouyang and his circle were also cut off from the High Tang by a less poignant, but no less real problem, that the Tang accomplishments were hidden by intervening figures from the Late Tang and early Song. Su Shi’s judgement that Du Fu represented the height of poetry is so widely accepted today that it is hard to imagine a different poetic canon; now Yan Zhenqing is routinely acclaimed as second only to Wang Xizhi in calligraphy. But these judgements were unusual in the early Northern Song: Huang Tingjian’s father and maternal uncle were among those who revived interest in Du Fu’s poetry.\textsuperscript{346} Before the revaluation they carried out, “the learning of the Tang people” actually referred to what we call the Late Tang, the period after An Lushan.\textsuperscript{347} In poetry, the canonical figures were Li Shangyin, Jia Dao, and Bai Juyi—all regarded now as lesser figures. They were
the wrong models, according to Su and Huang Tingjian, on which to rebuild “this culture of ours.”

In calligraphy, it was not the Late Tang who provided the models but much more recent figures like Li Jianzhong (945-1013) and Li Zong’e (964-1012). Ouyang Xiu dispatched Li Zong’e’s calligraphy with disdain. “People today like fat characters. They are just like thick-skinned mantou [round loaves of bread]; though they may not taste bad, all one has to do is to look at its appearance to know that it is something vulgar. The methods of calligraphy have been cut off now for fifty years.”

Su’s views were similar. “At the beginning of our dynasty Li Jianzhong had a reputation for being an able calligrapher, but the character of his calligraphy is mean and turbid, continuing the wasted and lowly spirit that had been perpetuated since the late Tang.” As in poetry, the models were the wrong ones. A further problem was that calligraphers imitated the appearance of calligraphers they admired—but the deeper structural principles were no longer being transmitted. Cai Xiang, a generation older than Su Shi, seemed able to perpetuate something of the Tang style, but was unable to reinvigorate the tradition with new brush ideas of his own. The problem was similar to something that Peter Bol pointed out in the larger cultural world of the Song: in a world which had come to value “the personal acquisition of moral ideas over the imitation of good cultural forms…imitation was now a sign that one had not seen for himself.” Though it seems paradoxical, without innovation the tradition could not be renewed. The task for the great Northern Song calligraphers—Su, Huang, and Mi Fu—was to rediscover and renew the principles lost in war and rain, one of which was “transformation” (bian).

b: The Great Archive of the Past

“More than any previous age in China, the Northern Song was involved in assessing its relationship to its past”, writes David Palumbo-Lui. Classical China is conventionally seen as venerating its past, especially those objects which preserve the antiquity of its writing system. But even inscribed objects were scattered like trash as the Song began.
In the preface to his *Collected Records of the Past*, Ouyang Xiu wrote a famous complaint.

King Tang’s wash basin, Confucius’ cauldron, the stone drums from Ji Yang, the inscribed stones at Mt. Dai, Zhouyi, and Kuaiji; the great steles, sacrificial vessels, bronze inscriptions, poems, prefaces, and dedicatory essays written by sage rulers and worthy officials from the Han and Wei dynasties down to today; and calligraphy done by various masters in archaic, greater seal, lesser seal, bafen, and clerical scripts—all these are priceless treasures from the Three Dynasties and later times, and they are the most bizarre and extraordinary, majestic and striking, skillfully crafted, and delightful of material things. They are not found in remote places and acquiring them does not involve danger or risk. Why is it, then, that exposed to the elements and ravaged by warm they are abandoned and damaged, and lie strewn about amid hillsides and ruins where no one gathers them up?\(^{355}\)

It seems impossible to overstate Ouyang’s contributions to setting the Chinese past in place. What is crucial here is that Ouyang began to collect rubbings from inscriptions found scattered across China. He collected widely, including unorthodox styles, almost-illegible writings, works whose textual contents he found disagreeable (such as those by Buddhists), and the calligraphy of the semi-barbaric northern kingdoms from the fourth to sixth centuries. Earlier volumes, such as the *Calligraphy Models from the Chunhua Pavilion*, which was published in 992 by the order of the Emperor Taizong as the Song found its feet, only provided models for court calligraphy. Ouyang’s by contrast collected the past in its diversity, preserving it for future generations. His eclecticism and range bears out Peter Sturman’s description of the situation. “In the Tang Dynasty there had been a mandated model, but in the middle of the eleventh century there was nothing comparable—only choices.”\(^{356}\) But that freedom had been imposed by the calamities of history, which had broken the continuity of the tradition.
“I hope that this will be transmitted to future scholars as a contribution to learning,” Ouyang wrote.\textsuperscript{357} The veneration of rubbings and inscriptions and of the stone steles seems to have had its origins in Ouyang’s collecting, and looking back, the Forest of Stele in Xi’an appears like a typical work of the Yuanyou period (1086-1094). Begun in 1087, its core was the Confucian Classics that had been inscribed in stone for the Temple of Confucius in Xi’an, as well as the ancient \textit{Xiping Classic of The Book of Changes} by Cai Yong (132-192). To these were added several stele by Yan Zhenqing (707-783)—the Tang calligrapher promoted by Ouyang and the Yuanyou circle but ignored in the \textit{Chunhua Pavilion}—as well as the \textit{Yu Shi Tai} by Liang Shenqing (dates unknown), a Buddhist text. The rectitude of the \textit{Classic of Filial Piety} and Yan’s calligraphy was brought together with Daoist and Buddhist texts. Perhaps the obvious merit in preserving the Confucian Classics provided a cover for preserving a wider range of inscriptions, in much the same way that Ouyang’s \textit{Collected Records of the Past} proceeded. But if the continuity of the tradition had been broken, the response to it, the labour of collecting and preserving the past, had the paradoxical effect of multiplying the past. This seems to have had pronounced effects on the mentality of the period.

Unlike Song calligraphy which is so highly praised, Northern Song poetry was and often is disparaged. But the terms of the criticism are extremely useful in understanding the period’s structure of feeling. A Qing period anthologist, for example, repeated the charge that the Song poets “were simply coarse plagiarists” because so much of their work borrowed words, phrases, and rhymes from earlier poets.\textsuperscript{358} Others saw the Song poetry as far too bookish. Today it might be called “academic”: Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692) said of Su Shi and Huang Tingjian, “If you take away their books then there is no poetry.”\textsuperscript{359} Perhaps the most insistent criticism was that the poetry was too philosophical, too discursive—and therefore was lacking in the immediacy on which lyric poetry was believed to depend.\textsuperscript{360} As early as the Southern Song, Yan Yu (1180-1235) was complaining that “the various gentlemen of recent generations produce idiosyncratic understandings. They take diction, erudition, and logical discourses to be poetry.”\textsuperscript{361} All
of these can be summed up as the complaint that Northern Song poetry is too allusive and too intellectual to fulfill the primary value of poetry, which is that immediacy of emotional response. That complaint is mirrored in the commentary on calligraphy, though in a more measured way. Dong Qichang (1555-1636) categorized the three greatest periods of calligraphy in a manner which is now received wisdom, with the Jin exemplified by yun or resonance, the Tang by methods, fa, and the Song by ideas or intent, yi. Where Dong sees historical and emotional richness in the Jin, and a depth of structure and skill in the Tang, the Song is seen as the most conceptual of the three, and without explicitly saying so, the least sensuous, the least emotional.

Human emotion was seemingly natural, and the idea of poetry being spontaneous assumed that poetry took place when encountering an object or scene in the natural world. Objects from the natural world were favoured as subjects, and the fusion of mind and object or emotion and scene was almost ubiquitously praised in Chinese criticism. But in the Northern Song, the centrality of this model for poetry was falling away. For Su Shi, doubts had begun to surface, just as they had about characterology. “It is indeed difficult for human desires to coincide with the natural course…How can [the coincidental] be natural?” he wrote in his preface to the Collected Poems of Shao Mao-ch’eng. Yugen Wang’s point is that as that as the association between poetry and the natural world weakened, the weight of past literature began to exerted in a much more conscious fashion. That past becomes especially apparent in Huang Tingjian’s hand.

The pervasive discursiveness, or bookishness, follows from that sense of the past in which the Northern Song, and especially the Yuanyou reformers, were steeped. The cumulative tradition had been severed from the present and was in danger of being lost. It not only had to be taken up again, but it had somehow to be synthesized, brought together once more. And the past, oddly, was in danger of being lost by being so multiplied. So much had been lost in the chaos that had intervened between the Tang and the Song, yet the sudden avalanche of texts that printing made available constituted a chaos of its own,
as though the great archive of the past had suddenly been dumped on the Song. Ouyang’s *Collection of Antiquities* was in this sense part of the problem which now confronted the Song artists and scholars. “Above all, there was the overwhelming desire to make sense out of past culture…The past was awesome in both size and complexity and during the Northern Song the implicit problems of cultural transmission became explicit.” The only way forward, at least for Su Shi and Huang Tingjian, was to be encyclopedic. Their work was to be marked by the mediation of a vast array of previous texts which were gathered up, brought together, and deployed in a demonstration of their continuing relevance.
Chapter 2: Two Works of Northern Song Calligraphy

Art awaits its own explanation. It is achieved methodologically through the confrontation of historical categories and elements of aesthetic theory with artistic experience, which correct each other reciprocally.\(^{368}\)

- Theodore Adorno

An aesthetic is a hypothetical construction, as I argued earlier, a form of scholarly conjecture, conjured to explain the concrete sensuous works that loom out of the past. The two works examined here—Su Shi’s *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food* and Huang Tingjian’s *Scroll for Zhang Datong*—are not subsidiary to that reconstructed aesthetic, nor were they in their own time. Nor are they test cases that illustrate it, or anything of the sort. They are what drew me, what brought me to study the Northern Song, lures cast into the centuries. The material artwork and the aesthetic of a period are non-identical, though obviously they form each other. In any material work—and especially one which was not utterly conventional—the artist or calligrapher used only certain aspects of the aesthetic understanding that was available to him, and amplified, ignored or contravened others. And so, the hypothesized aesthetic of a period never appears in its entirety, only as something partial.
1. Su Shi’s *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food*

![Su Shi’s *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food*](image)

Su Shi, *Rain on the Festival of Cold Food*, 1082, ink on rice paper, 118 x 33 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

**Rain at the Time of Cold Food**

Since coming to Huang-chou [Huangzhou]
this is my third Cold Food festival.
Each year I hate to see spring go,
but it goes anyway, heeding no regrets.
On top of that, this year we’re pestered with rain,
two months now it’s been as bleak as fall.
I lie and listen to cherry apple blossoms,
pale pink snow getting dirty in the mud.
Of the forces that steal things away in the dark,
the most powerful comes in the middle of the night,
as though a young man were to take to bed sick,
then rise from his sickbed to find his hair gray.\(^{369}\)

2.
The spring river is pushing at my door
but the rain will not let up.
My small house is like a fishing boat
surrounded by clouds and water.
In the empty kitchen cold vegetables are boiled,
wet reeds burning in the broken stove.
Who knows it is the Cold Food Festival?
Ravens carry the dead’s money in their bills,  
the emperor sits behind nine doors, 
and my ancestors’ tombs are ten thousand li away. 
I want to cry at the forked road. 
dead ashes won’t blow alive again.\textsuperscript{370}

The writing here flows freely, and unlike the “squashed” characters which routinely appear in Su’s calligraphy, many have long vertical extensions. The contrast between these characters and others which are tightly wound charts the flow of a qi which is bottled up then released. The ink often looks flowing, but at other points, almost coagulated. The long tails look sudden, but at this point Su’s hand would have had to slow to draw the extension, and in one character, the tail’s little flick at the end. At this point, an asymmetry is produced between how the calligraphy looks and how it must have been written. The appearance of suddenness and the actual time likely taken are completely at odds. Su’s calligraphy always slants, but in this piece there is a very pronounced slanting to the upper right. This creates patterning like a tilted grid, like slanting rain, or a tiled roof seen from an angle. It contrasts with the expansion and contraction of characters in each vertical row. From the beginning on the right to the end on the left, the characters grow in size, and grow blacker, more heavily inked. The brush is never allowed even to begin to empty; it is as though his wen is pouring out. “My wen is like a spring with a ten-thousand gallon flow,” said Su Shi.\textsuperscript{371} Most of the writing is “juicy”, as painters might say today, wet-looking—which gives the calligraphy such an appearance of freshness that it looks as though it had just been written. There is much more flesh than bone, much more flower than fruit. At many points the calligraphy has the quality of being suddenly in bloom. The long tails could be tall stems for blossoms, or long moans.

\textit{a: Peonies}

The freshness of Su’s calligraphy is startling, a new kind of beauty: even in a book on Mi Fu, Peter Sturman turns to the \textit{Cold Food} scroll to announce that “long accepted
standards of beauty and practice are suddenly replaced by something much more personal and human.”372 The question of what accounts for it requires multiple answers at multiple levels. But the broad outlines of an answer are given by Peter Bol in his study of the intellectual transition from the Tang to the Song: “Valuing the personal acquisition of moral ideas over the imitation of good cultural forms made it increasingly difficult to see how values could be shared, for imitation was now a sign that one had not seen for himself.”373 The An Lushan Rebellion had been ruinous intellectually as well as socially and materially. It shook the aristocratic Tang faith in the efficacy of ritual forms, a faith whose roots lay in the ancient Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BCE) that had first proclaimed the Mandate of Heaven and connected it to a system of rites. But following the proper forms had not been enough for the Tang to maintain the Mandate of Heaven; Bol writes that “there was a crisis of faith in the ability of culture to influence human behaviour.”374 The devastation of An Lushan meant that it was no longer enough to follow the correct outward forms. It was crucial instead to grasp the Dao directly, which meant grasping the Dao for oneself. Imitation now meant that one had not seen for oneself. In calligraphy, as in all areas of culture, this cast doubt on what had once been the model forms to emulate. The model calligraphers of the past were now in doubt, which meant that the calligraphic tradition could only be renewed by being transformed. This provides the outline of an answer, but only at a level of generalization which cannot account for the particularities of Su’s calligraphy. Other answers are needed, at much smaller scales of attention.

No one who knows calligraphy is likely to be surprised if I say I was drawn to this scroll after seeing it in reproduction. It is a strikingly beautiful work, gorgeous, and at first glance, all “flower”—though the rule was to value ”fruit” over flower, the heart of the matter over surface appearance.375 It seems anything but pingdan—not withered, not bland or tranquil, miles from the flavourless. Haofang seems the obvious way to describe it— “bold and uninhibited,” in McNair’s translation.376 Yet Su Shi had such an important role in promoting pingdan as the most sought-after quality that this gap between the ideal he proposed and this most famous of his works must be addressed.
It was after reading Ronald Egan’s *The Problem of Beauty* that I began to see a way of understanding the scroll’s curious relationship to the *pingdan* ideal; I believe that the *Cold Food* scroll must be approached by way of peonies. Egan provides a compelling argument for how influential Ouyang Xiu’s *Account of the Tree Peonies of Luoyang* was in changing the Northern Song perception of beauty. Before that period, it was very rare to find writing devoted to the aesthetic value of a plant. Texts were focused instead on the utility of the plant for human nutrition or on its value as a drug. *Bencao*, pharmaceutical literature, was commonplace, but only in poetry was there a place for the allure of flowers. After Ouyang’s *Tree Peonies* appeared in the 1030s, texts on the chrysanthemum, plum, crab-apple, rose, camellia, lotus, rhododendron, and orchid appeared, as though some floodgate had been opened. Egan’s crucial point is that the peony had no role in the Confucian moral analogies that had built up over the centuries, unlike the “three friends of the cold season”—the bamboo, the pine, and the plum blossom—that were seen to manifest admirable human traits. There was no legitimate reason for it to be taken up by a member of the literati.

There were other issues with the peony: it was the subject of a popular mania. Each spring in Tang period Chang’an, thousands of people had thronged to the temples, estates, and gardens to view the blossoms or buy flowers themselves, and certain varieties were so desired that they cost small fortunes. For these reasons, Egan writes that of all the major Chinese plants, “the peony was probably the one that best deserves to be called *su*. I mean *su* here in all its rich variety of senses: ‘popular,’ ‘common,’ and ‘vulgar.’” Normally, the Confucian scholar elite could not countenance this. In Bai Juyi’s eyes the spectacle of the peony season “warranted sadness”, according to his poem *Buying Flowers*, in which he laments, “Every person is caught up in the delusion…One cluster of deeply colored blossoms/Would pay the taxes of ten ordinary households.” Elsewhere, Bai confessed to buying a peony to transplant. But from the Confucian perspective,
“there was something improper, or at least self-indulgent, about giving oneself over to the sensuous delights of the peony.”\textsuperscript{380}

By Ouyang Xiu’s time, the peonies of Luoyang were celebrated as the finest anywhere. In part, this must have been the result of the climate and soil found in Luoyang, but the chief reason was that the peonies there were the products of grafting, which produced stunning new varieties in a huge range. The problem for a literatus like Ouyang is that the natural was always understood to be superior to the artificial. Ouyang seems to sidestep the issue, but it is addressed explicitly in another treatise on the peony which followed his. In it, Wang Guan writes that, “The accomplishments of heaven and earth are supreme and divine. Human effort can never venture to surpass them.”\textsuperscript{381} This is awkward, since as Ouyang states, “Unless the plant is grafted, the blossoms will not be exceptional.”\textsuperscript{382} A decade later, Ouyang’s attitude had shifted. By then he was serving in a northern prefecture, and upon seeing an album of the latest varieties of Luoyang peonies, wrote a poem that seems to fall back into inherited literati views. One section of it reads:

Perhaps the problem is the minds of men ever more ingenious and fabricating,  
Each competing in ingenuity to make these flowers ever more refined.  
Otherwise, since cosmic Simplicity vanished long ago  
Why are only recent years marked by such superficial allure?  
If this competing for novelty and gorgeousness is not put to a stop,  
What will the flowers be like a hundred years from now?\textsuperscript{383}

-Ouyang Xiu

It was difficult to sustain the idea that human artifice could be superior to nature’s Way. Egan’s view is that the certainty of nature’s superiority reasserted itself as Ouyang drew away in both time and space from the intoxicating blossoms.\textsuperscript{384}

Su Shi also wrote on peonies, and in the poem below displays his typical insouciance, his characteristic unashamedness.
Viewing Peonies at the Temple of Good Fortune

I’m not ashamed at my age to stick a flower in my hair.  
The flower is the embarrassed one, topping an old man’s head.  
People laugh as I go home drunk, leaning on friends—  
Ten miles of elegant blinds raised halfway for watching.  

The poem dates from 1072. From 1071-1073, he was the vice-governor in Hangzhou, serving as the assistant to governor Shen Li. When the governor wrote a treatise on peonies, Su was asked to write the preface, and though the treatise itself does not survive, Su’s preface does. By this time, some forty years after Ouyang’s treatise, it had become permissible for the literati to enjoy the peonies, especially while drunk, since their inebriation excused their conduct. The problem instead was how to justify writing soberly about the flower and devoting serious thought to it. For Su, the issue was how to justify both the governor writing such a treatise and his own countenancing of it by supplying its preface. Su does this in several ways, first by pronouncing the peony “the crafty show-off of the floral kingdom.” Having properly belittled his subject, he contrasts the flower with the governor’s behaviour and his own, writing that “the governor in his advanced years prizes virtue, while I myself am obstinate and contrary, more than anyone else alive today.” The distinction between the flower and the virtuous governor on the one hand, and between the flower and Su’s real or imagined contrariness, mean that both persons are ill-suited to writing on the peony. This saves each person from the suspicion that they have fallen into the sensuous enjoyment of the flower’s beauty. Similarly, through an allusion, Su emphasizes the governor’s inappropriateness for writing the treatise. He refers to Song Jing, a grand councillor of the Tang, who for all his uncompromising sternness, wrote delicate rhyme prose on the plum blossom. The implication of course is that Shen Li, like Song Jing, is unimpeachable—and yet is able to write on sensuous beauty because of the apparent incompatibility between his virtue and the blossoms. As
usual Su adds still more to the argument, writing that there can be a falseness to the “plain” and the “unsophisticated.” The suggestion then is that it would be a betrayal of the governor’s virtue if he displayed his virtue by refusing to write his treatise on the peony. The argument is ingenious, so much so that it may have been written to be playfully unconvincing.

This flower has been prized by the world for over three hundred years. It is bewitching and gorgeous beyond compare...In recent years new varieties have been produced in great abundance, more than ever could be recorded here, thus it strive to remain fresh and startling to keep up with the latest fashions. The flower is, in fact, the crafty show-off of the floral kingdom.

Reading his preface, the writing itself seems doubled—as though it was speaking of the peony and at the same time, of Su’s own calligraphy. It would be too much to call most of Su’s calligraphy the crafty show-off of the calligraphic kingdom, but gorgeous, yes, and even flowery—particularly if we turn to Su’s free copy of the Letter on the Controversy over Seating Protocol. In that work, there is something that approaches being a “show-off”—not far from Zhang Xu or Huaisu’s performance calligraphy, yet still rooted in Su’s training in all the four types of script. “Crafty” seems a stretch, and the course of Su’s life, his integrity and his series of exiles strongly suggest that anything like craftiness and political calculation were often lacking. But at so many points in his life, there is such obvious evidence of his enjoyment in being brilliant; I see his copy of the Letter as one more incidence of this, and brilliant it is. But of the Cold Food scroll, no. If it approaches something of the floral quality of the Letter, it still remains quite a different type of writing, one in which feeling saturates each character and is soaked up by it, then periodically breaks out once again.
Su’s hand, in the Cold Food scroll, has certain obvious flaws when judged by traditional standards—by comparison with the elegance of the two Wangs, who provided the state-sponsored model; or that of the Tang masters, Ouyang Xun’s which displays such balance, or Yan Zhenqing’s hand which stands out for an almost exaggerated uprightness. A typical view is this entry for his Hermit Li Taibo Poem scroll in Osaka: “According to his disciple Huang Tingjian, Su Shi was not good at the technique of writing with a raised elbow. This did not affect his leftward strokes, but his strokes to the right were somewhat cramped.”389 Su’s writing does lean, and is noticeably weaker on the right side than the left. This problem was so apparent that Huang Tingjian found it necessary to address these flaws when writing of Su’s work. “Many scholars today criticize East Slope’s brushwork for not conforming to ancient standards…Some say that East Slope’s ge [right-slanting] strokes show defective brushwork and others say that since he rests his wrist on the paper and lets his brush lean over, the left side of his characters is graceful but the right side is withered.”390 While Huang went on to defend Su’s hand, this leaning broke with the principle of the upright brush, a convention which to this day remains the central principle of calligraphic technique. Su himself, referring to Liu Gongquan’s famous statement, wrote in a colophon, that, “‘if the heart is upright, the brush will be upright’ was not only a remonstration but a true principle.”391 Yet his practice departed from this central tenet, just as it seems not be pingdan in its qualities.

In his preface to Shen Li’s treatise, Su had found a way to reject the pingdan, the plain, the unadorned and flavourless, in favour of something perhaps more genuine. “Can one really trust men who cultivate an aura of being plain and unsophisticated,” he wrote, “trying thus to deceive the world?”392

b. Beauty and Defects

Looking back, the Northern Song now stands out for its exceptional, individual, almost idiosyncratic calligraphy. But why was this valued rather than dismissed? And why did its great practitioners nurture these qualities instead of the Tang sense of order? Why did the
obvious flaws in Su Shi’s hand not discredit his calligraphy? Once again, I think the answer lies in Ouyang Xiu and his *Tree Peonies*. It was necessary for Ouyang to provide a justification for his book, and one of his tactics was to propose an extremely unconventional theory of beauty. I believe that this may have saturated Su Shi’s thought, and perhaps allowed the showy peony to serve as a model for both his *Cold Food* scroll and his copy of Yan Zhenqing’s *Letter*. Ouyang’s conception is that:

What is central and harmonious is possessed of life-breath that is constant and normal. The manifestation of this life-breath in physical things likewise ought to produce forms that constant and normal. Things that have these traits are neither particularly beautiful nor ugly. But when there is a defect in the original life-breath, beauty and ugliness remain isolated from each other and not harmoniously integrated. Consequently, things that are exceptionally beautiful or ugly are so because of an imbalance in their life-breath. Blossoms have a concentration of the beautiful, while knobs on trees and like protuberances have a concentration of the ugly.393

This is very strange, and completely at odds with the idea of *pingdan* being the dissolution of all particular flavours. If imbalance creates beauty, this offends against “the taste of the neutral, which reveals...the basic virtues of balance and centrality,” which Jullien understands as central to the *pingdan* aesthetic.394 He continues, “There is no other basis in reality apart from this value of the neutral: not leaning in one direction more than another, not characterized more by one quality than another.”395

But in Ouyang’s view, imbalance produces beauty; having a defect allows beauty to be separated from ugliness. Su’s calligraphy was widely admired during his lifetime, but was also recognized to have a defect. Whether or not Su consciously drew permission from Ouyang’s theory to develop his calligraphy in the way that he did, that theory is of a piece with Su’s defective and gorgeous writing.
This returns me to Peter Sturman’s understanding of pingdan which I quoted much earlier, that “pingdan becomes practically interchangeable with the concept of naturalness: what emerges without reflection from a state of equilibrium.” If Sturman is correct, then Su Shi’s writing here is not pingdan: it does not emerge from a state of equilibrium, and it is not interchangeable with the concept of naturalness. It is closer to grafting, a kind of forcing. If Su’s calligraphy here is not pingdan, as I believe, perhaps this is precisely where it inherits something from Ouyang.

Social class obviously played a role in this as well. The old Confucian virtues were those of an aristocratic class with inherited wealth and position. Egan sees in the emerging aesthetic signaled by Tree Peonies, “the acceptance of merchant-class tastes, as in the new interest in floral beauty….what we find is a loosening of ideological criteria, as well as aesthetic preferences, that had formerly been used to uphold a highly restrictive view of what was ‘worthy.’” I think it is clear that Su’s calligraphy takes part in this loosening of criteria, and through its floral beauty, puts in place a different experience of what was beautiful.

Su’s family, though, were not merchants. If his aesthetic differed from the aristocratic one, this must be due in part to the influence of his family, and most particularly, his father. Su’s family were not merchants; according to Michael Fuller they were a locally prominent, upwardly mobile family with a small land holding in Meishan. But the type of ideological loosening that Egan associates with the rising merchant class is apparent in Su Shi and his brother, Su Che—of whom Su Shi once said, “Your policy arguments were at odds with the world.” Both were taught by their father, Su Xun, in a distinctive way that the modern scholar Qian Mu (1895-1990) termed “Su Study.” Qian’s view was that Su Study was “syncretic and occasionally brilliant, but without any clear intellectual allegiance.” Fuller notes that Su Xun’s thought was unorthodox and eclectic—qualities which suggest the strengths and the weaknesses of someone self-taught. This scepticism and eclecticism, together with the far-reaching syncretic quality, must have been the
result of the new print culture, in which the great works were suddenly widely available, outside the capacity of teachers and institutions to constrain thought within what had once been its proper boundaries.

c. Balance and the Doctrine of the Mean

Like Ouyang, Han Yu had held an important view about the value of a lack of balance. Writing, especially poetry, results when external stimulation causes some imbalance in the writer’s emotional balance...In general, it is when things in the world are disturbed that they make noise. The trees and grasses are ordinarily silent, but when the winds buffet them they make noise. Water is silent, but when breezes stir it up then it makes noise...Similarly, stone and metal chimes do not sound of their own accord. It is only when someone strikes them that they make noise. It is the same with regard to men and the words they speak. Words are uttered only when someone has no choice to speak. When someone utters any sound whatsoever, it is because his heart is not at peace.\(^{401}\)

I doubt Su Shi’s heart was at peace. If there was imbalance in the writer of the Cold Food scroll it was because Su wrote the poem in exile, at Huangzhou, after his trial for treason. This of course is to read the work through the person, one of the isomorphisms that Donald Preziosi warns art historians against.\(^{402}\) Yet this would have been permissible in the Northern Song. “Northern Song scholars”, writes Sturman, “considering such earlier figures as the reclusive landscape poet Meng Haoran (689-740), Du Fu, Meng Jiao, and Mei Yaochen of their own dynasty, associated the suffering of poverty with direct experience of landscape and good poetry. Expectations of one’s artistic performance were thus often heightened during periods out of office. Certainly this is one reason Su Shi’s ‘Cold Food Festival Poems Written at Hangzhou’ have been so highly regarded.”\(^{403}\)
Su Shi had thought carefully about balance—and obviously he knew that his writing slanted egregiously. He admired Yan Zhenqing, but seems to have been sceptical about uprightness, ignoring it in his brush and expressing doubt about its role in the cosmos. In a poem about a famous mirage off the Shandong Peninsula, he refers to a poem by Han Yu, *Stopping at a Temple on Heng Mountain*, in which the author writes of passing by Heng Mountain in Hunan, and being disappointed to find the famous peak hidden in cloud. Offering prayers to the mountain gods, the clouds dispersed. Han Yu writes that the gods rewarded his virtue with a glimpse of the mountain. Su, as he was so often, was dubious—but it is the terms of his doubt that interest me. “He said his own uprightness moved the mountain spirit,/Not realizing the Fashioner pitied him in his distress.” The issue for him here was human suffering, not uprightness.

If there was one document that addressed the question of balance, one document that Su Shi knew in depth, it was the *Chung-yung, The Doctrine of the Mean*. In 1061 Ouyang Xiu had sponsored Su for the special Decree Examination. One of Su Shi’s essays for that examination treated *The Doctrine of the Mean*: it was these essays that first brought him fame. Su’s thought here seems central to how he understood the role of a loyal member of the *shi*; it appears to have provided much of the direction of his entire life, and I believe, renders it comprehensible, as though it were some sort of key. Peter Bol points out the importance of Mencius’s thought to Su: what Su stressed in Mencius was his conception of the *Chung-yung*, that “holding to the middle without *ch’uan* is no different from holding to one extreme.” Bol goes on to explain that “*Ch’uan*’ can be translated as authority, power, deviation from the constant, and expedience, but the model is the *ch’uan* as steelyard, which allows one to control a heavy object with a fractional move of the counterweight.” It is worth noting in passing that Su Shi praised Huang Tingjian for the fact that he “balances his characters asymmetrically.” What Su valued in his own work too was dynamic balance, not equilibrium.
This understanding, which Su had inherited from his father, entailed a fairly radical re-interpretation of The Doctrine of the Mean: the goal was not to balance oneself, but rather to balance the times. This could mean leaning the other way, so as to counteract the time’s tilt away from balance. “Chung, Su explains, is created by an individual through one-sided movements between extremes. One creates a center by being prepared to take the other position, for either side can be correct depending on the circumstances and neither is sufficient alone. Only the practice of going to both sides can be fully right.”

Peter Bol writes that, “For Su, the idea is to be in the world yet against the world at the same time, without being at cross-purposes with oneself.” The individual could effect change by acting as a counter-balance. Does this explain, or provide a justification for the radical leaning in his calligraphy? Perhaps this seems like an example of overinterpretation. I am not arguing that his calligraphy slanted as an illustration of his sense of ch’uan. It seems very likely that it leans because of some physical problem, an elbow stiffened by arthritis perhaps. The issue is why this was excused, or why Su could almost be said to have celebrated this. I believe that the best answer is to say that Su’s thought was of a piece, in the same way that Confucius maintained, “There is a single thread binding my Way together.” If it seems to be a stretch to look to The Doctrine of the Mean in order to understand calligraphy, it may be that this connection would not have seemed forced in Northern Song China: the Later Tang poet, Liu Yuxi (772-842), had already written, “I study calligraphy in order to learn the Doctrine of the Mean.”

And so Su’s writing leans in the belief that he could balance out his age. Or it leans because he had bad technique. Or perhaps, in his cherishing of the Buddhist “no-mind” responsiveness to the moment, he had no interest in technique. ”My calligraphy follows my feelings. I have no techniques”, was Su’s own view. “My calligraphy is purely created, at root without rules/ dots and strokes simply trust my hand, I do not seek.”

Calligraphy of old, I have heard, preferred Being limp to always the perfect steed. Everyone strives to make his brushwork imposing,
The crowd vying to be massive and towering,
Zhong [Yao] and Zhang [Zhi] are distantly abandoned,
But my views are contrary to the times.\footnote{416}

-Su Shi

It is perhaps for all these reasons that the \textit{Cold Food} calligraphy was so startlingly fresh, as though it had appeared without precedents. “It is hard to identify any definitive influences in this calligraphy” reads the entry in Nakata’s volume on calligraphy in his history of the arts of China.\footnote{417} This does not mean that Su Shi somehow arrived at his calligraphic style without influences. Su himself admits the importance of Yang Ningshi (873-954) during the Five Dynasties for maintaining calligraphy when “the beauty of letters…was completely swept away.”\footnote{418} His admiration for Yan Zhenqing was enormous and is expressed in his free copy of Yan’s \textit{Seating Protocol} letter. But nonetheless, Su’s writing seems unforeseen. When writing of Su’s criticisms of Li Jianzhong (945-1013) early in the Song, Sturman writes that “Su Shi’s comment essentially declares a rejection of the received tradition.”\footnote{419} I do not think that this rejection should be underestimated, and this returns us to Bol’s idea that the imitation of model forms was now impossible for the most advanced thinkers and artists, that the \textit{personal} acquisition of moral ideas was now paramount. “My own calligraphy may not be very good, but it expresses new meaning and does not follow in the footsteps of the ancients. This is a source of pride to me.”\footnote{420}

Given all this, the question of how one would acquire moral ideas must be answered. Through the Confucian tradition of course; but Su Shi called himself a lay Buddhist,\footnote{421} and though a Buddhist of a lax sort, it is impossible to imagine that he did not know the Four Noble Truths. \textit{Life means suffering; the origin of suffering is attachment; the cessation of suffering is attainable; this is the path to the cessation of suffering.} Suffering was itself instructive. After being imprisoned, tried, and likely tortured, Su became a vegetarian, and the following year gave the reasons in a note. “It is not that I hope for some reward. It is simply that having experienced such worry and danger myself, when I
felt just like a fowl waiting in the kitchen, I can no longer bear to cause any living being to suffer immeasurable fright and pain simply to please my palate.\textsuperscript{422}

I myself would lack humaneness if I ignored the fact that the \textit{Cold Food} scroll is a written and visual record of suffering, traced out by someone exiled from friends and family and social purpose. I cannot pretend not to moved by this. “Perhaps the centuries part, and feelings are transmitted.”\textsuperscript{423} I like to imagine that what I see is stained by human feeling, that the sequence of characters in which \textit{qi} is confined, then released, corresponds in some way to the experience of imprisonment and exile followed by the moments of joy and exhilaration that Su’s poetry often records, that the slanting characters are not just the trace of physical weakness. I do not argue that this is so in any objective sense, but that his calligraphy allows this to be imagined, and calls out for it.

2. Huang Tingjian’s \textit{Scroll for Zhang Datong}

Huang Tingjian, \textit{Scroll for Zhang Datong}, 1100, ink on rice paper, 34.1 x 552.9 cm, Princeton Art Museum.

On the last day of the first month of the third year of the Yuanfu era, my nephew Zhang Datong from Yazhou was preparing his belongings to return home soon. He came to me and asked for some calligraphy. I have been having stomach and chest pains, and today I had some leisure time, so I tried using my brush to write this essay. Zhang Datong has been interested in learning ancient-style prose, so I am giving this to him.

It has been three years since I moved from Qiannan to Bodao. I’ve made my home in the area south of the city near a butcher. Weeds grow as high as the roof, and rats share the narrow path. But at least there are some young
people who have persuaded me to teach them composition and calligraphy. They still preserve the habits of examination candidates in the capital area.

On a warm sunny day, I take my walking stick to help my limp and in leisure spend my time in mountains under trees or among clear streams and white stones. Among my various friends I am the oldest. Now I, Fuweng, am fifty-six. I still have foot trouble and cannot bend over. My belly seems to have something hard in it—it’s like carrying around a tile or stone. I don’t know if on a later day I will ever be able to write such characters as these again.424

The characters are huge, some as big as my hand with fingers spread. Every character is heavily inked, as though the brush were filled again for each character. Each seems to be a separate entity, or else the linkages between characters are invisible to me. Most are written with a hidden tip, and rounded ends to the brushmark; few end with a slashing, lifting stroke. The energy seems contained, recirculated within the precincts of each character; there are very few places where the qi can be released or can escape into the open air. In some columns three characters, in others, four—characters expanding and contracting in size, like a large animal breathing. Each brushmark, a burnt stick. Huge “rooftops” that, like mountains, reach all the way to what would be the “earth.” Wriggling brushmarks, like silkworms, not because of any unsteadiness in the hand, but for some opposite reason, as though drawing the natural world. Marks with scalloped edges, made by a brush wobbled deliberately forward then back, to a vertically centred uprightness. Brushmarks that enter the yard of the neighbouring character. The weight of the brush on the paper is pronounced, the pace of writing slow, deliberate. The writing is much more bone than flesh or flower. The repetition of large black elements on the ivory whiteness of the paper producing a hammering visual rhythm, like a drum beat. The writing presents itself as a stunning visual pattern of black marks on bone white.

a. Resonance

The great scroll was written in exile in 1100, five years before Huang Tingjian’s death. Justly famous, it is actually the colophon to an example of ancient-style prose that Huang wrote out for his nephew—Han Yu’s “Seeing Off Meng Jiao”, which was quoted earlier. In response to his nephew’s interest in ancient-style prose, Huang had written out a work by the person who had initiated the guwen movement. At some point, the colophon was severed from the Han Yu prose, which has disappeared. It’s odd to think that the
surviving scroll may have been the lesser work, but it may have been the slicing of the scroll into two parts which allowed it to survive at all. It’s fitting that this calligraphy was written in service to the *guwen* ideal. If Su’s *Cold Food* calligraphy appeared almost to be without precedents, Huang Tingjian’s was filled with echoes from the past—even though his hand is among the most distinctive and perhaps even eccentric styles in all of Chinese history.

Huang’s contemporary, Mi Fu, had the highest praise for the “one-stroke” writing of Wang Xianzhi, in which the *qi* flowed continuously from one character to the next. Though Mi’s instinct was always to value the most ancient calligraphy, the “one-stroke” type of writing was only possible in cursive scripts, which were developed during the Jin period (265-420). In Huang’s *Zhang Datong* scroll, most characters appear to have been written completely separately. The effect is as though the energy is kept circulating within each character, instead of flowing from one character to the next continuously as Mi believed was essential.

Another way of putting it, or seeing it, is to say that Mi’s writing emphasizes the action of writing, the gestures made by the calligrapher in writing the text. The writing refers the viewer to the writer’s body, moving in space. In Huang’s calligraphy in this particular scroll, the writing refers the viewer to the calligrapher’s body but less emphatically. Though it is virtually impossible not to refer to the body, it also calls up the incising of writing in stone, and the ancient past of writing in China. In its odd internally circulating separateness of characters, the calligraphy brings to mind seal script, the writing system that preceded all other types of writing in China, and which was solidly in place by the time of the first emperor.
Huang’s writing here is a running cursive script, which would usually be loose and expansive, and yet it suggests the much more ancient form of seal script. His calligraphy, like his poetry, did not simply make allusions, its whole structure was allusive. In his treatise on the arts, *Poetry Eyes from A Hidden Stream*, Fan Wen related some of the debates around aesthetics in the Northern Song. In it, Huang Tingjian is quoted as saying that “resonance is the most important quality in calligraphy and painting.” Fan later wrote that, “Each of the ancients discovered his own approach, just like the different paths to enlightenment in Chan Buddhism. Huang Tingjian’s special ‘path to enlightenment’ in calligraphy was ‘resonance.’” But what exactly was meant by this?

The term suggests a connection to music or sound, and Fan’s interlocutor, Wang Cheng, first ventured a comparison to temple bells. “I have noticed that when a bell is struck, after the initial gong has passed, a residual sound is heard. It wavers and undulates in the air, being a note ‘beyond the primary sound.’” Once struck, a temple bell sounds, continues, and dies off imperceptibly: the lesson of the bells in Chan Buddhism is that what separates life and death, like sound and silence, cannot be distinguished. Fan’s reply is that though the comparison to bells is close, it does not fully grasp what is at issue. In a
nutshell, according to Fan Wen, “Resonance is ‘to have more meaning’ than what is expressed.”

Fan also went on to recount the history of the term, recalling that only in the Jin period did the term begin to be applied to something other than sound. As its semantic area broadened out, its importance as a crucial aspect of aesthetic experience spread across all the arts. “It was the enlightened men of the generations preceding our own who first elevated ‘resonance’ as the supreme value and achievement in the arts. Today we understand that for beauty to be fully realized in any field, ‘resonance’ must be present. This single ideal, ‘resonance’, now established some one thousand years later…surpasses all other ideals in art.” In Fan’s view, the flowering of this ideal distinguishes the Northern Song. But paradoxically, it also links the Song to the ancient past: “What I am calling ‘resonance’ has had uninterrupted presence from ancient to modern times. It must have been because the former worthies valued it so much that they kept silent about it and did not teach it openly, leaving it for gentlemen of later ages to explain.” The thinking may be dubious, but it demonstrates the importance placed on the idea of resonance.

If resonance is the sensation of more meaning than what is expressed, it may have meant something much more specific in Huang Tingjian’s hands. Qian Zhongshu explains in a brilliant short essay that, “In early poetry criticism, yun means something completely different. In his Art of Writing, Lu Ji wrote, ‘The poet gathers up fragmentary writings from a hundred generations, he plucks the rhymes (yun) handed down through a thousand years.’” Resonance had once meant rhyme, and the gathering of rhymes is explicitly linked by Lu Ji to the inheriting and the transmission of the past. In using the rhymes of so many generations of previous poets, a poet takes up the past and passes it on to the future.

One way that rhymes were collected and transmitted was by matching rhymes. In writing earlier on calligraphy as a relational art, I mentioned the enormous number of poems that
matched rhymes with other poets. Yugen Wang has calculated that over forty percent of Huang’s poems are of the *ciyun* (matching rhymes) variety. Earlier, my emphasis was on how poetry, and by extension calligraphy, linked individuals. Here the point is that every *ciyun* poem was not a self-sufficient entity; the pressing issue therefore became one of “where it comes from” (*laichu*). Huang Tingjian’s view was that, “In Du Fu’s composing of verse and Han Yu’s composing of essays, there is not one word that does not come from somewhere else. Probably, because later generations do not read enough, they say that Han Yu and Du Fu made these expressions up themselves.”

If Du Fu set the example, then it was crucially important to take up and redeploy the inherited cultural tradition, filling the new work with echoes of the past. “To read his poetry is to travel through a huge and extended textual space, with the reader experiencing, in the words of one contemporary song observer and commentator, ‘as many as six or seven works by past authors in a single line or word.’” I take Yugen Wang’s sense of Huang’s poetry as a description of resonance at work. Obviously there are no rhymes to match in calligraphy, but there are similar cultural gestures; just as each *ciyun* poem was self-consciously historical, so too was Huang’s calligraphy. Every word came from somewhere else, and every character he wrote was a word. Not to allude to a somewhere else, a someone else, would be to collapse the textual space he had laboured so hard to produce.

There is another aspect to this resonance that may have acted on Huang, which is the modularity of the writing system. In writing on *qi* and the body, John Hay wrote of the importance of resonance, and there he explicitly connected it with the modularity of so much of China’s material culture. “In connection with these patterns of energy transformation, we should note the remarkable prevalence of resonance in Chinese art. Whether it be the rhythmic repetition of strokes in calligraphy, the reverberating forms of painting, the multiplication of basic units such as pillars and brackets in architecture, the constant echoes of parallelism in literature…in all of these we can identify resonance as a
constant factor.” I think this is a stunning insight, one which opens the depth of China’s material culture.

What Hay is describing is the well-known modularity of Chinese material culture: the mass production of standardized parts that allowed objects as diverse as the Terracotta Army, temple pagodas, and porcelain to be produced—and which, according to Lothar Ledderose, is characteristic of the Chinese way of organizing society. In Ledderose’s view, that modularity was exemplified by the Chinese writing system itself, made up of a repetitive system of strokes that can be broken down and recombined. Two hundred or so different components generate approximately fifty thousand different characters. If this is correct, then the practice of writing would continuously reinforce the value of modularity—and at the same time, continuously offer experiences of resonance. “Script profoundly affected the patterns of thought in China,” states Ledderose. And of course, the shi as a class were typified by their literacy; what was more crucial to them than the writing system? Resonance, then, involves repetition, just as ciyun poetry does, though on a less conscious level, because it was embedded in writing and in every other experience of modularity.

Resonance is not simply the repetition for the sake of repetition; it is repetition for the sake of historical experience. Perhaps I should say that in calligraphy, resonance is the experiencing of the historical depths of the writing system. Ledderose points out that the most popular modular system was probably that of the Yijing with its ancient binary system of broken or unbroken lines. Resonance and divination were tied through the modular system, and extend even further into the Chinese past. In writing on Shang dynasty (1766 BCE-1122 BCE), oracle bones, David Keightley outlines how the divination practices constructed the realm of the ancestors, building what amounted to a vast bureaucracy of the dead to which the living had an impersonal access. The ancestors found their places in an enormous hierarchy, and were worshipped not for who they were, but for what they did, as though they were minor functionaries. What is crucial here is
that Keightley sees in this construction of the ancestors the same modularity that Hay sees as the basis for resonance. “I am also struck by the homology between the ancestral organization described above and the modular forms of production, depending on the standardization of units, that Lothar Ledderose has referred to as representing ‘a distinctly Chinese pattern of thought.’…The ritual compartmentalization, standardization and impersonalization of the Shang ancestors, are entirely congruent with, and were presumably deeply implicated in, the genesis of the modular imagination that Ledderose describes.”

I wonder if Fan Wen’s friend, Wang Cheng, might not have felt reassured, imagining that this interpretation supported his idea of resonance being like the ringing of a temple bell? I am not suggesting that the whole exploration of “resonance” above was in Huang’s mind. On the other hand, it’s clear that he consciously intended to explore these echoes through his incessant allusions to past poets, past calligraphers. “More than any other Chinese poet, Huang Tingjian embarked on a radical exploration of how to manipulate the voices of past poets,” David Palumbo-Liu’s succinctly notes. In emphasizing resonance to such a degree, his calligraphy developed a greater capacity for this quality than had been possible before, opening the gate to the distant past.

**b. Allusion and Transmission**

Du Fu provided the great poetic example for Huang, but this was a new and rather radical idea, since it was only in the Song that a concerted interest in Du Fu’s poetry was revived. Huang’s father and maternal uncle were in the forefront of that renewed focus. Huang himself planned to copy out Du Fu’s poems on the East and West Rivers and the gorges at Kuizhou, and to have them carved in stone. But these poems, copied out, were not intended simply as a kind of homage to Du Fu, or even as “indexes to a prior age,” as David Palumbo-Liu puts it. Instead, they were meant to function as a gateway to the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Songs of the South*, a gateway through which one could imagine passing from the present to the past and back again. At the same time, there is
something mournful about this project. It is only necessary because “Huang is lamenting...a loss of understanding, his contemporaries’ inability to discern the line of transmission between the Classics and Du Fu.”

Resonance too was a way of manifesting the presence of the past: if Huang had one distinctive technique for this, it was the multiplication of allusions. The use of allusion itself was nothing new: Chinese poetry had relied on allusion long before Huang. But in earlier poetry, the allusions turned the reader toward a particular poem or a delimited set of historical events. This ensured that the poems and their allusions were comprehensible to a suitably knowledgeable reader. Even the later Tang poet, Li Shangyin (813-858), whose work today seems remarkable for its shifting ambiguities, apparently relied on a similar structure. Allusions in Li’s poems are not frequent, and the seemingly impenetrable air of mystery to his work seems to be the result of the degree to which any knowledge of the “culture of romance” to which the poems refer has vanished for modern readers. Huang’s allusive structure was quite different: allusions were so frequent as to be almost omnipresent, and this frequency of occurrence wove the allusions into a dense fabric that seems to hang down behind every poem by Huang. What such allusions made reference to were not obscure (for the literati), but they presupposed that China’s entire literary past had been made available to readers.

This interpretation seems to be borne out by one of Huang’s more enigmatic poems, “Elaborating on the Erya,” of which Palumbo-Liu writes, “It is difficult to make sense of this poem.” It seems to be a long and confusing list of observations about animals ranging from silkworms to bees to moles to flying squirrels with nothing to unify it. It is in fact an exploration of the *Erya*, the first known compendium of characters, which likely predates the First Emperor. Huang takes up in the same order as the *Erya* the animals, insects, and birds, together with the beliefs about them that had been recorded there. While Palumbo-Liu struggles to interpret the poem, his suggestion is that, “There
seems to be no escaping. The perception of things is mediated by layers of accreted readings, interpretations, and conventionalized usages.”

“Words are imbued with layers of meaning as they are used; each layer implies an accretion of readings and interpretations,” Palumbo-Liu emphasizes with regard to Huang’s writing. Allusion makes this apparent; it dissolves away any illusion that the writer is beginning afresh, or as though outside history. From this vantage point, it is as if the effect of Huang’s dense web of allusions was to make the whole literary past heave into view—which in some sense it had, through the avalanche of printed texts. Something similar took place in his calligraphy. Fu Shen notes, as many have, the resemblance of the *Zhang Datong* scroll to the Tang calligraphers Yan Zhenqing and Xu Hao (703-782), and to both the *Eulogy on Burying a Crane* (*Yi He Ming*) and the *Ode to Shimen (Shimen Song)* cliff inscriptions. The archived past of calligraphy too was becoming available. In 992, the *Chunhua Model Letters* was published, and soon reprinted several times, often from blocks carved by copying the reproduced rubbings. The masterworks contained there were suddenly made available to persons who previously could only have dreamed of access to them: Patricia Ebrey points out that the *Model Letters* now made possible a discussion of the same work by men who were scattered across the vast space of the empire.

For Huang, the role of allusion was not simply to give an erudite appearance to his work. Allusion brought the past forward, kept it from vanishing. But it also was to be transformed and in this way, transmitted. About writing, Huang left this characteristic advice, “Get to the place where the ancients employed their minds, the heroic and marvelous part of the literary piece. Then you will be able to twist old language into a thing of your own.” If poetry provided a guide, then his calligraphy also needed to be based on what was marvelous in someone else’s writing. But there was much more to this than the imitation of compelling models. Juefan Huihong (1071-1128), a Zen monk and poet who knew Huang, records him as saying that the issue was “to penetratingly imitate
the meaning of the prior poet and yet further nuance it."\textsuperscript{451} Here it is clear that it is the meaning, not the surface effects, that are to be taken up. Imitation, for Huang, must have meant the imitation of meaning not style. But the issue went even further: it seems that what was necessary was to take up the qi of some great predecessor. Huang and Su studied Yan Zhenqing’s calligraphy together and made copies, and again, it was not the ability to copy Yan’s style that mattered. “When I look at my work [after Yan’s], there seems to be some resemblance of style and spirit, but compared to Tzu-chan’s [Su Shi’s], I’m left far behind. Tzu-chan copied at least ten-odd sheets of calligraphy for me in Lu-kung’s [Yan’s] style. They look like Yan’s descendants: even though there is a difference of generation, they all have the bones and energy of the grandfather.”\textsuperscript{452}

Fu Shen’s insight is that what mattered most to both Su and Huang was “untrammelled spirit which transcended rules” and that this “was of greater importance...than any formal correspondence.”\textsuperscript{453} As to why this would be important, David Palumbo-Liu’s thinking is that “Perfectly integrating past texts into one’s own present usage erases the difference between ages.”\textsuperscript{454} I am a bit dubious about this, since the Northern Song seems to be so conscious of the disruption of the cultural tradition. I wonder if it is more plausible to say that it is not that the difference between the ages is erased, but that it is made apparent.\textsuperscript{?}

Liu Xie’s (465-522) famed \textit{Dragon Carving and the Literary Mind} contains this idea: “To be able to use the words of others as if they were one's own creation is to have a perfect understanding of the past.”\textsuperscript{455} If that perfect understanding was the goal, then perhaps Huang’s dense web of allusions functioned as a way of integrating the intent of the great writers and calligraphers of the past with his own—and in this way the past could be inherited and transmitted once again.\textsuperscript{456}

\textit{c. Wen}

I was struck by the intensely rhythmic patterning of the \textit{Zhang Datong} scroll; it reminded me instantly of what was called “pattern painting” during the 1970s.\textsuperscript{457} In his dissertation, Fu Shen made a related point, “His [Huang’s] calligraphy possessed a strongly pictorial
quality and his feeling for the qualities of pure design were those of a painter extended to calligraphy. The “design” of the scroll is obviously intended to make the written characters appear as a pattern. This is an aspect of calligraphy which can be made more or less intense in any particular work: it tends to be diluted in Wang Xizhi’s mercurial hand or in Huaisu’s, where each letter seems to require its own attendance. In the Yan Family Stele, Yan Zhenqing’s writing asserts itself more as patterning than is the case with Wang or Huaisu because it is much more regular, much more evenly weighted. The same is true of the Yu Shi Tai with its lovely clerical script. But I have never seen any calligraphy that announced itself so boldly as a pattern as Huang’s scroll.

It is possible that this too is a way of making the visual appearance resonant. Wen, as I had learned, had come to mean “writing”, or even “prose” for Su Shi and Huang’s period. Yugen Wang explains that tianwen, “naturally formed patterns”, was considered the ideal symbol for literary writing, and that literature was usually understood as the epitome of renwen, the “humanly formed patterns”, which I understand as roughly equivalent to “culture,” though far less lovely. Similarly, guwen was ancient-style prose. But wen had once meant the appearance, or ornament of natural beings, the marking or patterning by which the object or entity could be recognized.

A friend of Huang’s, Wen Shaoji, once sent him some poems. In response, Huang wrote two poems praising Wen’s writing. One begins, “Your wen [writing] is like a leopard in the fog.” What an astonishing image. Huang’s own writing in the Zhang Datong scroll displays this same awareness of the depths of meaning compressed in wen, and it does so through writing that is also pattern, that is patterning every bit as much as it is writing.

d. Method

In poetry Huang looked back to Du Fu, yet he dismissed the canonical Tang calligraphers — Ouyang Xun, Yu Shinan, Chu Suiliang—as “too restrained by method.” In the Zhang Datong, the Tang sense of order was visibly overturned. In almost all calligraphy,
each character is contained within an imagined square of rectangle, even the wild cursive calligraphers of the Tang. Huaisu’s lovely *Autobiography*, as graceful, free, and unconstrained as it appears to be, still abides by this rule. But Huang’s scroll has a completely different structure, which Fu Shen’s dissertation carefully records in a series of lucid diagrams; these plot out what are often taken to be the idiosyncracies of Huang’s hand, making its hidden order clear. “Within a single work, the size of characters depended without exception on the number of strokes it contained: characters with more strokes were written larger, characters with fewer strokes were written smaller. In other words, Huang T’ing-chien did not intend to have each character, regardless of complexity, be a uniform size or conform to an imaginary square…He accommodated each character to its basic physical framework, without any desire to have them fit into an imaginary square. This departed from the T’ang dynasty sense of proportion.”

At first glance, the terms of Huang’s rejection of the Tang might seem odd: Tang calligraphy was traditionally characterized by method (*fa*), and Yugen Wang has shown in how committed Huang was to finding methods to direct both the composing of poetry and the reading of texts. It is precisely this commitment to method that separates Huang and the Jiangxi School from the earlier model of an ideal spontaneity. But perhaps this contradiction is only apparent, if the target of his criticism was not method, but rather, being too restrained by it. My suspicion is that from the standpoint of the Northern Song, the calligraphy of the Tang court looked too constrained—a return, after the Wei-Jin’s emergence of more individual feeling, to the “universal emotional form” promoted by both the rites and music tradition and Confucian principles.

When Huang had criticized the Tang masters, he referred particularly to the methods they had internalized from standard script (*kaishu*), which he believed constrained their calligraphy in any type of script. Yan Zhenqing he excepted from this, because of Yan’s ability in running script (*xingshu*) which displayed a freedom from this constraining influence. Just as he found poetry to have been based on the wrong model—and so he
turned to Du Fu—he sought a better model for his own calligraphy. Especially in his large character writing, Huang was drawn to the *Eulogy on Burying a Crane* (*Yi He Ming*), a cliff inscription by the Yangtze. By Huang’s time, it had broken off and fallen into the river, only visible for part of the year, when the waters were low. When Huang eventually made his own visit to study the inscription, he was left deeply moved. “Recently I saw the large characters of in the inscription, *I-ho-ming* [*Yi He Ming*], from the broken cliff stone of Ching-k’ou...It’s greatness cannot be described.”

The *Eulogy* provided a better model in many different ways. Ouyang Xiu had claimed that Liu Gonquan too had taken his brush method from this inscription; Huang also attempted to learn from its example, trying to internalize its thin but strong lines, written with a rounded tip. The hidden tip alone was crucial to Huang’s writing, especially in the *Zhang Datong* scroll—a hidden tip was used in writing seal script, but not the standard script (or “running standard” as Fu Shen calls it), which relies on an exposed tip.

As Fu Shen points out, the stone’s inaccessibility, its fragmentation and its damaged surface gave it a sense of antiquity. Much more importantly, though, the irregularities of the rock surface meant that characters had to expand and contract, shift sideways or vertically to suit the stone. (When an area of the rock face could easily be cut down to make a flat surface for the calligraphy, this was routinely done. But the rock in this case was very difficult to carve.) This seems to have provided Huang with a model in which each character had to accommodate itself to the world, rather than be fitted into the abstraction of a grid.

It has occurred to me that what may have impressed Huang as well was the fact of its erosion. A slightly younger contemporary of Huang’s, Huang Bosi (1079-1118) recorded that “sections of the writing have been damaged by water, so that the characters have no feeling of the brushtip: they seem to have been written with a worn-out brush.”

Shen writes that “the writing as we see it today indeed has ‘no tip.’” Though obviously the inscription must have continued to erode after the Northern Song, it seems likely that what Huang Tingjian saw was already an inscription whose tips had been rounded by the river, a writing produced in collaboration with nature. I have been unable to find any record in English translation that this is so, so this remains speculation. But it calls to mind this famous statement by Huang’s friend and fellow calligrapher, Su Shi. “My wen is like a spring with a ten-thousand-gallon flow. It does not care where; it can come forth in any place. On the flatland spreading and rolling, even a thousand miles in a day give it no difficulty; when it twists and turns around mountain boulders, it takes shape according to the things encountered.” I believe that in the *Eulogy on Burying a Crane*, Huang found an image of what wen should be—writing that was simultaneously human and natural, that had returned to the mythic origins of writing.

In finding the right model, Huang’s own calligraphy opened itself to the deepest resonances of the past. In the Song, the Shang and Zhou oracle bones still lay buried, hidden in the centuries. Once they were unearthed, they provided a sudden proliferation of ancient writings where the various characters, accommodating themselves to the surfaces of the bones, shells, and cracks, had to scatter themselves across the surface. With their appearance, the resonances of Huang’s writing deepened even more, as though their discovery confirmed the model he had adopted.

**e. Ren and Li in Written Form**

In *How Societies Remember*, the sociologist Paul Connerton writes of the types of commemorative practices. He distinguishes between incorporating practices—bodily actions and postures, like bowing one’s head in respect or kneeling in prayer—and inscribing practices—such as taking a photograph or recording history in writing. Writing too is a bodily practice—even though the advent of printing and word processing has made this disappear from our consciousness. But the calligraphic tradition understood
this, and placed great value on it, especially in the case of the great cursive and gesture writers.

Though texts are the outcome of inscribing practices, having been copied or printed or carved in stone, each character of the writing system continues through time only through incorporating practices—by being learned and written, repeated according to certain rules, of stroke order for example, which are learned by rote, and for the most part, repeated mindlessly. “All rites are repetitive,” says Connerton, “and repetition automatically implies continuity with the past.” Clearly, writing in Chinese culture is nothing but the repetition of shared social forms, and so it is ritual, though it is rarely considered in this way.

Calligraphy then can be placed within the two poles of Confucian thought, *li* (ritual) and *ren* (humaneness.) The problem in calligraphy, at least for the great calligraphers, was how to “follow the desires of the heart without overstepping the bounds of right,” as the *Analects* say. Calligraphy that was merely correct was either slavish or heartless, empty of human feeling, like *li* when it appears to be simply ritual, which Confucius warned against. When Sturman wrote of the Northern Song that a well-established sense of beauty was suddenly replaced by one that was more personal and more human, he was, in my view, writing of a changed relationship between *li* and *ren*, made visible in calligraphy.

In Su’s *Cold Food* calligraphy *ren* seems to be struggling with *li*, almost finding them to be in contradiction. Perhaps this follows from his trials and exiles in the factional wars that required crying out, from the contradiction between his admiration for Tao Qian’s reclusion and his own inability to excuse himself from public service. It is quite distinct from “the universal emotional form” of the rites and music and Confucianism: highly individualized, though still looking to the traditions that had made universalized feelings the basis of community. Huang’s writing seems almost the polar opposite to this, a
writing where *ren* is so allied with *li* that it almost disappears into it, as though humaneness can only appear by mobilizing the whole past of writing’s public forms. Yet Huang’s hand emerges from this as one of the most immediately recognizable in all of calligraphy. Like Su’s, it is a glimpse of the emerging *self*-consciousness that so distinguishes the Northern Song.
Chapter 3: Records of a Non-Historian

1. *The Declining Year at Hangzhou*

Andy Patton, *The Declining Year at Hangzhou*, 2013, oil on canvas, left panel 66” x 42”; right panel 66” x 21”

*The Declining Year at Hangzhou*

The previous declining year still winding its brocade around the always newly out of style pavilions.
Stone cisterns coiled about with dragons.
Lakeside temples attended by cypresses, their shadows bowing in imitation.
Monuments that litter the city, the scattered leaves of public greatness.

But the time for awe is past.
The veneration of a way of being held up like a mirror in a kind of hopeful vanity toward a time that never was.
The painting is large; the left panel almost the size of the Yan Family Stele. The two panels are completely unlike a scroll, more like a stele where one can see the front, though one where the back cannot be read. Unlike the stolid bearing of a large inscription, the space wavers. Unlike calligraphy, the work is in colour—a deep intense purple lake with golden letters. A few letters, scattered randomly across the surface, appear to float on orange squares; these are painted in grey. The orange squares appear to be much closer to the viewer than the deep purple ground and its letters, but the depth of the purple ground varies, deeper here, lighter there. The orange squares fluctuate a little before the eye, as though varying in space. After a short time, one can make out two different orange pigments, one slightly more yellow than the other. The letters are large, each situated in its own three inch square. The effect is more like typesetting than calligraphy, and more like carved characters than written ones. If this is seen as calligraphy, it is closer to standard script than cursive. Each letter is swept differently, some horizontally, some vertically. All are lightly blurred, as though in some slight fog. There is no linking of letters, no flow of qi from one to another. Instead, each letter seems to exist as though in its own domain. Sentences are separated by a diamond-shaped mark that almost looks chiseled. If there is energy in the hand, it is released through the whole painting at once, not powerfully, but rather slowly, almost patiently. Seemingly natural accidents of light and darkness fall across the surface of the work. Some letters are almost swallowed whole by darkness, can barely be made out.

a. Hangzhou

I never intended to make a painting about Hangzhou. I was there simply to visit the temples where Su Shi had practiced briefly and haphazardly; to see the city and the lake which were the site of several of his poems, and to stand where he perhaps had stood a thousand years earlier. I arrived at the end of February; the new year’s celebrations had ended and life had returned to its routine. It was the Year of the Dragon and my sixtieth year; the twelve animal signs and the five elements, the sixty year stem-and-branch cycle had come round again to the same position as in the year of my birth. On Nan Song Yu
Jie, the rebuilt Southern Song Imperial street, I sat and read Su’s poems. My coffee arrived with a dragon on a sea of foam—an auspicious sign I thought, for a yang water dragon on a trip to China.

I first visited the temples in the hills above Hangzhou, led by my guide, Jenny Tong. The next morning I wandered about in the area near my hotel and found myself on Renhe Road in front of the house where Lu Xun had briefly lived. Later, I spent the evening looking out on West Lake from Orioles Singing to Willows, watching the boats on the lake ferrying their tourists while the hills turned to a wash of ink. A boatman passed by as his working day ended, singing to himself. An oriole in human form, I thought. The absurdly beautiful lake with its screen of faint hills was too beautiful to be true, and too beautiful not to be true. Earlier I had shopped for silk on Hefang Lu. South of the street were lanes of reconstructed nineteenth century buildings with dark, elaborately carved wooden facades, and white-washed horse’s head walls rising above the rooflines. I thought of how often Hangzhou had been wrecked, and how often it had been restored. Were the beautifully rebuilt lanes and buildings past or present? I thought too of the weather-beaten columns at Jingci Temple—all that survived the Cultural Revolution. The day before, I had wandered among the devout in the newly reconstructed ancient temple’s grounds, where the Lotus Sutra Bell is struck one hundred and eight times to bring in the new year. Simultaneously past and present, the site itself seemed to be ringing with “the parallel phenomena of spiritual preservation and material destruction.”
Lu Xun railed against West Lake and its “ten-sight disease,” believing that it had turned China into “a cultural landscape of stasis.” In his eyes, internal turmoil and even foreign invasions had failed to bring fundamental change, were just “a brief commotion.” He thought that, “What is distressing is not the ruins, but the fact that the old traditions are being patched up over the ruins. We want wreckers who will bring about reforms.”

Would he have been happy with the wreckage and the reforms of the Cultural Revolution? Death to the four Olds: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. But the old buildings, the ancient temples had reappeared, as though the more recent past had never been. The wrecked past had evaporated, though everyone had a story to tell about being sent to the countryside. Wrecked, rebuilt, the past displaces the past at West Lake, which I suppose is how it imagines itself, at once changeless but layered in history’s silt.

The text for my painting, once settled, seemed to call for a painting in two parts. The first, larger, painting is nothing other than a wistful description, gathered from poems by Pain Not Bread, one of which described Beijing, the Forbidden City and the construction of the Great Wall; another which imagined Chang’an, with its white-headed crows as an invading barbarian army. Unhooked from their contexts, floating like leaves, I could stitch them together to imagine a city I’d actually seen, which was designed to be a site of imagining.

But the description, or imagining, comes to an end—with the word, “but,” and the meaning pivots. The text continues in a second panel, one which, through judicious working and reworking of the text, I could array in a painting exactly half as wide as the first. What follows is a warning of sorts, which is a warning to myself, that all this imagined beauty is virtual, a mirage. And this allowed a painting divided against itself, but unified by colour, light and space.
b: Translating Brush and Ink

Perhaps the painting demonstrates that calligraphy cannot be translated into Western painting, with its heavier and slower oil paints and canvas. The painting was in fact made through the projection of a text that had been typeset, and so the outcome is not at all like Su’s flowing, blossoming hand. There is no possibility then of letters being linked through painterly gesture, so that the painter’s qi would flow throughout the piece. To speak of “writing” at all would erroneous.

It was only possible to take up a few qualities of Su Shi and Huang Tingjian’s calligraphy in the painting: there are always limits to a person’s ability and limits to a medium. But in what it could absorb, the painting provides evidence of how the Cold Food scroll and the Zhang Datong scroll were seen. At certain points in the Cold Food scroll, the ink almost clots rather than flows, in a manner Sturman describes as “inchoate pools of ink.” At these points, the clotted ink seemed for a moment like a glimpse of Jackson Pollock’s untransformed blots and drips of paint, and this provided a gateway to oil paint with its much heavier weight and viscosity. But this is likely a misreading of Su’s calligraphy, since this kind of clotting was and is frowned on. Mi Fu in particular prided himself on being able to control the flow of ink by never being too fast or too slow with the brush.

But Su, like Song Ke in the early Ming, now and then allowed the brush to slow, depositing too much ink at that point. Perhaps Su and Song were both flawed in their calligraphy—perhaps, but Su as he often said, did not abide by rules. “My own calligraphy may not be very good, but it expresses new meaning, and does not follow in the footsteps of the ancients.” I wondered whether this apparent flaw was not deliberate, but I knew too that this was to see Su’s work through a Western optic, in much the same way that Donald Judd saw Pollock. “The dripped paint in most of Pollock’s painting is dripped paint. It’s that sensation, completely immediate and specific.”
Western perceptions cannot simply be projected onto Chinese objects nor can today’s conceptions be cast anachronistically onto works a thousand years previous to us. Pollock doesn’t provide access to the Northern Song.\textsuperscript{484} But artworks are not simply consigned to history: the only value they can have is a value sustained in the present. “It sometimes strikes me,” writes Jeff Wall, the contemporary artist, “that an image from the past becomes spontaneously open and possible again the moment I see it. This happened with the Hokusai print which inspired the \textit{Sudden Gust of Wind} too. By the way, that’s why I don’t believe there is “old art” as opposed to ‘new art’; if I’m experiencing something now, really experiencing it, it is ‘now’ for me...”\textsuperscript{485} The use to which an historical work is put translates it for a new historical period; it changes, but this is how it survives as an \textit{artwork}, rather than simply enduring as an artefact. “Great works continue to live in the distant future. In the process of their posthumous life they are enriched with new meanings, new significance.”\textsuperscript{486}

Almost everything material had to be translated into terms I could comprehend, that I could put to use. Mi Fu had said that,“In calligraphy what is to be valued is the handling of the brush.”\textsuperscript{487} But Wang Xizhi’s or Mi Fu’s twisting, lifting, thinning, thickening touch would always be too distant from oil paint and canvas to provide useful models; what I needed instead was a “brush idea” that was not tied to ink on paper. Huang Tingjian’s hand in the \textit{Zhang Datong} scroll was exactly that, a relatively slow-moving but strong hand, one that in calligraphic terms was quite heavy, that could be imagined as capable of pushing oil paint around. Rather than being quick, light, and mercurial, Huang’s hand was consistent, even deliberate; the brush was not constantly twisting in its orientation or lifting off the paper surface, as it does in Wang or Mi.

Fu Shen’s dissertation was invaluable to me, and in particular, two observations that made it clear why I had been drawn to Huang’s scroll and why it could be a useful model for contemporary Western painting. The first was his quotation of Huang’s view of Wen Tong’s painting and calligraphy, which I discussed earlier on the convertibility of the arts.
“When Wen Hu-chou [Wen Tong] paints bamboo and trees, his brushwork is simply wonderful, but his calligraphy doesn’t match up to his painting: if he could use his painting method to write calligraphy, then no one could match him.” The second is his own observation that, “His [Huang’s] calligraphy possessed a strongly pictorial quality and his feeling for the qualities of pure design were those of a painter extended to calligraphy.” Obviously in these passages neither Huang nor Fu Shen were thinking of contemporary Western painting, but these could almost be taken as instructions on how calligraphy could be transmuted into painting.

Huang explicitly opens the door to painting rather than writing calligraphy. Taken seriously and extended into a world much wider than Huang could have imagined, it suggests that calligraphy could be made through Western painting’s means, in oil and canvas, with heavy brushes, glazes, coloured pigments. Fu Shen’s own use of concepts like “pictorial quality” and “pure design” shows an awareness of possibilities from outside the Chinese tradition. This insight made me realize that analogous visual qualities could be found in the Western tradition and its particular understanding of what was required by a picture. But of course, this means that in practice, in an actual work, calligraphy would be confronted by a very different “concept of the picture”, as Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall call it.

The pictorial drama of Baroque painting—more exactly, its drama of pronounced contrasts of light and darkness—is one element of this different concept of the picture. (A second is painting in a thin film, like Frederico Barocci, which allows these illusions of light and darkness.) In Rembrandt’s Night Watch, figures are lit by seemingly natural accidents of light. Light in that painting does not correspond to any hierarchy of social importance; it falls in shafts as though through a tattered roof, sometimes occluding important figures or spotlighting the less significant. In del Sarto’s Madonna of the Harpies a knee, picked out by light, seems to become a subject of the painting. In a similar way, light in The Declining Year does not direct the eye to the most significant
passages in the text: darkness envelopes words and phrases because the light falls in patches, like accidents of light in a natural world, independent of human wishes.

I could translate space, but not colour, such a crucial element of that very different concept of the picture, enormous in the Western tradition, but absent in classical calligraphy. Even the paintings of the Song and Yuan literati were more than muted by the standards of the West—though the Daoist and Buddhist murals, like temple interiors, were bold to the point of being garish. But strong colour was not part of the pingdan ideal of the “bland” or “flavourless.” Even the more daring contemporary calligraphers, like Wang Dongling, do not work in colour. If China exerted an influence on me in terms of colour, it was contemporary China, not the Song: The Declining Year’s purple field with its scatterings of orange is from a silk scarf I saw in a shop in Hefang Lu, not far from West Lake, but did not buy.

\section*{c: Translating Space}

I might never have understood calligraphy at all, or found a way to take up something of that practice, if I had not read in Jean-Francois Billeter that, “Western writing has never been conceived in terms of three-dimensional bodily forms...In China, the nature of calligraphic space has always been the same as that of pictorial space.” Space in China’s visual culture was not the same as space in the West, but Billeter’s observation made clearer what linkages could exist between calligraphy and Western painting, in spite of all the apparent differences.

The three-dimensionality of writing is especially pronounced in cursive script, and most powerfully in the tradition that follows from Wang Xizhi. In that tradition, calligraphy is a kinesthetic record of the calligrapher’s hand moving in space. Brice Marden’s \textit{Cold Mountain} paintings took up this twisting, lifting, rotating “brush idea” and interpreted it through Jackson Pollock’s ceaselessly moving line that is always looping into skeins that produce space.
I did not follow Marden’s lead—in part because his paintings had already absorbed those particular lessons. But it is also that I am not a gestural painter, and so I needed some other way forward that suited the visual and material means I’d built up over the years. (The idea that artists can choose what to do is a myth. What we refer to glibly as “a way of working” is really a deeply rooted identity, built up over years, and anchored in our perceptual apparatus, our physiology, our unconscious patterns of thought and feeling. It cannot easily be shifted, and constrains what is possible. Su Shi once said that trying to change one’s calligraphy was “like trying to row a boat against the current. One can exhaust one’s strength to the utmost, but the boat never leaves its old place.”

Marden was able to follow the example of calligraphers like Wang and Huaisu because his work is abstract. The gestural possibilities largely vanish if the painting of texts is the issue, and this also means that the illusion of space becomes much more difficult to produce. By comparison with Chinese characters, the letters of the Western alphabet appear flat, and they are not imagined as existing in space. If F. W. Mote is correct, then the gestural possibilities in calligraphy follow from the freedom calligraphers have in adjusting in the relationship of parts, the angles and thickness of brushmarks, the verticality or horizontality of a character. But the Western tradition of painting is rich with a very different history of space.

It was difficult to overcome the flattening effect of typeset letters, but through trial and many errors in earlier paintings, I found that this could be overcome by treating each letter separately, giving it its own “weather.” Blurring one letter more than its neighbour...
would make it appear to be slightly further away, as though atmospheric perspective was beginning to act on it. A letter left relatively clear would appear to be closer. By treating every letter individually, a shifting, fluctuating space resulted, related to that of Cubism where the surface of the painting is divided into a series of shuttling planes.

The pictorial drama of dark and light is also a drama of space—as the paintings of Caravaggio and Rembrandt show. The sequence of my own paintings is a slow dawning of light and space; both become more pronounced as I grew more confident in putting to use certain perceptual structures of Western painting. In *The Declining Year*, certain patches of letters fall into darkness as though into a well, while others emerge into light and seem to be much closer to the surface. The orange squares with their grey letters seem to float on a surface of fluctuating depth, like lily pads on a pond of purple lake.

### **d: Translating Time**

Scrolls unroll the time encoded in calligraphy, in a manner which is antithetical to Western painting with its “always on” structure. One cannot be translated into the other. My goal had always been to make Western paintings that responded to the pressure of an immersion in the Northern Song, not works which pretended to be part of the Chinese tradition. In the end, though, I found certain sources in the calligraphic tradition which even contemporary Western paintings could draw from.

The stone stele, like Western paintings, are designed to travel in time rather than space—they are “time-biased” in Harold Innis’ terminology. It should be no surprise then that I was deeply impressed by the inscribed stones at the Forest of Stele in Xi’an, especially the *Yu Shi Tai* by Liang Shengqing, and the *Yan Family Stele* by Yan Zhenqing. There was something terribly poignant about these stele, something I did not sense in the works on paper or silk—even though Robert Harrist Jr.’s belief is that, “All writing is haunted by mortality.” But this is magnified in writing that addresses some distant future. Harrist writes of the *moya*, the cliff inscriptions, “When writing on the surface of the earth, the
contrast between the durability of the words and the ephemeral hand of the calligrapher is stark indeed.”

To visit the Forest of Stele, seeing the scratched and worn inscriptions, is to experience that same haunting, to feel the resonances of deep cultural time. “A love of metal-and-stone [inscriptions] is like turning toward the ancients, like going back into the [cultural] memory” said Jiang Xuanyi (1903-1977). In the West, the emergence of a multitude of new media—video projection, the internet, computer animation—have made painting more resonant, as though it had been turned towards a past that the newly invented media never shared. In the stele, it seemed I had found a point of contact between calligraphy and Western painting.

I suppose Mi Fu would have thought I was egregiously mistaken; he was insistent that, “One cannot learn from stone engravings.” Sturman explains that, “stele, in general, undermine the self-expressive capabilities of calligraphy because the difficult process of transplanting the written traces to stone make it impossible to maintain the subtleties of the original.” The brush amplified the importance of the individual calligrapher; the stone inscriptions mitigated this. Coming from a culture that relentlessly promotes individuality, I found myself far less interested in the self-expressive possibilities than in qualities like patterning and visual rhythm, since these require each character (or letter, in my case) to defer to the work as a whole. Perhaps this is the very faintest intuition of the Confucius’ ren, humaneness.
The Declining Year is much less like Mi Fu’s flowing hand, or Su Shi’s, and more allied to the Yu Shi Tai, and Yan Zhenqing’s Yan Family Stele, neither of which rely on the flowing cursive script. The Yu Shi Tai utilizes the clerical script typical of Han dynasty stele, though it was written during the Tang; the Yan Family Stele was written in standard script. In both stele, each character seems to be self-contained, as though it could have been written in isolation from the others. In both an incised grid is visible which ensured the proper placement and size of the characters transferred to the stone. The Declining Year too relies on that grid, together with all the other paintings—though it was studying funerary inscriptions at the Royal Ontario Museum that first suggested this way of controlling the placement of letters.

That grid is crucial to the paintings, because it slows reading. The stele, like the scrolls, were read in vertical rows, starting on the right. But the spaces that separated characters in their vertical rows, and the spaces that separated characters from their neighbours horizontally were made equal by the grid. In The Declining Year, what confronts a viewer is a text; the text is only meaningful if read in vertical rows, but for someone habituated
to reading across horizontal rows, this is difficult. The texts are not long by the standards even of lyric poetry, but they are very long for painting. (To my knowledge only the only longer ones are in Greg Curnoe’s *Victoria Hospital, First Series, 1969*, and Ron Terada’s *Jack*, from 2010 which reproduces a whole chapter of a book devoted to Jack Goldstein.) It seems very difficult to read the paintings. Decoding the language takes longer, and seems to require holding words in memory for long periods of time, and mentally assembling them. It slowly dawned on me that I was engaged in the process that the Russian Formalist critic, Viktor Shklovsky, called “distension”, which Elizabeth Legge summarizes as “a technique for making texts difficult in different ways, by means of extending their length or intensifying the experience of their length in order to demand more of the reader.”

The rhetorical delaying in language that *Pain Not Bread* sometimes engaged in is not possible in the paintings, but a different and more extreme version of this can take place. The texts are more difficult to take up because they are arranged vertically—and because they present themselves as a pattern. And so reading stalls—and since paintings elicit being seen, the painting can insist once more that it must be taken up through the work of seeing. Looking and reading then seem to be both united and divided.

e. Composing the Texts

The texts in my paintings are derived from *Pain Not Bread*’s book of poems, *Introduction to the Introduction to Wang Wei*. *The Declining Year* is gathered from many points in the book: the most crucial elements are found in the poems, “Crows” and “In the Forbidden City, I Went to See the Marble Staircase That Reputedly Leads to Heaven…”

For more than a decade, the poets Roo Borson, Kim Maltman and I wrote poetry collaboratively, “mining” critical introductions and translators’ forewords to Wang Wei and the other great Tang poets, extracting from them striking words and phrases, images that fired our imaginations. We read these texts as points of departure in the attempt to find new contents—thoughts, feelings, and ways of saying which were foreign to us. We
sought ideas we could reverse or invert, images we could excise from their contexts. New poems were ignited by tinder collected from earlier texts; often we saw, or imagined, linkages between words and phrases now separated from their original contexts. Things meant literally became the starting point for extended metaphors; phrases separated by an intervening expanse of several pages were welded together. Word-by-word literal translations of poems were overturned, the meanings and sequences of phrases spilled, and new poems made from these. Behind our poems, knowledgeable readers could see the original Tang poems, but as though in a distorting mirror. “Mountains and rivers ruined by the state survive,” reads our poem, and behind it lies Du Fu’s great poem, “The Chancellor of Shu,” which begins, “the state is ruined, mountains and rivers survive.”

The point was to discover new meanings—unbidden or unforeseen moments of poetry. We hoped to make poems that in some small way were analogous to the dense allusiveness of Tang dynasty poetry. But we also wanted to dwell in a literary secondariness, making poems that were so clearly derived from earlier writings, and that displayed this, “as if perpetually stuck, in some doorway which opens out onto those great works.” It was not until several years later that I realized that what we had attempted was closer to the Song and its way of appropriating and redeploying earlier poems.

The paintings are mine, then—in the sense that it was I who painted them. They are not mine in the sense that their contents, the texts which I assembled, are derived from Pain Not Bread, with now and then a hint or a scrap from a Chinese poem. Pain Not Bread’s poems are ours in that we wrote the poems; they are not ours in the sense that words and phrases are often taken from other authors. The paintings extend into that long resonating chain of previous authors and texts. Here is the very smallest point of contact with Confucius’ insistence, “I do not invent. I only transmit.”
The paintings were not made to take up some theoretical point such as the “death of the author” or to imply a critique of originality—nor was the Introduction to the Introduction. I simply wanted not to bother taking part in certain “authorial positions” because I have no interest in them. Pain Not Bread simply wanted to try something else, some different way of working; we were weary of certain understandings of lyric poetry. “To be true to the modern era, we must say that art is criticism, and that art is practiced ‘critically’” Stephen Horne wrote quite accurately. But that is part of the contemporary understanding from which I want to dissent, by which I do not want any longer to be circumscribed.

In an essay on Pain Not Bread, Alison Calder argues that those poems trouble the conviction that poetry has its roots in one individual’s experience, that “the genesis of the text is located at a particular point in the author’s life.” What I wanted, both in Pain Not Bread and in the paintings, was simply a text that did not issue from one specific point or person. Was it possible for a piece of writing to appear like a fog, hovering, issuing from no one particular place, a property instead of the whole local atmosphere? The outcome in the paintings is a voice which is mine but not mine. Somehow, speaking in a voice which is not mine, as though from a vanished culture to which I did not belong, has allowed me to speak more directly than had been possible for me before, though of course, this is quite indirect. I can say what I have needed to say, now that “I” am not speaking. (One might have to be a Ch’an monk to grasp this paradox.)

“That Pain Not Bread are working with a ‘foreign’ genre, classical Chinese poetry, is key to their discussion because it allows enough alienation from the Western literary tradition that Western conventions become visible. Classical Chinese poetry is thus an ideal site for Pain Not Bread’s experimentation, as its strangeness to most Western readers allows exposure of the strangeness that is disguised within more familiar modes.” Calder may be right: I find this useful in thinking about such a familiar mode as painting. But the meaning constituted by a reader is not the same as the meaning for the maker. My own
reasons for this alienation or “foreignness” are more straightforward. On one hand, a quiet dissent from my time; on the other, that there were things we seemed unable to say or even to think from a position solidly within our own culture. Years ago, Jeff Wall wrote that, “Estrangement experienced in the experience of the picture has become our orthodox form of cultural lucidity.”513 This seems right; we may have come to the point historically where a lack of estrangement feels like a lack of lucidity—at least in certain circles.

I’m not sure that I can express what motivates me in purely Western terms. I feel much closer to something Peter Bol wrote about Liu Mien (?-ca.806) in the Tang, that he feared that “the personal search for ultimate values leads [persons] to devalue public, external standards.”514 If everything has become essentially individualist, if all things are taken up as forms of personalized consumption, then entangling my work with the work of others, and making this apparent, perhaps allows a glimpse of something else, some other world, with a different way of living, a different structure of feeling.515 If Huang Tingjian’s calligraphy and Su’s are both instances of newly emerging self-consciousness, seen against the backdrop of the Tang’s method and order, then perhaps my own work, routed through Pain Not Bread, is something like an attempt to be “restrained by method,” seen against the backdrop of a culture that is everywhere individualist.

To turn the poems into an argument, which they are not: in Introduction to the Introduction to Wang Wei the argument is made that, “In front of this world, another world should be placed.”516 This vanished world—or more precisely, its aesthetic—is often idealized there, not because it was in fact ideal, but because it offered something lacking in the contemporary world. “Friends look back and mourn the passing/ of another world, imagining it reached a greater,/ or compared to ours perhaps, less troubled height.”517 But that of course is the problem with what is idealized; somewhere there must be room to admit that, “the time for awe is past,/ the veneration of a way of being/ held up like a mirror in a kind of hopeful vanity/ towards a time that never was.”518 All of
this, the whole aesthetic gesture, can be dismissed, and perhaps it should be. “I suppose
you’ll say/ that intellectuals are always patching holes in the roof/ with some still-living
vine, that this/ is the sort of amateurish and ineffectual thing/ one can always imagine
them doing once it’s too late, in their thin blue sleeves,/ when the weather is already
turning cold.”

2. Holes in the Roof

…I think that’s what I’m doing now—patching holes in the roof, though with perhaps
some no-longer living vine. The aesthetic that I had inherited now is stuck together with
bits of the Northern Song that have attached themselves, for whatever reason. I hope I
haven’t left the impression that my immersion in the Northern Song has come to some
neat conclusion; I don’t know if I will ever be finished with the period, its works, the
aesthetic understanding. I’m not left with “more”, a better aesthetic which somehow
melds the Song and the contemporary. Instead I’m left with the sense that each undercuts
the other. I took up the Song in order to change my own understanding of art. Looking
back, I didn’t really believe that change was possible. As Su Shi said, it’s difficult to row
very far upstream, the current of one’s own time is always so powerful… Besides, it’s not
possible simply to assent to a different aesthetic. An aesthetic is inherited, little of it is
volitional, since it is what we are and how we see. I’m left instead with a series of open
questions, a bag of issues that trouble me, slight hesitations in how I work. They’re like
clouds, always returning in different forms, multiplying endlessly…

…The Cold Food scroll is an ideal for me, in how it fuses visual art and poetry, and Su
Shi, a beacon, in his leaning one way to balance the time…
I can’t read Chinese characters, and so I’ll never know, but I wonder if in this scroll, reading and looking are fused. Harrist says that calligraphy refuses to resolve into a visual or a verbal mode. But in China I never met anyone who reported feeling this refusal, this tension about any piece of calligraphy. If it was there, it passed unnoticed. I thought I was working my way towards this kind of fusion, with Wang Wei’s poem also in mind, but my own paintings seem to divide looking and reading. I know too that arranging the letters in vertical rows increases the difficulty—it’s not just that paintings elicit looking. It seems inordinately difficult to read the work—and if you do read it, if you force yourself, then the work seems to escape, because it’s no longer seen. It’s as though reading it was turning away from the work, though of course it isn’t. Something always escapes—the words, or the way of appearing. The work seems to be this contradiction, where each way of taking it up is a way of turning away from it. I’ve followed Greg Curnoe’s example as much as Su Shi’s. “Are you reading or just looking?” reads a section of his View of Victoria Hospital, First Series. Obviously he was aware of how his lettered paintings divided a viewer’s mind. I think I must have a divided mind, at home with this switching back and forth between looking and reading…

…I think we’re tilting into something similar to the literati aesthetic, now that the teaching of art has been swallowed whole by universities. Texts are the center of attention: it’s more important to be literate than visually literate. The prolonged learning of craft practices evaporates, everything dissolves into theory, and the acuteness of the visible world is diluted. But as the Analects teach, “If a craftsman wants to do good work, he must first sharpen his tools…”

…It snowed today, the drifts piled up. I looked through Su Shi’s poems, and read the ones filled with snow: how unbroken the mind’s concentration must be, to unfold, line by line,
the world of a poem. So different an experience from my paintings, with their dividedness. Why? What world is this that’s being made?…

…Everything dissolves into literature, which changes the relationship to the past, and restructures the relationship between imagination, knowledge, and emotion. The way in which material things seem to dissolve away and then can be re-imagined: sitting there, West Lake dissolves away into lines and phrases, then re-emerges, perfumed by its literary past, “a hazy and nonspecific external world of scenes and images”—as though it were an image projected on a screen…

…I think the place of suffering was changed. Changed too was the role and place of imagination, the role and place of rationality. “If we look at the various genres of Chinese art…in both form and content, all of them demonstrate this characteristic tendency to emphasize the spirit and deemphasize the material”… And “time and space, cause and effect, and so on, are freed even more from common logic, so that the fortuitous nature of the thinker’s newly revealed emotion becomes more pronounced…”521

…I read Li Zehou and think of Adorno. Would they have found common ground, in their Marxism perhaps, or that both were exiles? I think the Northern Song aesthetic made more room for suffering. The Song had not suffered the Enlightenment’s narrowing of reason, and “enlightenment” meant an awakening to suffering and compassion. “Suffering remains foreign to knowledge,” wrote Adorno, “though knowledge can subordinate it conceptually...Suffering conceptualized remains mute and inconsequential…”522
…We divide subjective and objective; we think of feeling as subjective. But for the Northern Song, an expression of feeling was, in some way, “objective”… “In general, it is when things in the world are disturbed that they make noise,” said Han Yu. “Stone and metal chimes do not sound of their own accord… Words are uttered only when someone has no choice but to speak…”

…“To learn calligraphy, one must develop a sense of justice.” I’m dubious that an artwork actually reveals an artist’s character. But the idea itself is beautiful. If it were true, then an artist’s work would not only be the object or event they made; artists would be at work on their own character. Is it this that allowed Huang Tingjian to speak of justice?…

…But that was just an ideal at most. Most calligraphy was routine or derivative or slavish, not close to being an ethical practice. But even an ideal is impossible now. It would be ridiculous to say that it’s necessary for an artist to develop a sense of justice. Does this leave us better off? Is there some advantage to saying that art has nothing to do with justice? I know now that this ethical ideal came from the rites and music, from the Confucian inheritance, from the idea that art shapes our behaviour and our inward nature. But our culture has nothing to do with ren and li, and even in China this aesthetic has been eroding for centuries. Is it even possible to learn from the past, when the whole present acts against it?…

…And yet this has left me with the sense that an artwork is a form of conduct. I often find myself thinking in terms of ren and li, thinking that art is a li-practice, an outward form, that art could produce humaneness…
…About the literati aesthetic, Jeff Wall captured something crucial—when he said, though not of the Northern Song, that it was a “utopian project of rediscovering the roots of creativity in a spontaneity and intersubjectivity freed from all specialization…”524

…“Be awakened by poetry, be established by ritual, be perfected in music.” How did we come to separate ethics and aesthetics? …

…But it’s Li Zehou as much as Confucius who has changed my thinking. Conceptions of beauty are like tools—just as the invention of tools changed our human nature, so too the ability to perceive beauty changed us. But the perception of beauty changes, as historical conditions change, as the technological organization and material wealth of a society change. Perhaps in the Song, the progress in social life—the proliferation of material goods and increased consumption—led to the sense that personal feeling had to be liberated from its traditional bonds. Perhaps the aesthetic was the means of this change, and led to people producing themselves as “more individual.” Each new perception of beauty changes our nature once more, tuning it to a new social atmosphere, a new way of life which seems to take place naturally. The aesthetic realm is not an ornament. It’s a way of producing ourselves…

…“Adept Kung asked about the practice of Humanity, and the Master said, ‘If a craftsman wants to do good work, he must first sharpen his tools…”525

…The literati aesthetic, with its hovering, just-beyond-the-sensible flavour, its meaning beyond the words, its sense of the illusory quality of life together with such depth of
feeling. Meaning is lifted away from the medium itself. This seems like liberation to me —and yet I continue to work away with my heavy paints, in a manner which really is closer to “labour” than to the “ink play” that “leaves behind a few brushstrokes…”

…I think that Cahill was right, that the literati aesthetic did lead to an amateurization of painting. From Fan Kuan in the early days of the Song to Ni Zan in the Yuan, painting already starts to lose its visual articulation, becomes more vague and dreamy. “If we look at all the various genres of Chinese art, we find that, in both form and content, all of them demonstrate this characteristic tendency to emphasize the spirit and deemphasize the material.” This lets us dream our way into the work. The visual dilution is deliberate; it creates the sense of a hesitant, resonating meaning out beyond the brushmarks. But this is a loss to the culture as a whole, like losing the capacity of make water wheels or print books from wooden blocks. I think it’s similar to the “de-skilling” that began in the Conceptual Art of the 60s. This worries me. I think there are some things that can only be “said” visually, that can only be contested visually…

…What if this withdrawal from the medium, this voluntary de-skilling is the way the aesthetic expresses, or creates, the dreamy unawareness of how resistant the world is? “Something in reality rebuffs rational knowledge,” said Adorno about Western reason. Did something in reality rebuff that Chinese aesthetic? What if that aesthetic reinforced the “voluntarism” that Li sees as leading to Mao’s horrors—the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution—as though real material change simply required a change in consciousness? There are things I love in that vanished aesthetic. And yet I’ve met so many who suffered so deeply during Mao’s programs. Did their suffering follow from what I value? …
Perhaps meaning had to lie beyond the words, beyond the brushstrokes. Perhaps in a period of relatively sudden cultural over-production like the Song—or our own time—it’s no longer important to have one more poem, one more piece of calligraphy, one more painting. Perhaps it’s suffocating to feel that meaning is stuffed in the material itself. Perhaps it’s important to hear the artwork resonating in the others that are piling up in the cultural storehouse…

I suffer from double vision: onto this world, another world is projected. In Liam Gillick’s work, I see the problems of Ni Zan; in Ni Zan I see Conceptual Art’s “withdrawal of visuality,” which still is spreading. Rirkrit Tiravanija’s vacant retrospective: empty galleries, visitors with their written scenarios. But I understand why Gillick wants to open the work up, even though this means diluting it visually. It’s necessary to create the situation where “the work in the gallery is…associative, discursive, and parallel to the text.” A viewer wanders, almost dreams their way into the work, attends to it by not particularly attending to it. The work “lacks consolidation”, as Gillick cheerfully admits. “There are a number of keys to understanding my work: one is distraction.” Artists make ways of paying attention: this is social training in distraction. Perhaps it prepares us for immaterial labour, for multi-tasking. I see it too as a tool that is lost, just as Ni Zan surrendered what Fan Kuan accomplished. “Its vanguard is its own disappearance”, wrote Guy Debord of the Western avant-garde…

I think so often of Wang Wei, and tried to visit his estate in the mountains. Now weapons are tested there, and armoured divisions hunker down amid peaks Fan Kuan could have painted. That he was “mistakenly” a poet, “mistakenly” a painter—this has been so important to me, I almost cherish it… It offered a way past the categories in which I had been trained. It seemed like liberty, and let me attend simply to doing what was necessary. It was a way past names. Perhaps this sounds foolish. But Zhuangzi
pointed out that it is necessary to pass beyond names and categories, not to take them as truth…

…But how should I conduct myself? “For absolute freedom in art,” Adorno said, “always comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole…”

3. Stone and Metal Chimes

“Stone and metal chimes do not sound of their own accord…It is the same with regard to men and the words they speak.” I installed the exhibition (Records of a Non-Historian), and when the paintings were up, I was taken aback by how quiet they seemed; this wasn’t what I expected. The next day, I went to the gallery to spend time with the work. I left feeling chastened by my own work. Later, the beginnings of an understanding started to fall into place: I hadn’t realized just how deeply I have been influenced by this vanished aesthetic, traces, hints and flavours of which remain, even after the always-growing impact of global capitalism.

It was only possible to feel this way if the idea of art as self-expression had begun to fade, if the work could be seen as a form of conduct. If so, then it could be, in some way, better than its maker, and could differ from the artist. As if Han Yu’s understanding was possible—that human feeling is closer to being objective than subjective, that it is shared, or set in motion by circumstances outside one’s self. I recalled an experience I had one day in the studio after I had returned from China. I began to sense strange and unsettling feelings I’d never experienced before, that I did not recognize.

I think that what I saw in the gallery was this same unsettlement. Artworks are a very slow form of digestion. Thoughts are fast and possible; artworks rule out so much, and
take so much labour. It’s often years before changes make their appearance: it never occurred to me that this could happen so quickly.

I’m left feeling strangely displaced by own work—which is fitting, since the two works I admire most, and which I have examined here, were both written in exile. Perhaps it’s not too far-fetched to say that Northern Song China is a voluntary place of exile, though exile of course is never voluntary, and the Song involves a displacement in time as well as space. “It sometimes strikes me that an image from the past becomes spontaneously open and possible again,” meaning that artworks that had been pinned to the wall of past can revive themselves.534 “The truth of the new is the truth of what is not already used up,” writes Adorno.535

It may seem strange to say of the Northern Song that it belongs to that which has not been used up. But seen from the Western tradition, its foreignness in this very different context of reception makes it fresh, and allows Walter Benjamin’s “hope in the past” to flourish in it.536 Just as an image from Hokusai became possible again, something of the Northern Song seems possible, which is why I find it impossible to a reach a conclusion. If, as Jeff Wall says, it sometimes happens that “an image from the past becomes spontaneously open”, this sudden openness is the opposite of a past that has been concluded.

Just as culture is collaboration with the dead, it is also, and always, a project without end—an endless reinvention, an endless exploration of its precincts, an endless testing of its confines. What conclusions then could I reach? It would be ridiculous to say for example that the Northern Song aesthetic was superior to ours. It would be equally absurd to maintain the opposite: the two cultures are different projects founded on different principles. Nor do I believe that “components” could be extracted from the Song and plugged into our contemporary aesthetic to upgrade it, an aesthetic being a world or an atmosphere, not the sum of parts assembled into a machine. I value the Northern Song instead as a challenge to the present, as something that cannot be assimilated into the
present’s terms. That challenge presented by calligraphy to the western world’s art history has only recently begun. What it offers is a different model of art.

I want to insist, as I did in my introduction, that the artworks themselves are the basis of that encounter. This poses a challenge to the very idea of a written thesis: what, for example, could be the thesis put forth by Simone Martini’s *Saint Louis of Toulouse*? That Chinese silks exist? That they are beautiful? That their particular decorative surface could be placed within the representational scheme of a European altarpiece? There can be no answer which would not misrepresent the work performed by a work of art. As Pierre Bourdieu argued of practice in general, it is misrepresented by logical thought, “making it say what goes without saying and projecting on to it an explicit thought that it excludes by definition.”537 The original Greek, *tithenai*, to place, is much closer to what an occurs in a work of art.538 Something is set in place, perhaps positioned next to something else—an encounter is produced.

It is difficult to be precise about what my paintings absorbed from the Song. A different emotional tenor? A different relation to language? A sensation of meaning lying beyond the materials? A changed relation of private and public? A different origin for subjective feeling? It is much easier to say what the paintings were unable to absorb, the many lessons which my medium or my own capacities rejected. The complex visuality of material artworks mark out the limits of what is possible to bring across the border from one culture to another. This is a way of learning, and the paintings themselves are the thesis put forward here, in both their capacity and their incapacity to absorb lessons from the Northern Song. I believe that something of the Northern Song marks the paintings and dislocates them, in, I hope, a manner like that of the poet, Feng Zhi (1905-1993), who, during the Japanese invasion of China, wrote a series of sonnets deeply influenced by Rilke, the great German poet.539 Those poems are odd strange concatenations of China and Europe marked by a foreign quality, a voice not at one with itself, a series of oppositions held in tension.
I cannot claim that I have not been changed by this encounter with the Song. My work too has shifted and this, perhaps, means that the two aesthetics are interacting a little more densely than before, across this gap of cultures and centuries. Something of this confrontation can be put in words. In introducing the history of the reception of Chinese art, I wrote that exactly what could be absorbed was impossible to foresee in advance of the artwork actually being made. I could never have predicted, for example, that the most crucial conscious lesson for me would be understanding art as a form of conduct, a lesson which seems to be slowly bringing me into alignment with the Neo-Confucian views that were developing during the Northern Song.

I see the Northern Song now as a moment in which a decidedly individual expression was still explicitly tied to public, collective values—something which appears paradoxical. Because of this, Northern Song calligraphy cannot simply be posed as the collectivist opposite to the intensely individualist promotional culture of the contemporary art world. The calligraphy of Su Shi and Huang Tingjian is among the most strikingly individual, even eccentric, examples of that form. And yet both strove to make work that served some larger public purpose. The often intensely emotional tone of their work is both personal and public—but the two are not identical. Instead, in the calligraphy itself there seems to be something we can recognize as a very distinct individual expression, and in the same work, another “layer” of feeling, in which something other than individual is also given voice—a historical depth in the case of Huang Tingjian; the suffering of others, in Su Shi’s. I often wonder if the pingdan aesthetic was not some attempt to adjust human feeling to this new dividedness in the structure of the calligraphy, diluting the intensity of feeling in order to accommodate the strain.

This sense of art as conduct places an emphasis on the making of art as the making of the artist. “To learn calligraphy, one must develop a sense of justice,” wrote Huang Tingjian. I doubt this was ever true, but it is a beautiful ideal. “Reverence becomes tedium without
Ritual, and caution becomes timidity. Without ritual, courage becomes recklessness, and truth becomes intolerance, ” The Analects teach. Outward form, this emphasis on conduct, is a type of rigour, the public aspect of private feeling which keeps valuable qualities from decaying into private feelings that could erode the public realm.

What strikes me as crucially important is that this emphasis on conduct does not bring to an end or suppress the expression of what is distinct in an individual. But it insists that the role of art is not simply the expression of the self. Instead the place of art is to give expression to thought and feeling while also molding, channeling, and shaping them. This, then, twines together the private and the public realms, without making them identical—and perhaps offers some way past the self-promotional individualism of our period. “When the Way’s lost in your country, there’s shame in wealth and renown.”

This is not to say that shameless self-promotion did not exist in the Northern Song, as the criticism of slavish writing makes obvious.

Han Yu’s view of emotions has also been crucial to me as well, providing a way of understanding human feeling as more than merely individual, a sense that the emotions are, if not precisely objective, then motivated by concrete circumstances manifested in the world. Obviously, human feelings can only exist within some individual person. But if words are uttered only when someone has no choice but to speak, then the point of an expressive art is no longer the promotion of the self in any narcissistic sense. If there is no choice but to speak, then an obligation is placed upon both the artist and the viewer to recognize this real unfreedom. Art, then, might once again be consequential, might secede from the entertainment sphere which has seemingly swallowed it whole.

By then it was almost midnight. The gallery was completely silent. The guests had left; I fell asleep on the gallery floor. I dreamed that two cranes had flown in, and calmly glided about the space. As they drifted by, they greeted me and asked, “What did you learn on your journey to the Middle Kingdom?” When I asked their names, they looked down
without answering, and continued to circle in the space. My head began to clear. “Now, I understand. You are the calligraphers, Su and Huang. Was it you that called out to me as you flew overhead in Hangzhou?” They looked back as they flew slowly out into the night, and their calls sounded like laughter. Suddenly I woke up. I opened the door and looked outside, up and down the street, but saw no trace of them.\textsuperscript{542}
References

1 Maginnis, The World of the Early Sienese Painter, 98.

2 Hills, The Light of Early Italian Painting, 96.

3 Caiger-Smith, Tin-Glaze Pottery in Europe and the Islamic World, 129.

4 Sullivan, The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art, 2.

5 None of Wang Wei’s paintings survive, only a stone engraving purported to have been copied from his original painting. But Su Shi records having seen Wang’s painting, and compares them to those of Wu Doazi in a poem.


7 See Ad Reinhardt, Art As Art, 212-215. The influence of Chinese art and thought can be seen throughout his writings, in statements such as the famous essay, “Art-As-Art.”


14 An Emperor’s time in power was divided into a series of proclaimed “reign periods.” “Yuanyou” refers to the reign period when those opposed to Wang Anshi’s reforms were briefly recalled to power. The group included Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, Qin Guan, all of whom were exiled at the end of the period.

15 See Yugen Wang, Ten Thousand Scrolls, 73.

16 The two studies that come closest to accomplishing this are Peter Sturman’s monograph, Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China, and Amy McNair’s The Upright Brush: Yan Zhengqing’s Calligraphy and Song Literati Politics. I have relied heavily on both. But for my purposes, each provides obvious problems. Mi Fu seems to be somewhat an outsider, as Sturman suggests, and both his practice and mentality differ greatly from Su Shi and Huang Tingjian, who are probably more characteristic of the period. Yan Zhenqing lived during the Tang, and though his calligraphy is crucial to the Northern Song, obviously, his practice itself was not part of an era which lay far in the future.
17 Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu*, 3.


20 Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 162.


27 Wen Fong, “Prologue”, 1.


33 Harrist, *The Landscape of Words*, 18.


40 Quoted in Zhu Guantian, “An Epoch of Eminent Calligraphers”, 218. The poem is “eight carefree souls after a drinking bout.”

41 Quoted in Qian Zhongshu, 93.

42 See Egan, *Word, Image and Deed*, 293.
I wonder from time to time whether Su’s comment isn’t, at the same time that it is accurate and humorous, also a wayward type of compliment, an acknowledgement that Huang’s writing had some flavour of the "birds and worms" script was used in the ancient Kingdoms of Wu, Chu, and Yue.


Quoted by Hays, "The Human Body," 82.

Quoted in Peter Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 61.


Peter K. Bol, *‘This Culture of Ours,’* 1.


Quoted in Qian Zhongshu, *Limited Views*, 104.


Quoted in Peter Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 84.


Zhang Huaiguan, (9th century) quoted by Hay, "The Human Body,” 86.

Peter Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 84.

Quoted in Qian Zhongshu, 284.

Quoted in Qian Zhongshu, 282.

Quoted in Qian Zhongshu, 286.

67 See Swartz, 124.

68 Or it was believed that he had invented this style, and wrote out calligraphy in his own hand. But it is more than likely that most of the calligraphy is merely apparently in his hand, and was written out instead by skilled writers at his order.


73 See James Cahill, *The Painter’s Practice*, 2.


75 This essay was written for his decree examination in 1061. His essays were widely circulated and were the basis of his early fame. See Egan, *Word, Image and Deed*, 8.

76 Quoted by Wen Fong, in Zhongshi Ouyang and Wen C. Fong. *Chinese Calligraphy*, 17.

77 See Sturman on Mi Fu’s letters written at Yongqiu, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 101-106.

78 Quoted by Cong Wenjun, “An Overview of Ancient Calligraphic Theories,” 419.


80 Quoted in McNair, *The Upright Brush*, 1.


82 Quoted in McNair, *The Upright Brush*, 2

83 Quoted in McNair, *The Upright Brush*, 11.

84 Quoted by Cong Wenjun, An Overview of Ancient Calligraphic Theories,” 434.

85 Cong Wenjun, An Overview of Ancient Calligraphic Theories,” 433.
This idea that all men, and not merely sages, could follow the Confucian teachings became explicitly a central tenant of Neo-Confucian thought through Zhu Xi (1130-1200) during the Southern Song. But this view seems to have gradually been growing in strength for some time. It was implicit in earlier Confucian thought, in Confucius’ insistence on self-refinement for example, and both Mencius and Xunzi made explicit statements on this issue. “The sage and I are of the same kind”, said Mencius; Xunzi stated that, “Any man in the street has the essential faculties needed to understand benevolence, righteousness, and proper standards, and the potential ability to put them into practice.” (See Lau, D. C. Mencius, 249, and Burton Watson, Hsun Tzu: Basic Writings, 166-7.) In the late Tang, Li Ao explicitly raised the objection to Buddhism that Zhu Xi would—that its teachings were not possible to be practiced by all, and therefore it could not be the tao of the sage. (See Bol, ‘This Culture of Ours,’ 138.)

Antonio S. Cua. Virtues of Junzi, 8.

Karyn Lai, An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy, 77.

See Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 16.

McNair, The Upright Brush, 13.

Ronald Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 273

Yuehping Yen reports that because the Tang set clear criteria for calligraphy, and because one could find a bureaucratic post through excellence in calligraphy alone, Yu Shinan and Liu Gongquan found positions. See Yen, Calligraphy and Power, 128. Something of this must still have been in effect in the Northern Song.


Quoted in Sturman, Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy, 29

Quoted in McNair, The Upright Brush, 135.

Quoted in Ronald Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 267.

Quoted in Egan, Word, Image and Deed., 267.

Quoted in Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 268.

Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 262.


A funerary inscription for a general from the reign of the Empress Wu is part of the Royal Ontario Museum’s collection. On the tablet, the characters introduced by the order of Empress Wu have been vigorously scratched out.

Quoted in Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 32.
Just as Ouyang collected much more extensively than any individual before, the historian Sima Guang also felt the need to read and evaluate a much greater range of historical accounts. Both were part of the same *guwen* movement. See Egan, “To Count Grains of Sand”, 50.


Quoted in Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, 12.


See for example Mote, *Calligraphy and the East Asian Book*, 4.

In a famous essay John Hay wrote that, “Anyone studying the pattern of China’s intellectual history must be struck by the interpenetration of what, for us, would be distinct areas of thought and activity. Parenthetically, we should emphasize that this applies most profoundly to art “ See John Hay, “The Human Body as a Source,” 80.


Chief among these is Amy McNair.

Su Shi for example was banned from writing and publishing poetry in the shi form, and all wooden blocks used to reproduce his literature and calligraphy were ordered destroyed. See Egan, *Word, Image and Deed*, 105.

See Ebrey, *Accumulating Culture*, 253. Because the Northern Song fell when Cai Jing was Chancellor, he is vilified as the architect of the dynasty’s ruin. For this reason, many assessments of Northern Song calligraphy replaced Cai Jing with Cai Xiang, who was much earlier in the Song—thus preserving the Mi, Su, Huang, and Cai way of summing up that period’s calligraphy. To my eye, alas, the “wicked councillor” was a better calligrapher than his replacement.


I can think of few exceptions in Western painting. Chief among them are the medieval altarpieces, such as Van Eyck’s the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb which I once saw in Ghetto. At that time it was still in the chapel for which it had been painted. When we entered, the altarpiece was closed; all that was visible were the outer figures painted in grisaille. When a monk came to open the altarpiece for the same group of visitors, everyone gasped as the brilliance of the interior paintings were suddenly visible. But today, virtually all the altarpieces that shared this closed/open structure are displayed in museums in an “always open” manner. The temporal structure of even those works has been completely negated.

Ad Reinhardt’s Black Paintings are very temporal works; it often takes several minutes before a viewer can distinguish all nine different black sections within the black painting. It is not coincidental that he had studied and taught Asian art.
In his essay on painting, Wang Wei attempts to put painting on the same footing as calligraphy. There he writes, that “drawing pictures does not end as mere craft, since when perfected it should be in the same category as the images of the Yi jing.” Wang was from a long line of well-known calligraphers. See Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, 69. (Note: this is the Wang Wei of the Six Dynasties period, not the Tang dynasty poet discussed later in my dissertation when dealing with the convertibility of the arts.)

For example, Peter Sturman describes Su Shi’s Cold Food scroll in the following way: "From the misshapen character zi (since)…there unfolds a ceaseless display of shifting rhythms, manners, and tones as Su Shi explores his inspiration at each moment.” See Sturman, *Mi Fu*, 45.


The time “unrolled” in the writing of calligraphy, and its appreciation, could be seen against the background of time as regulated by the imperial bureaucracy. This administration of time must have begun with the rites and inscriptions involved with the consulting of oracles bones. It continues through texts such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Records of the Grand Historian*, the official histories of the various dynasties, the system of reign years and the like. Against this background, in which the shi participated, the qualities of the calligraphic time might have appeared as both regulated (by the demands of the characters) but free in terms of the calligrapher’s ability to adjust the pace of writing.


The dragon boat races are performed in Qu Yuan’s honour; the boats race to rescue him, to keep him from drowning himself.

Quoted in Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 123.

Quoted in Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 121.
In *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, Li publishes a table that acts as a rough map of the whole tradition. Periods in Chinese history are linked with their most characteristic philosophies, subjects, media, concepts of beauty, and representative artists, poets, calligraphers and painters. In that table, he gives the calligraphy of Wang Xizhi as an example of what follows from Qu Yuan’s depth of emotion. Su Shi is placed with Chan Buddhism, for obvious reasons following from Su’s life and philosophy. But I disagree. I would argue that in Wang’s calligraphy, emotional depth is subsumed in the calligraphy’s graceful airs, and that the Cold Food scroll provides a much more compelling example—perhaps even the example—of what follows from Qu Yuan.

The images in the poems of the *Shijing* (*The Classic of Poetry*) were interpreted as figures in a structure of moral analogy, and the poems as political allegories, until the Northern Song, when scholars began to argue for more literal interpretations. (See Zong-ci Cai, *How to Read Chinese Poetry* 33.) Su Shi’s life may have been saved by this new way of interpreting poetry. During his trial for treason, Wang Gui argued to the Emperor Shenzong that two poems about juniper trees were evidence of Su’s treason, by reading through the earlier structure of moral analogy. Shenzong himself rebutted this interpretation of Su’s poems, saying “How can you read poetry like that? He was just describing junipers. It has nothing to do with me.” (Quoted in Egan, *Word, Image and Deed*, 50.)

See Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 152.


This is found in a letter from Wang Sengru (465-522) to his friend, He Jiong, quoted in Qian, *Limited Views*, 412.


On cursive scripts, see Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition*, 7, 8.

This is also the period when Xie An, a close friend of the calligrapher Wang Xizhi, began to listen to music during the period of ritual mourning, music which must have enhanced one’s depth of feeling. Initially this was criticized, but quickly became the wide-spread custom. See note 22, p. 224 in Kafalas’ *In Limpid Dream*.


See Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 125.

See Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 133.


Wang Yao, quoted in Wendy Swartz, “Pentasyllabic Shi Poetry,” 130.


Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 166.

Peter C. Sturman. *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 35.

Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 162.

Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 162.

*The Garden of The Unsuccessful Politician* is Craig Clunas’ translation of Zhou Zheng Yuan; it is also translated often as “The Garden of the Humble Administrator.”

Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites*, 137.

See Clunas, *Fruitful Sites*, 1, 164-5, 189-93.

Clunas, *Fruitful Sites*, 166.


“Canonical authority in the cultural sphere derives from focusing the maximum number of fields, from not being reducible. In the case of Wen Zhengming these would be not only the fields of painting, calligraphy, poetry, but state authority (he was an expert on legal and administrative precedents), imperial power (he served at court), fatherhood, brotherhood, locality, friendship and many others. Discursive power in the Ming comes from not being Canonical authority in the cultural sphere derives from focusing the maximum number of fields, from not being reducible. In the case of Wen Zhengming these would be not only the fields of painting, calligraphy, poetry, but state authority (he was an expert on legal and administrative precedents), imperial power (he served at court), fatherhood, brotherhood, locality, friendship and many others. Discursive power in the Ming comes from not being associated exclusively with one field.” See Craig Clunas, “How Wen Zhengming Became An Artist.”

Clunas has compiled an extensive list of Wen Zhengming’s writings on gardens. It totals thirty-two different poems or prose pieces on twenty-four different gardens, most of them in Suzhou. See Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, 109-112.

At the Shaanxi Institute for Research into Historical Calligraphy I learned that Daoist hermits still live in the mountains to the south. Apparently, hikers often come across them there.

I attempted to visit the site of Wang Wei’s estate in the Lantian section of the Qingling mountains south of Xi’an. A Buddhist friend of a friend had a map which he consulted along with an copy of a supposed engraving of the mountains where Wang Wei had made his estate. As we drove higher and higher in the mountains, the air became colder and cleaner, and the villages wealthier. Eventually, not far from our destination, at a metal gate, we were turned back by the very angry members of the neighbourhood committee. The site of Wang Wei’s estate now lies in what locals called the “Hollow Mountains.” During the period when China and the USSR were preparing to go to war with each other, the limestone mountains were hollowed out, and occupied by whole divisions with their command centres. Today those military divisions still are housed there, hence our angry greeting from the villagers at the metal gate.

See Clunas, *Fruitful Sites*, 137.

Xiaoshan Yang, “Li Deyu’s Pingquan Villa,” 58.


Sometimes the presence of literature in the garden was visible. Robert Harrist Jr. says of the Northern Song that it saw “a burst of writing addressed to the origins and meanings of names for studios, pavilions, ponds, and other sites associated with gardens”—and according to Clunas, these texts were placed within the gardens on name-boards. See Robert Harrist Jr., “Site Names.” Cited by Clunas, *Fruitful Sites*, 145.

Ryckmans, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past”. It’s interesting to note that Tobie Meyer Fong makes a similar point about Yangzhou in the Qing period, writing that “imagined architecture was more important than wood and walls.” See Meyer Fong, *Building Culture in Early Qing Yangzhou*, 2.

Translation by A.C. Graham, “Poems of the West Lake.”


Geremie R. Barmé. “The Tides of West Lake.”

Duncan Campbell, “Searching for the Ming; Zhang Dai.”


Literature is inscribed on many of China’s mountains and hills. Sutras and other texts are carved into the rock of many different sites, including “Flew From Far Away Peak” at Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou. See Robert Harrist Jr, *The Landscape of Words*.


Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 156.


The famed battle of Red Cliffs took place in 208. The northern general, Cao Cao, was defeated there by generals from southern kingdoms, preventing him from reuniting the lands of the Han empire. Ronald Egan writes, “But it is not that Su Shi was mistaken. In fact, he was well aware of the dubiousness of what must have been local claims that the Huangzhou Red Cliff was the battle site.” Egan, *Word, Image and Deed*, 221. Strassberg offers a political reading of the Red Cliff Odes, seeing in the first a reflection on the destruction of a three hundred thousand man Song army in an attack on the Western Xia. See Strassberg, 54, 55 and 442, notes 112, 113.

Geremie R. Barmé, “The Sights of West Lake: a Kind of Neurosis.”


Zhang Dai’s brilliant displays of nostalgia for the lost Ming lay centuries in the future, and yet they provide more evidence for Li’s contention. See Zhang Dai’s “Searching for West Lake in My Dreams.” Campbell, Duncan, trans. *Searching for the Ming: Zhang Dai*.

Jay Xu, "Opposite Paths to Originality: Huang T'ing-chien and Mi Fu," 272.


Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 143.

Fu, Shen C.Y. “Huang T'ing-chien's Calligraphy and His Scroll for Chang Ta-t'ung,” 131.


The translation is by Pain Not Bread. The last poem in the *Introduction to the Introduction to Wang Wei*, it is the only poem not written by Pain Not Bread.

Bau Yiu-ming (also Bau Yaoming) is my good friend, Andrew Lee’s, “uncle.” Hearing of my interest in calligraphy, he offered to write out something for me. I asked for the Wang Wei poem. Bau was a close friend of Zhou Zuoren, the essayist and translator, Lu Xun’s younger brother, and himself a major figure of the May Fourth Movement. Like Zhou and Lu Xun, Bau studied in Japan. In 1997, he edited *Zhou Zouren’s Correspondence in his Late Years* (*Zhou Zuoren wannian shuxin*. Hong Kong: Zhenwenhua chubanshe.)

Quoted in Angela delle Vacche, *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film*, 44.


Stuart Sargeant, “Colophons in Countermotion,” 273. The quotation is found in Su Shi’s colophon, “Written on Mo-chieh’s [Wang Wei] Painting of Misty Rains at Lan-t’ien.”


Trans. Philip B. Yamplosky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. 153,


Quoted by McNair, *The Upright Brush*, 11.


Quoted by Palumbo-Liu, *The Poetics of Appropriation*, 98.


Quoted in McNair, *The Upright Brush*, 52.


I don’t believe that Ai Weiwei’s house arrest provides an counter-example, since his arrest does not follow from his artworks or the style in which they are done. It follows instead from public criticisms such as his investigation the corruption that led to the poorly constructed schools which collapsed in the Sichuan earthquake of 2008.


See Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 27.

For an overview of the political situation, see Bol, ‘This Culture of Ours,’ 212-253; Murck, Poetry and Painting, 32-40; and Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 27-53.

Patricia Ebrey writes that commoners purchased printed portraits of sima guang to make offerings to his image, that tens of thousands made their way to the capital to attend his funeral, and that more than a hundred persons followed his funeral procession all the way to his ancestral home more than a hundred miles from the capital. See Ebrey, Accumulating Culture, 52. For a first hand account of the mourning for Chou En Lai and government attempts to suppress displays of popular affection for him, see Nien Cheng, Life and Death in Shanghai, 571-575.

See Peter K. Bol, ‘This Culture of Ours,’ 212-253.

Quoted by Bol, ‘This Culture of Ours,’ 189. The reference to wooden slips refers to the period before the invention of paper, when writing was done on flattened strips of bamboo. The meaning then is that “if it was good when people wrote on bamboo, then it will always be good.”

Sima Guang’s Comprehensive Treatise, quoted in Bol, ‘This Culture of Ours,’ 236.

See Bol, ‘This Culture of Ours,’ 148.

See Bol, ‘This Culture of Ours,’ 155.

Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 36.

See Keay, China: A History. 57.

Hon, Tze-Ki. The Yijing and Chinese Politics, 6.

Quoted by Bol, ‘This Culture of Ours,’ 218.


See Palumbo-Lui, The Poetics of Appropriation, 60; and James T.C. Liu, Ou-yang Hsiu, 85-90.

Quoted by Bol, ‘This Culture of Ours,’ 273.
Quoted by Bol, 'This Culture of Ours,' 189.

Quoted by Bol, 'This Culture of Ours,' 273.

Quoted by Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 73.

Burton Watson, Records of the Grand Historian, 47.

Quoted in Qian Zhongshu, Limited Views, 364.

Quoted by Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 32.

See Alfreda Murck. Poetry and Painting, 32.

Quoted by Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 36.

See Murck, Poetry and Painting, 37-38, and Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 47.

Burton Watson, Selected Poems of Su Tung-p’o, 46.

Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 49.

Quoted by Qian Zhongshu, Limited Views, 37. The passage is taken from the preface to Bai Juyi’s Luoyang poems.

Quoted by Bol, 'This Culture of Ours,' 86.


McNair, The Upright Brush, xiii. McNair’s entire book is devoted to the Northern Song construction of Yan as a canonical figure.

Quoted by McNair, The Upright Brush 39. See 39-44.

Quoted by McNair, The Upright Brush, 141.

Quoted by McNair, The Upright Brush, 67.

Robert E. Harrist, Jr. The Landscape of Words, 85.

Quoted by Sturman, Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy, 159.

Quoted by Sturman, Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy, 157.

Sturman, Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy, 49.

See Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 16.

Su’s calligraphy in writing out the “Record of Enjoying Rich Harvests Pavilion” influenced my painting, Ghost Sutra. I tried there to carry over some of the “fleshy” quality of Su’s hand.
In what seems like its peculiar mix of qualities, I have wondered whether the best Western example of something that even approaches pingdan might not be either the late poetry of Eugenio Montale—the Italian modernist poet, whose late work seems to have shed every vestige of the poet’s early flash and brilliance of language in favour of something almost desiccated—or the black paintings of Ad Reinhardt—which attempt to subtract colour, personal expression, subject matter, light, declarative paint handling, changes in style, until all that remains is “Art as art.”
See Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 139.

Quoted in Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 153.

Liu Shao’s dates are unknown. He lived during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280), and served as advisor to the Wei state.

Quoted in Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 139.

In my case, it was Anna Shields who pointed out the relationship of guwen to pingdan.

About Tu-ku Chi, see Yu-shih Ch’en, Yushi Zhen, 6. The quoted passage is Bols’ translation, see Bol, “This Culture of Ours,” 116.

Email from Peter Sturman, Tuesday, May 26, 2009 12:18 AM.

Quoted in Eugene Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra*, 397.


It’s interesting to see that Xinda Lian calls Su Shi “a representative of the school of ‘heroic abandon’ (haofang).” See Xinda Lian, 276. This is in a discussion of Su Shi’s poetry however.

Quoted by Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 154.

Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 35.

Yang and Yang, *Poetry and Prose of the Tang and Song*, 70.


Quoted by Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 153.


Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 77.

Quoted in Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 151.


327 Quoted by Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 112.
328 During his exile to Huizhou from 1094-1097, Su Shi embarked on a plan to write poems matching rhymes with each poem of Tao Qian’s that had survived, about one hundred and twenty poems in all. See Egan, *Word, Image and Deed*, 233.
333 Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 153.
335 Translation of “The Placid Style”, by Barnstone and Chou, 217.
339 Ryckmans, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past.”
340 See Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*,” 167.
344 Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*,” 77.
345 Quoted by Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 25.
349 Quoted by Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 38.
Quoted by Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 33.

Bol, “This Culture of Ours,” 123.

For more on the importance of transformation in Northern Song calligraphy, and Su Shi’s in particular, see Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed*, 275.


All the objects Ouyang lists were inscribed with texts. Bronze objects such as cauldrons usually had texts written on their interiors, and often exteriors.


Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 46.


Quoted by Palumbo-Liu, *The Poetics of Appropriation*, 27.

Quoted by Palumbo-Liu, *The Poetics of Appropriation*, 57.


Watson, *Selected Poems of Su Tung-p’o*, 99


Quoted in Bol, “This Culture of Ours,” 297.


Emphasis mine, Bol, “This Culture of Ours,” 123.

Bol, “This Culture of Ours,” 109.
375 See Munakata, “Ching Hao’s ‘Pi-fa-chi’: A Note on the Art of Brush’.
376 See McNair, The Upright Brush, 79.
378 Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 357.
379 Quoted by Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 112.
381 Quoted by Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 121.
382 Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 121.
384 Egan also suggests that it was easier for Ouyang to put aside the conventional view when writing in a form less highly valued than that of a poem.
385 Watson, Selected Poems of Su Tung-p’o, 40.
386 Quoted by Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 140.
387 See Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 144.
388 Quoted by Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 140.
390 Quoted in Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 273.
391 Quoted by McNair, The Upright Brush, 72, and Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 267.
392 Quoted in Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 140.
393 Quoted in Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 118. The quotation is from Su Shi’s poem, “Sick, I hear Ziyou was not allowed to proceed to Shangzhou”
394 Francois Jullien, In Praise of Blandness, 100.
395 Jullien, In Praise of Blandness, 49
396 Sturman, Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy, 153.
398 Fuller, The Road to East Slope, 43.
Fuller, *The Road to East Slope* 44. The quotation is from Su Shi’s poem, “Sick, I hear Ziyou was not allowed to proceed to Shangzhou.”

This is Fuller’s summation of Qian Mu’s view. See Fuller, *The Road to East Slope*, 44.


Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 107.


See Egan, *Word, Image and Deed*, 6

Quoted in Bol, “*This Culture of Ours,*” 205.

Bol, “*This Culture of Ours,*” 203.

Quoted by Fu Shen, “Huang T’ing-chien's Calligraphy,” 120.

Bol, “*This Culture of Ours,*” 205.

Bol, “*This Culture of Ours,*” 205.


I have no proof that Su Shi knew this statement by Liu Yuxi, but Su Shi’s poetry did in fact make allusions to Liu on several occasions. See Fuller, *The Road to East Slope*, 126, 165, 185. See also Cong Wenjun, “An Overview of Ancient Calligraphic Theories,” 434.


Su Shi, quoted by Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 47.


430 Fan Wen, quoted by Qian Zhongshu, *Limited Views*, 112.


443 In writing of how the literary past might have appeared to Huang Tingjian and his like-minded contemporaries, Palumbo-Liu calls it “a historical reservoir of poetry which had become public domain”, *The Poetics of Appropriation*, 175.


448 Fu Shen, “Huang T’ing-chien’s Calligraphy,” 232.
449 See Ebrey, 208. The actual title is *The Model Letters from the Imperial Repository Issued in the Chunhua Period*.
452 Quoted by Fu Shen, “Huang T’ing-chien’s Calligraphy,” 193.
454 Palumbo-Liu, *The Poetics of Appropriation*, 64.
455 Liu Xie, quoted by Palumbo-Liu, *The Poetics of Appropriation*, 155. Liu Xie’s *Dragon Carving and the Literary Mind* was almost completely forgotten by the Tang. (See Yugen Wang, 21, and footnote 45, 209.) But Huang certainly had read it thoroughly: Palumbo-Liu notes that Huang quoted from it.
456 See Palumbo-Liu, *The Poetics of Appropriation*, 60, especially his point that, “The crucial difference in the Northern Song is the value of integrating the intent of the prior writers with one’s own…the connections drawn between the intent of the prior writer and that of the latter-day poet stressed the interpretive act of the latter.”
457 “Pattern Painting”, or “Pattern and Decoration,” was an art movement that began in the late 1960s and continued into the late 1970s. It took place mainly in New York, and was largely instigated by feminist artists, who emphasized art that was explicitly decorative—at a time when serious art was distinguished by a denial of visual pleasure. Valerie Jaudon, Miriam Schapiro, Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, and Mary Grigoriadis were among the most notable figures.
458 Fu Shen, “Huang T’ing-chien's Calligraphy,” 131.
Huang Tingjian, quoted by Sturman, 35. Richard Strassberg notes that the Tang court increasingly drew members of the aristocratic families away from their local bases of power to the court. The effect of this metropolitanizing was that Tang writers became more and more dependent on the court, and “were unable to envision a mode of existence apart from official life.” This may help account for the restraint and order of Tang calligraphy. See Strassberg, 34.

Fu Shen, “Huang T’ing-chien's Calligraphy,” 125.

See Yugen Wang, Ten Thousand Scrolls, 294-29.


See Fu Shen, “Huang T'ing-chien's Calligraphy,” 226.

Huang Tingjian, quoted by Fu Shen, “Huang T'ing-chien's Calligraphy,” 225.

See Fu Shen, “Huang T'ing-chien's Calligraphy,” 225, 226.

According to Fu shen, Kang Youwei (1858-1927) called Huang’s calligraphy here, “running seal”, which is accurate—and a conscious contradiction in terms. See Fu Shen, 228.

Huang Po-ssu, quoted by Fu Shen, “Huang T'ing-chien's Calligraphy,” 227.

Fu Shen, “Huang T'ing-chien's Calligraphy,” 228.

Su Shi, quoted in Bol, “This Culture of Ours,” 297.


Connerton, How Societies Remember, 45.

Analects 2.4, quoted in Li Zehou, The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition, 48.

“Ritual, ritual! Does it mean no more than presents of jade and silk?” (Analects 3.3) “As for mourning, real grief is to be preferred over formalities.” (Analects 17.11) See Li Zehou, 43,

See Sturman, Mi Fu, 21.

Li Zehou, The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition, 125.

Ryckmans, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past.”

Lu Xun quoted by Eugene Wang, “Tope and Topos.”

Sturman, Mi Fu, 22.

Egan, Word, Image and Deed, 279.
It is possible, though, that seeing this sort of materiality glinting through in Su Shi’s calligraphy is not so erroneous after all. Jonathon Hays points out that calligraphy, from the eighth century on, began to discover “surface” in the modern sense. If calligraphers began to deploy the “blank” paper surface in this self-conscious way, as Huang Tingjian did, then it is entirely possible that calligraphers like Su Shi began also to notice the materiality of their inks as well. See John Hay, “Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface.”, 101.

Jeff Wall, *Selected Essays and Interviews*, 278.


Quoted in Sturman, *Mi Fu*, 171.

Fu Shen, “Huang T'ing-chien's Calligraphy,” 131.

As it turned out, it was this translation of calligraphy into the terms of Western painting that interested Zhang Yingqun at the Shaanxi Institute. In his studio, he showed me what I thought were “sketches” for calligraphy, though I had had no idea that such things existed. They were in fact sketches for a new type of calligraphy—if they worked. He had seen images of my paintings online, sent to him by a mutual friend. The use of colour and the immersion of letters in a Western pictorial space interested him, so he had began to experiment with writing in colour, and with allowing the characters to rhythmically fade into and emerge from the whiteness of the paper.

Wall, *Selected Essays and Interviews*, 77.

Two Daoist and one Buddhist mural from the Yuan can be seen today at the Royal Ontario Museum.

The painting was actually intended to be red, but this colour failed to work well with the text. The painting was then repainted in orange, which also failed. Eventually, after a few other failed attempts, it was repainted with purple lake as the predominant colour. I had intended to have many more orange squares, but this too did not work, and so many were eliminated.


Quoted by Sturman, *Mi Fu and the Art of Calligraphy*, 46.

See Mote, *Calligraphy and The East Asian Book*, 5-7. Knapp’s Chinese Houses provides an astonishing example of this variety in writing characters. A panel on a house in Shanxi province is shown with one hundred different forms of the character for “long life.” See Knapp, 89.
Beginning at the latest in the Ming, calligraphy becomes increasingly individualist. On these tendencies in the Ming and afterwards, see Li Zehou, 194-221.


For a more complete explanation of how the writing proceeded, and a list of sources, see the “Afterword” and “Notes on the Text” in Pain Not Bread, *Introduction*, 120-129.


Our poetry may not be very good, but it expresses new meaning. This is a source of pride to me.


Though she does not connect Pain Not Bread explicitly to the Song, in her essay on the collaboration, Alison Calder relies heavily on David Palumbo-Liu’s book on Huang Tingjian.


Wall, *Selected Essays and Interviews*, 81.

Bol, “This Culture of Ours”, 145.

According to Li Zehou, “It was not the emotions characteristic of ‘individual liberation,’ then, but the communal emotions of interpersonal caring (humanitarianism) that became the serious motivating force behind the life and existence of Confucian officials.” If his view is seen as too idealized, the point might be that this ideal is not the same as the ideals of the contemporary West. See Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 43.


Analects 15:10; David Hinton, trans., 173.

Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 96, 156.


Jeff Wall, *Selected Essays and Interviews*, 163.

*Analects* 15:10; Watson, 173.


To my knowledge, this widely known phrase first appeared in Benjamin Buchloh’s criticism. See Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, 99.


Wall, *Selected Essays and Interviews*, 278. “When singers have been killed and their song dragged into a museum and pinned to the wall of the past, the generation they represent is even more desolate, orphaned, and lost—impoverished in the most real sense of the word.” Jakobson, “On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets,” 300.


Feng Zhi was once a member of the short-lived Shallow Grass Society. Lu Xun wrote of the contributors to the Shallow Grass Quarterly that they had tried to “absorb foreign nutrients externally and to explore the individual soul internally.” See Barnstone and Ping, *The Anchor Book of Chinese Poetry*, 377-381.

540 *The Analects*, 8:2, Watson, 81.

541 *The Analects*, 8:13, Watson, 84.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


“Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Conceptual Art.”
In Art After Conceptual Art, edited by Alex Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann, pp. 27-53.


Fu, Shen C.Y. “Huang T'ing-chien's Calligraphy and His Scroll for Chang Ta-t'ung: A Masterpiece Written in Exile”. (Ph.d dissertation.) Princeton University, 1976.


DOSSIER:
Paintings
Written on Fallen Blossoms

The flowerheads once more lie scattered in sleep.
The willow pollen blown like snow,
white ghost lilies at the trellis.
Twice-opened the chrysanthemums,
resembling older wiser heads that have refrained
from making choices that are meaningless.
Is it the flowers then or remorse?
Already the evening is searching for someplace
to lean its long bamboos.

Only mountains should judge the dead,
but what if their greenness never ends?
Rain, mountains and cloud eliminate salvation,
the present is declared in the hissing rain.
But I am not despairing over this life alone.
Day by day the dead advance as the living recede.
Half my friends are ghosts,
not living souls on not to be measured roads,
Hands that reach out from the past
to touch what made it possible.
But my words are like starlings
And death itself is without rest.


Note: Near the centre of the painting a line from the Han dynasty’s Nineteen Ancient Songs appears but with its meaning inverted: “Day by day the dead advance as the living retreat.” The original reads, “Day by day the dead are receding and the living coming closer”, in Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping’s translation.
Splendours of the Imperial Capital

Only the roar of existence.
Like a dish of bright red agate
continuously fed by strips of satin
blazes with a godlike mettlesomeness.
Everything is in this predicament.
The moon climbing into her daughter’s arms.
Houses and roads passing in and out of the world.
The crimson terraces.
The city walls still radiating heat.

Written in Exile

"Written in Exile, 2009, oil on canvas, 54” x 36”
Collection: Emmanuelle Gattuso, Toronto

I read again and late spring floods the characters.
I see them gather in their flocks on old silk scrolls.
They rise and fall like columns of smoke. Or columns of troops
serving up knowledge to the whirlwind.

A Cottage at Year’s End

I have a cottage at Year’s End.
From my little scrap of hillside, I look down
and see the past endlessly dividing
with a grief no one understands.
But this past is another future,
this future another past.

*A Cottage at Year’s End* contains the phrase, “with a griev that no one understands”, (in the Barnstone and Chou translation) which in Su Shi’s poem describes a solitary goose, a well-worn image of loneliness.

Exhibited: *Ampersand*, ArtLab, University of Western Ontario, 2011.
*60 Painters*, Humber Arts and Media Studios, Toronto, 2012.
No sutras, no hymns, no doctrines.
Only these next lines blown about by the wind.

Dissent

*Dissent*, 2012, oil on canvas, 69” x 39”

The rigours of dissent discarded without shame, like a fan. Outside the implements of war creak and clatter. Countries are passed like pots across a table that groans with plates of hummingbird tongue. Day and night, heaven and earth are split. But in this rushing stream, I hear a spinning wheel.

(The phrase, “I hear a spinning wheel” is taken from the Ming poet, Gao Qi, in Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping’s translation.)

Lotus Sutra

In its range and beauty, and from a distance,
the desire to be without desire
looks like a mountain range. But all things lie.
Scholars poled across in barges
disturb a placid mirror of the world.
Even the lotus is a kind of bait.

Exhibited: Records of a Non-Historian, Birch Libralato, 2013.
The Declining Year at Hangzhou

The Declining Year at Hangzhou, 2012, oil on canvas
left panel 66” x 42”; right panel 66” x 21”

The previous declining year still winding its brocade around the always newly out of style pavilions.
Stone cisterns coiled about with dragons.
Lakeside temples attended by cypresses,
their shadows bowing in imitation.
Monuments that litter the city,
the scattered leaves of public greatness.

But the time for awe is past.
The veneration of a way of being
held up like a mirror in a kind of hopeful vanity
toward a time that never was.

Exhibited: Records of a Non-Historian, Birch Libralato, 2013.
The body, the senses
are leaves of the self.

Solo Exhibition:

*Records of a Non-Historian*, Birch Libralato, 2013

Group Exhibitions:

*60 Painters*, Humber Arts and Media Studios, Toronto (catalogue), 2012.

*Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965–1980*. University of Toronto Galleries: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto Art Centre, and Doris McCarthy Gallery, Toronto; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.; Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta; Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec; Anna Leonowens Gallery (NSCAD University), Dalhousie Art Gallery, MSVU Art Gallery (Mount Saint Vincent University), and Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia; Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Germany. 2010-2013.


Catalogue:


Exhibition Co-Curated:

*Conspiracies of Illusion: Projections of Time and Space*, McMaster Museum of Art, McMaster University, Hamilton, (with Mark Cheetham and Christine Sprenger). August 28- November 3, 2012. (Artists: David Reed, Janice Gurney, Nestor Kruger, Yam Lau, Blinky Palermo.) Catalogue included my essay, “The Path of an Image”, and essays by Cheetham and Sprenger. The essay proposed that “time” does not exist previous to events and objects, and dealt with how each of the artworks produced different times.
Conference Paper:

“Unmoored Time: David Reed and the Contemporary Moment”, at Contemporary Histories—Intersecting Pasts and Futures, February 25th and 26th, 2011, The 30th Annual University of British Columbia Art History, Visual Art, and Art Theory Graduate Symposium, Vancouver. (My paper dealt with David Reed’s Vertigo works, which seem to disturb historicism—the understanding that the contemporary moment and a contemporary work of art mirror each other, so that each can be read in the other.)

Lectures:


Twilight Hour: Andy Patton. Twilight Hour Speaker Series, Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver, B.C., 2011. (Lecture on my recent paintings.)

Panelist:

Symposium: “Materialize: How the stuff of painting creates meaning.” (My contribution was to suggest that the idea of a “meaning beyond the brushmark” meant that the real issues lay beyond the level of the artistic materials.) Moderated by Nicole Collins, other panelists: Melanie Authier, Joe Fleming, 2012.


Publications:


**Architecture:**

Assisted on the design, Kongats Architects, District Energy Center, West Donlands, Toronto, 2010-11.

**Awards:**

2009: Ontario Graduate Scholarship

2010: Mary Routledge Fellowship, University of Western Ontario

2010-2013: Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS Doctoral Scholarship, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
Curriculum Vitae: Andy Patton

Represented by Birch Libralato Gallery, Toronto

Post Secondary Degrees:  University of Manitoba, B.A., 1972
                        University of Western Ontario, M.F.A., 1996.
                        University of Western Ontario, PhD, 2013.

Solo Exhibitions of Paintings

2013: Records of a Non-Historian, Birch Libralato, Toronto.
2009: Prelude to Crossing the Magpie Bridge, Birch Libralato, Toronto.
2008: The Essential Works Show III, Birch Libralato, Toronto. (Group Exhibition)
1990: Sorrow at the End of the Canal, Stride Gallery, Calgary, Alberta.
      too fine for this human mesh, S.L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
      The Architecture of Privacy, YYZ, Toronto, Ontario.

Paintings in Group Exhibitions

      60 Painters, Humber Lakeshore Studios, Toronto.
2008: The Essential Works Show III, Birch Libralato, Toronto.
2001: Spilled Edge/Soft Corner, The Kinderdine Art Gallery, University of
      Saskatchewan, Saskatoon; The Art Gallery of Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
      Spilled Edge/Soft Corner, Galerie Christiane Chassey, Montreal.
1999: Spilled Edge/Soft Corner, The Blackwood Gallery, Erindale College,
      Mississauga, Ont
1985: *The Allegorical Image in Recent Canadian Painting*, (curated by Bruce Grenville), Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.
*Fire and Ice*, Galerie Walcheretum, Zurich, Switzerland.
*Double/Doppelganger/Cover*, (curated by Paul Groot), Aorta, Amsterdam
1984: *Late Capitalism*, (curated by Tim Guest), The Art Gallery at Harbourfront, Toronto.
*Urban Circuit*, Non-Commercial Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
*Art and Audience*, Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg, Ontario.
*Content/Context*, (curated by Richard Rhodes), Mercer Union, Toronto and The Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C..
*Art and Audience*, Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg, Ontario.

Wall Paintings in non-gallery sites

2006: *Sant’Apollinare in Brampton*, (wall painting in abandoned silo), Wanless Road, Brampton, Ontario.
2003/4: Chemist’s House, (wall painting in abandoned house), Gibraltar Point, Toronto Islands, Toronto.


1999: Chinguacousy Road Arc, (wall painting in abandoned silo), Halton Hills, Ontario.


I Ching Floor Painting, (wall painting in emptied shed), Halton Hills, Ontario.


1995: Caledon Silo, (wall painting in abandoned silo), Caledon, Ontario.

1994: Georgetown Curve, (wall painting in abandoned industrial site), Georgetown, Ontario.

1993: Grand Valley Silo, (wall painting in abandoned silo), Grand Valley, Ontario.

Sales Office, (wall painting in ruined brickworks), Halton Ceramics Work, Burlington, Ontario.

1992: Assumption University Wall, (wall painting in staircase of religious college), University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario.

A Doll’s House Exposed to the Elements, (wallpaper work in abandoned industrial site), Georgetown, Ontario.

Halton Ceramics Works, (wall painting in ruined brickworks), Halton Ceramics Works, Burlington, Ontario.

1991: Bedroom Wall (for Micah), (wall painting in bedroom), St. Claren’s Avenue, Toronto.

Georgetown Light, (wall painting in abandoned industrial site), Georgetown.

Wall Paintings: Solo Exhibitions

2002: Door to the Window, goodwater, Toronto, Ontario.

1999: Displaced Wall Painting, as part of Spill, ALLM, 19 Charlotte St., Toronto.


Colour on a night like this, Gairloch Gallery, Oakville, Ontario.

1994: The whole light of the sky/Toute la lumiere du ciel, Oboro, Montreal.

1993: Two Cells for Fra Angelico, St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre, St. Norbert, Manitoba.

Anonymous Posters

2010-13: Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada c. 1965 to 1980. Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto Art Centre, Doris McCarthy Gallery, Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto, Toronto; Dalhousie Art Gallery, Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, Halifax; Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton; The Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver; Badischer Kunsteverein, Karlsruhe, Germany.


1994: Mill Street, done anonymously, Winnipeg, Manitoba.


1979: Politics Poster, (with Gary Shilling), done anonymously, placed on billboards, among posters of political protest, and posters for bands.

1978: Civic Election Poster, done anonymously, placed in context of campaign posters for mayor and city council.


Light Boxes: Exhibitions


1981: Language and Representation, A Space, Toronto, Ontario. (Series of solo exhibitions, curated: Philip Monk.)
**Appropriated Comics, as Artists Bookwork**


**Appropriated Comics: Exhibitions**

1984:  *KromaLaffing*, Grunwald Gallery, Toronto, Ontario. (Group exhibition.)
1980:  *Whoever was here, now wasn’t*, The Funnel, Toronto, Ontario. (Solo exhibition.)

**Digital Project**

2001:  *A Wind Is Perpetually Blowing From the Future*, animation, published as QuickTime movie on CD. (Digital work as memorial to the Russian poet Joseph Mandelstam.)

**Book of Poetry (as part of poetry collective, Pain Not Bread)**


**Collections**

Art Gallery of Ontario; National Gallery of Canada; Museum London; Winnipeg Art Gallery; Canada Council Art Bank; Department of External Affairs, Canada; Fasken Campbell Godfrey; McCarthy Tetrault; Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt; University of Lethbridge; Canadarel; A.E. Lepage; WestWind Capital; various private Canadian, American, and European collections.

**Exhibitions Curated**

2012:  *Conspiracies of Illusion: Projections of Time & Space*, McMaster Museum of Art, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. (Co-Curated with Mark Cheetham and Christine Sprengler.) Artists: Janice Gurney, Nestor Kruger, Yam Lau, David Reed.


### Critical Bibliography


*Bradley, Jessica and Nemiroff, Diana, Songs of Experience*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, 1986. (Exhibition catalogue.)


*Burnett, David, Toronto Painting 84*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1984. (Catalogue.)


*Cheetham, Mark;"The Sublime is Now (Again)”, C magazine, Toronto, winter 1995.*

*Clarke, George Eliott, “Pain not Bread a Poundian pursuit”, Halifax Herald, Sunday, December 31, 2000.*


Fischer, Barbara, *spilled edge soft corners*, Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, Mississauga, Ontario, 2001. (Catalogue.)


Lau, Yam, “Space as Expression: Some Thoughts on Dimensionality”, *Espace* 75, Montreal, Spring 2006.

Lypchuk, Donna, "From Here to Eternity," *C* magazine, Toronto, Fall, 1984.


**Art and Literary Criticism Published**


“We See by Jad’s Light: Guy Gavriel Kay and the New Sanctuary Mosaicist,”


“Someone,” (essay on George Amabile’s poetics) in *Prairie Fire*, “George Amabile Special Issue,” Winnipeg, Manitoba, vol. 21, no.1, Spring 2000.


“Jamelie Hassan at London Regional Art Gallery,” (review, with Janice Gurney), Parachute, Montreal, no.36, fall, 1984.

“Civil Space,” (essay), Parachute, Montreal, no.31, summer, 1983.

“Stephen Horne,” (review) Parachute, Montreal, no.29, winter, 1983.

“Joanne Tod: Replications (Dark Haired Girls),” Parachute, Montreal, no.25, September, 1981.

Visitng Artist: Lectures, Lectures on Own Work and Readings


2011: Twilight Hour lecture series, Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver.


2009: ”Words and Images in Art: Classical China and Today in the West”, University of Toronto At Centre, Toronto.

2008: Guelph University, Distinguished Visitor, Year-End Crits.

2007 “Brancusi, Smithson and The Planetary Sublime”, guest lecture, Geo-Aesthetics, (graduate seminar, Art History), University of Toronto.

2006 Simon Fraser University, Vancouver.

Twilight Hour lecture series, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, Vancouver.

2005 Alberta College of Art, Calgary.

2001 Toronto School of Art, Toronto, Ontario.


1996 York University, Toronto, Ontario.

1993 The University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario.

1990 York University, Toronto, Ontario.

University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta.

Alberta College of Art, Calgary, Alberta.

1989 Ontario College of Art, Toronto, Ontario.
1989  Oboro, Montreal, Quebec.
1987  Dundas Valley School of Art, Dundas, Ontario.
       York University, Toronto, Ontario.
       London Regional Gallery, London, Ontario
1984  Sydney School of Art, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.
       Emily Carr School of Art, Vancouver, B.C.
       Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C.

**Artist in Residence**