

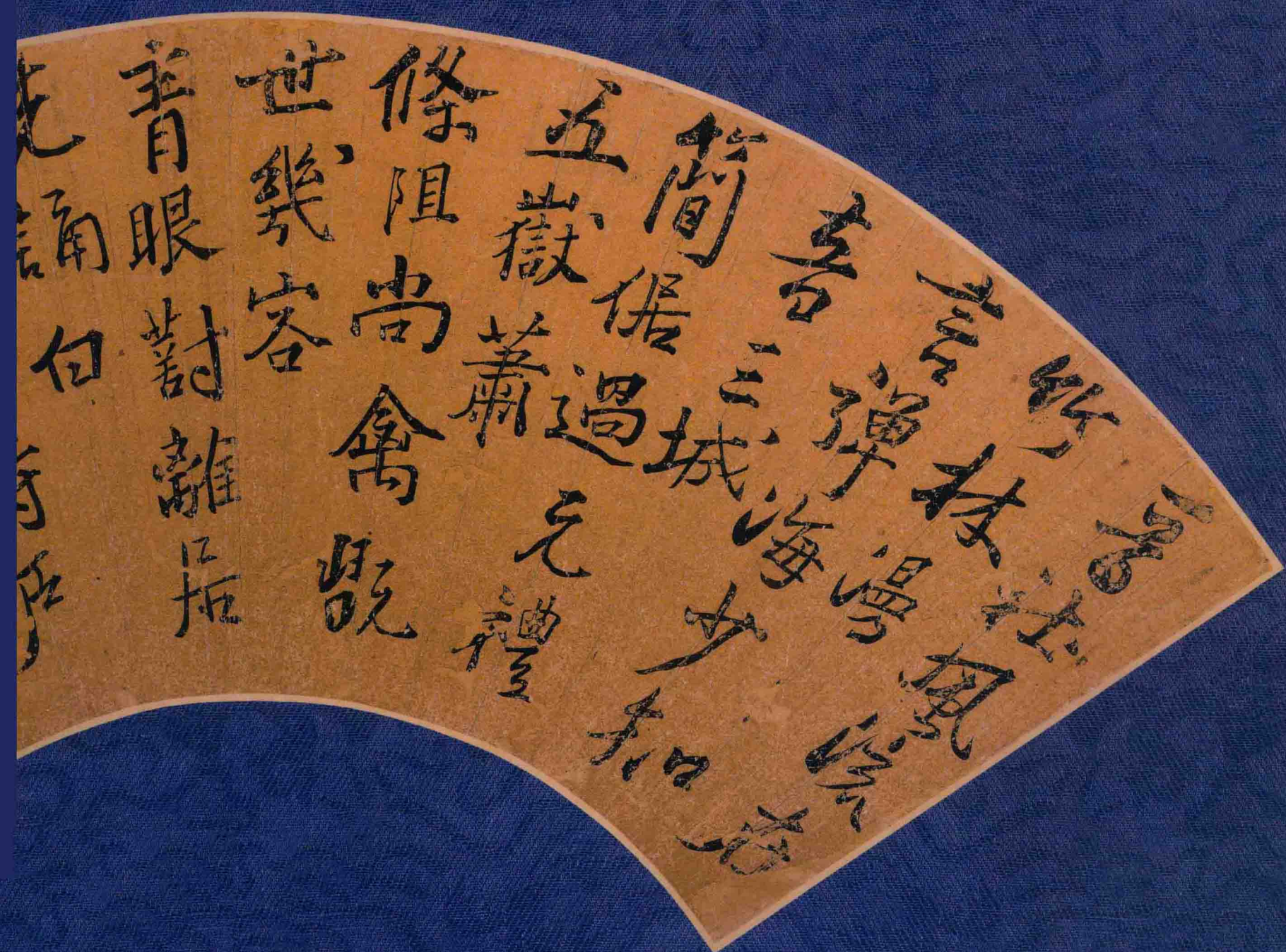
北山堂古

中國書法

【別冊】



The Bei Shan Tang Legacy
Chinese Calligraphy
(Supplementary Catalogue)



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Chinese Calligraphy
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Art Museum and Fine Arts Department
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
2014

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Harold Mok

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Printed by Freeway Printing and Production Co.

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ISBN: 978-98819490-5-9

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Introduction

Inheritance, Integrity and Courtesy: A Survey of Chinese Calligraphy through the Bei Shan Tang Collection

Harold Mok

To the literati in classical China, personal cultivation and scholarly devotion were as much duties as a means to achieve their ultimate purpose in life, i.e. to work towards the welfare of the state as scholar-officials through civil examinations. Contributing little to this end, art and literature, in comparison with Confucian classics, were often regarded as merely peripheral. Yet, they attracted not a few devotees, who have bestowed on posterity a tradition glittering with gems and jewels. One of these bejewelled peripherals that have become almost a literati way of life is calligraphy. Functional apart, it carries an enchanting visual appeal and embodies Chinese culture at its most profound. A general survey of this unique art form is facilitated by the Bei Shan Tang Collection, which is virtually a treasure trove of diverse specimens with dates scattering over more than a millennium.

Conversancy in History

With the remark that one's observations are epoch-making when grounded in a conversancy in history, the grand historian Sima Qian (ca. 145BC-87BC) of the Han dynasty has provided a paradigm for later scholars as well as historiographers to base their understanding of the present in light of what happened in the past. So indelibly is this imprinted on the elites that history, tradition and the ancients have always been looked upon as beacons, yardsticks and models, be the pursuit literature, history, philosophy or art. Thus, calligraphers down the ages have prized inheritance above all and sought to unravel secrets to their art through studious studying and copying of past masters. It is only when one's brush methods and characteristics are internalized that one is able to connect with the tradition in one's own practice. In the same vein, discussions of calligraphy down the ages have always taken "ancient" methods as the starting point. Reverence for masters and masterpieces from the past does not mean mechanical replication down to the minutest detail. In the process, while the less gifted may find themselves prisoners of the tradition, the more talented are able to transform and forge their own personality or even found a brand new ground-breaking school. So deeply seated is such a tradition that archetypal styles are perpetuated but not without variations, big and small, from person to person and from period to period, culminating in the diversity that has come to define the calligraphic tradition itself. What remains unchanged is the golden rule that inheritance is indispensable for innovation.

Traditionally, familial values are cherished as much in Chinese calligraphy as they are in Chinese society. There is no

lack of celebrated father-and-son calligraphers sharing a similar style in the history of calligraphy: Wang Xizhi (313-360) and Wang Xianzhi (344-386) of the Eastern Jin, Ouyang Xun (557-641) and Ouyang Tong (?-691) of the Tang, Mi Fu (1051-1107) and Mi Youren (1074-1151) of the Song, and Wen Zhengming (1470-1559, Plate 24), Wen Peng (1497-1573, Plate 28) and Wen Jia (1501-1583) of the Ming. As the description implies, familial style extends beyond father and son. A case in point is the imperial family of the Song dynasty. Emperor Gaozong (r. 1127-1162) adopted Huang Tingjian (1045-1105) and Mi Fu as his first calligraphic models before retracing the tradition expounded by Wang Xizhi through the Sui monk Zhiyong. The elegant and genteel style he had thus developed prevailed in the early Southern Song court and was emulated by imperial ladies as well as courtiers. Of whom, Empress Wu (1115-1197), or Emperor Gaozong's consort, stood out for her calligraphy that is almost indistinguishable in style from her husband's, leading to the theory that part of the extant *Shijing* (*Stone Classics*) by Emperor Gaozong is actually ghostwritten by Empress Wu.¹ The Emperor's legacy was kept up to an identical extent by his successor Xiaozong (r. 1162-1189) even though the latter was not his offspring. Four generations later, stylistic affinities can still be easily detected in the calligraphy of Emperor Ningzong (r. 1194-1224). Among the few works that have survived, there is a heptasyllabic birthday poem (Plate 4) written for Empress Yang (1162 or 1172-1233) impressed with an imperial year seal that corresponds to the year 1261. Artistically speaking, the poem can hardly be considered a masterpiece with its unsophisticated execution and crude structuring but the elegance and serenity reiterate the familial style originating from Emperor Gaozong. Like her counterparts from other reign periods, Empress Yang's calligraphy closely mirrors her husband's, only more skilful to add to the merit of the imperial familial style.

Another thought-provoking example presents itself in an album of letters (Plate 19) that Wu Yi (ca. 16th century) wrote to his uncle Wu Kuan (1435-1504). A scholar-official noted for his calligraphy, Wu Kuan drew inspiration from Su Shi (1037-1101), signifying the revival of the Northern Song tradition in the mid-Ming as did Shen Zhou's (1427-1509) emulation of Huang Tingjian. Wu Yi, the nephew, also wrote in Su's style which is particularly evident in the plumpness. Although it is yet to be ascertained if this is borrowed from Su Shi direct, it is plausible from the inheritance point of view that the uncle had a certain bearing with his preferred model becoming a shaper of the familial style. The theory can be further bolstered by a poem in

running script (Plate 37) by Mi Wanzhong (1507-1628), whose brush methods, character structuring and overall crispness approximate that of Mi Fu, a fellow clansman from generations back. Like the senior, the junior, who styled himself Befriender of Rocks, adored rocks besides painting his misty mountains after the accomplished painter. His grandson Mi Hanwen (*jinsi* 1661) was also a notable calligrapher who wrote and painted in Mi Fu's style as exemplified by his hanging scroll of a poem by Qian Qi (722-782, Plate 62). Characteristics of the familial style, of which Mi Fu was the source, litter the entire piece whether it is the manipulation of the brush or the exertion of strength and power.

Modelling on past masters was so fundamental that resurrecting ancient styles and perpetuating the tradition have been constantly instrumental in the development of Chinese calligraphy. As perennial icons of calligraphy, Wang Xizhi and his son Wang Xianzhi of the Eastern Jin have always been uppermost in the minds of calligraphic aspirants. Serious copying by dedicated followers with disparate perceptions and understanding has cemented together a Wangs' tradition that embraces transformation and variation. Take for example Mi Fu, who has been widely regarded as the most accomplished among emulators from the Song dynasty. Paradoxically, it was his fervent immersion in the Eastern Jin tradition that spawned a strong personality described to be as vehement as raging swords and arrows on a battlefield. Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322) of the early Yuan, who championed revival of the past as a panacea for all the ills arising from degeneration since the Southern Song, succeeded in devising a style to his name that is characterized by a grace inspired by the discipline and resonance of the Eastern Jin as interpreted by the Tang masters. By the Ming period, the Two Wangs' legacy practically pervaded the calligraphic world which was then led by the Wu school. According to Zhao Yiguang (1559-1625), the most prominent of the Wu masters have each assimilated a certain quality from the running-cursive script of the Two Wangs. Specifically, Song Ke (1127-1387, Plate 15) owes them his mellowness, Zhu Yunming (1460-1526, Plate 20) his archaic appeal, Wen Zhenming (Plate 24) his neatness, and Wang Chong (1494-1533, Plate 27) his resonance.² Stylistically unique, extant specimens of these masters reveal an inheritance beyond the confines of formal resemblance. This is because, to the Ming calligraphers, the Two Wangs' tradition represents an ideal that is capable of connecting while generating styles that are visually dissimilar.

The picture can by no means be complete without bringing in the views held by Dong Qichang (1555-1636) of the Ming. In his criticism of calligraphies from previous periods, he lauds Jin masterpieces for their resonance and deems the Jin resonance the hallmark of calligraphic perfection. As for perfecting one's calligraphy, he suggests placing dual emphasis on departure and abidance: Formal resemblance is not essential and imitating the past allows subjective modification. When stripped and cleansed of all that is inherited formally, one's personality will emerge.³ Whether or not the doyen was practising what he preached is plain from an examination of his numerous extant works, among which many were produced to pay tribute to past masters as in the case of *Poems by Du Fu in Running Script* (Plate 32). Although given to be in the style of *Shengjiao Xu* (*Preface to Sacred Teachings*),

it bears little resemblance to the canonical masterpiece assembled by Monk Huaiaren. No wonder Zhang Zhao (1691-1745) points it out categorically in his colophon. Visually speaking, the work is by and large a creation from scratch. That said, it is the fruition of lifelong studying, copying and understanding of the *Preface*. What is envisaged as an "imitation" is in fact "an agile fish that has broken free from the restraining net".⁴

Dong Qichang was a giant overshadowing calligraphic development in the late Ming and the Qing dynasty. On the one hand, his style commanded so predominant a following that it gave rise to the Huating school. On the other, his theory on copying ushered in a boom in copying and imitating the past. Among his followers were the brothers Qi Zhijia (1594-1684) and Qi Biao (1602-1645). In his scroll in running script (Plate 50), Qi Zhijia not only adopts a pentasyllabic octave by Dong for his calligraphic text but also produces a slantness in his calligraphy that is revelatory of his admiration for the great master. The same adoration is seen in the aura radiating from the vigorous sleekness in the younger brother's poem in running-cursive script (Plate 51). Dong's legacy continued into the early Qing as exemplified by Shen Quan (1624-1648), whose running script immediately evokes Dong Qichang both formally and spiritually. Even his regular script, as seen in an excerpt from Wang Xianzhi's *Luoshen Fu Shisan Hang* (*Nymph of the Luo River in Thirteen Columns*, Plate 59), the tilted character structuring and sparse composition are reminiscent of Dong's style although the work is presumably produced out of a wish to connect with the Eastern Jin tradition. Despite the passage of time, the Huating school held sway. Chen Yixi (1648-1709) demonstrates how Dong's essences, whether in brush methods, character structuring or overall aura, are captured in full in his heptasyllabic octave in running script (Plate 63).

Turning to Dong's theory on copying, Wang Duo (1593-1652) has certainly heeded his advice most diligently. As acknowledged by the calligrapher himself, modelling on antiquity was his first priority and ancient methods served as the fountainhead of his transformation. This attitude of his is succinctly expressed: "In modelling on antiquity, the excellent neither forsake antiquity nor fetter themselves with it".⁵ What he means by "antiquity" is primarily the tradition established by the Two Wangs. This explains his myriad copies of the father-and-son's masterpieces. Yet he had no intention to be formally faithful since what mattered to him was something more transcendent.⁶ This can be illustrated by the scroll in Wang Duo's typical running script in Plate 48. The style dovetails his works that are imitative in nature even though it is not indicated as such in the inscription. Antiquity is not forsaken since the Two Wangs' tradition is kept alive through references drawn from Mi Fu. Neither is antiquity a fetter since his distinct personality is given full rein in the overwhelming energy that has morphed from the tradition.

The tenor sustained even in the late Qing when the Eastern Jin tradition lost some of its lustre to the current frenzy for gaining new inspiration from Northern Wei steles and the ancient seal and clerical scripts. It was a time of change driven by the rise of the stele school but attaining transformation through modelling on antiquity remained as valid a guiding principle as ever. In the set of four hanging scrolls in Plate 82, He Shaoji (1799-1873)

blends together Yan Zhenqing's (709-785) style with features from Northern Wei steles to arrive at a gravity uncorrupted by artifice. In the octosyllabic couplet in seal script in Plate 84, Yang Yisun (1813-1881) reproduces the appeal of stones and bronzes against a traditional backdrop. Both are endeavours to innovate without losing sight of ancient methods and merits. Perhaps it is this spirit that has enabled Chinese calligraphy to defy time and to reinvent itself again and again.

Art for the Man's Sake

Whether it is the Confucian morality or the Daoist detachment, they have been readily espoused by the literati to the extent of equating their evaluation of calligraphies with that of their calligraphers. Wang Xizhi being refined and untainted, his calligraphy is regarded as elegant and graceful. Yan Zhenqing being upright and patriotic, his calligraphy is regarded as robust and awe-inspiring. The two ideals of introspective perfection of the self and extrospective perfection of the state are matched respectively with a subtle and intense calligraphic style. Thus, the man and his calligraphy cannot be viewed in isolation of one another. No wonder Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) and Su Shi have echoed one another in opining that a calligraphic work is widely celebrated only if the calligrapher is a fine man and that a calligraphic work, however fine, will not be cherished if not for its calligrapher.⁷ In other words, whether a calligraphic work is worth preserving is determined not so much by its merit in an artistic perspective but by the calligrapher's qualities as a man.

This cultural phenomenon is well manifested in the uniquely Chinese collection of personal letters as calligraphic masterpieces. On account of their literary and calligraphic appeal, letters, which are otherwise everyday correspondence, have been appreciated and collected since the Eastern Han. Letters became fervidly collected during the Northern and Southern Dynasties as they were said to embody calligraphic, rhetoric and literary charms all in one. The craze showed no sign of subsiding in the Tang dynasty. Emperor Taizong (r. 626-649), for one, was passionate about Wang Xizhi and his letters formed the bulk of the imperial collection. Letters also predominate in *Chunhua Tie* (*Model-calligraphies from the Chunhua Archive*), an ambitious carving project under the auspices of the Song emperor Taizong (r. 976-997), not to mention a lot more in other Northern Song carvings. Given the importance that the Song people attached to the calligrapher as a person when evaluating his works, the collection of letters was governed by considerations other than aesthetics.⁸ In his colophon to a poem by Fan Zhongyan (989-1025), Huang Tingjian relates that, whenever he chances on any letter by Fan, he cannot take his eyes off it in his bliss while fondly remembering the writer, whose virtues were unparalleled by his peers.⁹ Actually, what fascinated him was not the letter itself but its association with the writer and his character. Also worth savouring is the colophon by Zhang Shou (1085-1145) of the Southern Song to a letter by Ouyang Xiu. In his defense for Ouyang's relative insignificance as calligrapher despite a talent that is comparable with any past master, Zhang points out that his letters have largely been collected for the man's erudition, literary flair, integrity and distinguished career.¹⁰ The argument is made even more explicit by Zhou Bida (1126-1204)

in his colophon to the calligraphic masterpieces by Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi and other personalities: "Letters have been preserved in consideration of (the sender's) virtue, office and art. Possessing all three at the same time, however, is next to impossible. In the case of Ouyang Xiu's and Su Shi's, flawless as they are in every aspect, survival until eternity is only to be expected."¹¹ Terse and unequivocal, the colophon attributes the collectability of letters to the sender's character, denotable by "virtue", his achievement as scholar-official, denotable by "office", and aesthetics, denotable by "art", with "virtue" at the top. Without doubt, collectability for the man's sake was a prerequisite for letters to become collectibles. Letter collecting reached its heyday in the Southern Song. Huddling in an empire that had shrunk by half, the Southern Song literati took it upon themselves to preserve the legacy of their glorious past. In their eyes, any calligraphic works by Northern Song masters, even as mundane as letters, were precious cultural embodiments.¹² The allure outlived the Song dynasty with collectors drawn especially to the cultural and moral significance as well as calligraphic merit in letters by prominent figures. The same can be said of the many otherwise ordinary communications in the Bei Shan Tang Collection, namely those by Zhang Jizhi (1186-1266, Plate 5), Chen Zhi (1293-1362, Plate 9), Song Ke (Plate 15), Wen Peng (Plate 28), Li Liufang (1575-1629, Plate 40), Yi Bingshou (1754-1815, Plate 76), Zhang Tingji (1768-1848, Plate 78) and Weng Tonghe (1830-1904, Plate 85).

Like letters, the curt loan agreement by Wang Chong (Plate 27) should have been nothing special. Comparing much less favourably with letters as far as literary charm goes, it boasts an enviable provenance throughout its existence since the Ming nonetheless. Remounted time and again for better preservation, it has been granted favour and recognition in the form of colophons by dozens of admirers, the majority of whom are resounding names in history. It is no accident that this 68-character proof of a loan of 50 taels that Wang Chong obtained from a friend has been so highly valued.¹³ Wang Chong being one of the three leaders of the Wu school of calligraphy, there is an undeniable value in something as humble as a loan agreement, although casually written rather than intended to be a tour de force. Working further in its advantage is Wang Chong's positive image. As a man of letters, Wang pledged allegiance to the essay tradition of the Han dynasty and to the poetic tradition of the High Tang; as a man, he was self-critical and true and honest to others.¹⁴ Thus, the short-lived literatus was widely regarded even in his lifetime as exemplary among his peers in the Wu area. A reading of the colophons reveals that, while its calligraphic charm is occasionally brought up, its allure lies more in the man. To cite the instances, Shen Deqian (1673-1769) praises Wang's impeccable character; Zhu Yun (1729-1781) spells out that a calligraphic work is precious for facilitating a close encounter with the calligrapher and his times; Huang Xuan (1740-1800) states with a rhetorical question that it is nothing but the man that makes those dozens of characters a gem of all times. Indeed, evolving from a single sheet into an exceedingly long scroll as it is, Wang Chong's loan agreement serves to testify not only an anecdote in the literati community but also the traditional measure that it is the man behind that matters as far

as calligraphy is concerned.

It therefore comes as no surprise that manuscripts by patriotic heroes become hotly sought-after collectibles. Attesting to this phenomenon are the manuscripts in Plate 45, which were written by three Ming loyalists and martyrs, namely Ni Yuanlu (1593-1644), Huang Daozhou (1585-1646) and Qu Shisi (1590-1651). Ni Yuanlu hung himself with a piece of white silk upon learning in his hometown that Emperor Chongzhen (r. 1627-1644) committed suicide at Mount Mei when the rebel leader Li Zicheng (1606-1645) took Beijing, the Ming capital. Huang Daozhou was imprisoned for his resistance against the Qing, or the conquerors' regime, and chose death over submission. Qu Shisi, in his attempt to restore the Ming, rendered his service to Prince of Gui and died a martyr when his stronghold at Guilin was captured. The trio has thus been revered by posterity for their unyielding commitment to their empire, buckled not even by death. The fact that their calligraphic works were mounted in a single scroll was due not to artistic consideration but to their extraordinary patriotism since Qu Shisi was not known for his calligraphy as were Ni Yuanlu and Huang Daozhou. The quality of the calligraphy was indeed the last thing on the mind of the many prominent figures who graced the scroll with colophons, the focus of which is exclusively heroic and adamant loyalty.

Belonging in the same category in the Bei Shan Tang Collection is the poem in cursive script by Cao Xuequan (1574-1646, Plate 39) and the fan in running script by Kuang Lu (1604-1650, Plate 87), both of whom died for their empire during the Ming-Qing transition. Cao tried to drown himself to evince his loyalty to the late emperor Chongzhen. Rescued by his family, he joined the Southern Ming court to help expel the Manchus. When his hopes were dashed by the defeat of Prince of Tang, he killed himself at home. Kuang spared no effort in rallying resistance forces. Aided by the troops stationed locally, he succeeded in holding out for 10 months when the city of Guangzhou was besieged. When the city finally fell to Qing hands, he starved himself to death with a *qin*-zither in his arms. So poignant are their stories that their manuscripts make meaningful collectibles for later generations.

Morality is also given expression in the memorial in blood by Zhou Maolan (1605-1686, Plate 56). The story began with Maolan's father Zhou Shunchang (1584-1626) becoming a victim to the clique headed by Wei Zhongxian (1568-1627). With the newly enthroned Emperor Chongzhen bent on purging the eunuch's protégés, Maolan took the opportunity to present a memorial in blood in a bid to clear his father's name and to bring the murderers to justice. The memorial, however, had to be revised to remove certain problematic expressions. This occasioned the retention of the original, which has survived to this day and is mounted as two scrolls together with an inscription by Zhou Maolan, detailing the relevant circumstances, and colophon after colophon. Showering praises on either the father's loyalty and righteousness in face of the villainous clique or the son's filial piety to seek redress for his father, the colophons invariably dwell on the moral values signified by the piece. The memorial has become a testimony in blood that recounts the history of the late Ming and reasserts the moral ideal of the Chinese people. Whether or not it is calligraphically artistic

actually plays little part in its reception and survival.

Predilection for Poetry in Calligraphy

Ouyang Xiu once remarked, "Learning calligraphy makes a long day short. Depleting though it may be, it delights. Refined are those who strive to devote themselves to learning calligraphy."¹⁵ This view should have been most likely shared by many of his fellow literati. In traditional Chinese education, learning calligraphy through copying began as a daily regimen in the belief that good handwriting worked to the advantage of candidates sitting for civil examinations. Before long, the charm of calligraphy was such that countless literati became captivated and took to the practice with enthusiasm. Legend has it that the calligraphic baron Zhao Mengfu possibly wrote as many as 10,000 characters a day whereas Kangli Kuikui (1295-1345) 30,000, both considering it not a toil but an enjoyment. Talking about numbers, the *Qianziwen*, or *Thousand-character Essay*, that used to be the first primer for Chinese children in the old days has been a favourite among calligraphers, whatever their times. The fact that no two characters are the same throughout the text is certainly an attraction since writing it out once means writing a thousand characters and the number increases in multiples once the essay is written out in multiple scripts. The most well-known example is by Monk Zhiyong in regular and cursive scripts while Zhao Mengfu has also left behind extant masterpieces in two and four scripts. An even more ample supply is available from the Ming dynasty. In the Bei Shan Tang Collection alone, there are the *Thousand-character Essay* in cursive script by Chen Chun (Plate 26) and that in running script by Wang Chong, demonstrating how calligraphers have relished the practice of calligraphy.¹⁶

Literati excelled in poetry and hence the plentitude of self-composed poems in their calligraphic works. For instance, Shao Bao (1460-1527), an eminent Neo-Confucianist of the Ming who had a penchant for the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*), turned the favourite poem *Dianyi Tai* (*Terrace for Reading the Book of Changes*) that he had composed into a calligraphic work (Plate 21). Likewise, it can be safe to surmise from the extant handscroll in running script (Plate 25) that Li Mengyang (1427-1530), one of the Seven Early Masters advocating a return to the past for literature, should have been pleased with his poem *Huanggu Pian* (*Song for the Yellow Swan*) that has adopted the prosody of the ancient *yuefu*-ballad. The piece *Xingshu Meihua Shi Baishou* (*One Hundred Poems on Plum Blossoms in Running Script*, Plate 68) also features self-composed poems, by Hang Shijun (1696-1763) in his spare time. According to his inscription, the poems are a sequel to a set of perfectly rhymed poems, celebrating the same flower, which had already won wide acclaim and now he openly invites review for his second set, not without a ring of pride and confidence. Such instances are too profuse in the Bei Shan Tang Collection to need multiplication.

If the calligraphic poems are not self-composed, they are borrowed from past poets. Whether or not the choice was deliberate, it somehow bespeaks the calligrapher's personal disposition. In adopting poems by Tao Yuanming (ca. 365-427) for his work (Plate 14), Wu Lü (1316-1389), an irreproachable official of the early Ming, was probably being self-reflective while admiring the aloofness of the Eastern Jin poet. The ancient

poem *Jiuge (Nine Songs)* in the handscroll by Yuan Yangfu (late 14th century, Plate 16) attests to the revivalist movement for the *fu*-rhapsody that gathered momentum since the Yuan dynasty. Literary vogue also accounts for the choice of Wang Changling's (ca. 690-ca. 756) *Xigong Qiuyuan (Autumn Sadness in the West Palace, Plate 41)* by Chen Yuansu (ca. 1576-ca. 1634) and of Shen Quanqi's (ca. 656-ca. 714/5) panegyrics by imperial order (Plate 31) by Zhan Jingfeng (1528-1602), considering the prevalence of the Tang tradition in the mid-Ming poetic scene. In his selection of three poems by Du Fu (712-770, Plate 32), Dong Qichang was, no doubt, persuaded by the Tang poet's popularity at the time. In the case of Zhang Ruitu (1570-1641), while Li Mengyang's imperishable literary presence was definitely a factor, *Hanjing Pian (The Han Capital, Plate 38)* was probably taken as a vehicle for voicing the calligrapher's own anxieties over the perils facing the empire. Love for the poet Cao Zhi (192-232), however, may have mattered little in Shen Quan's *Luoshen Fu (Fu-rhapsody on the Nymph of the Luo River, Plate 59)*, which was probably produced for paying tribute to Wang Xianzhi through his magnum opus *Luoshen Fu Shisan Hang (Nymph of the Luo River in Thirteen Columns)*. To Jiang Chenying (1628-1699), who looked to Wang Xizhi for a calligraphic model, writing out *You Tiantaishan Fu (Fu-rhapsody on Roaming Mount Tiantai, Plate 60)* by Sun Chuo (314-371) was likely to be his way of identifying with the Eastern Jin tradition since Sun Chuo was an acclaimed literatus who was present at the gathering made so famous by Wang Xizhi's *Lanting Xu (Preface to the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion)*.

To literati at large, writing out poetry as gifts was an elegant means of social bonding. Surviving in great number, works with the recipient named can be categorized under "courtesy calligraphy". The exact connotation of courtesy, however, varies from piece to piece. In *Xingshu Shizha (Poems and Letters in Running Script, Plate 12)*, for instance, the second, sixth and seventh component pieces were self-composed poems written out by Ni Zan (1306-1374) for his friends Chen Zhi, Ye Cheng and Zhou Di (living ca. 1367), expressing respectively his grievances in poverty, attachment to friends in his vagrant late years, and listlessness in recuperation. These poems in which Ni Zan pours out his heart to his friends have made possible reconstruction of the calligrapher's life. The album in Plate 22 by Chen Yi (1469-1538) comprises over 30 poems that were sent at various times to Luo Feng (*jinshi* 1496), a friend and a leading collector from Nanjing, for comment. Mostly unpublished elsewhere, the poems supplement existing research materials and help shed light on the friendship nurtured through literature between the two. Illustrated in Plate 23 is a selection of recently self-composed poems that Tang Yin (1470-1523) sent to his friend Zhu Chengjue (1480-1527) together with an earnest request, in the inscription, for comments and suggestions. Here and there, individual characters are circled for editing purposes, indicating that the scroll was more or less a draft and that it was a literati custom to solicit advice from each other. The three examples cited above serve to evidence that producing courtesy works was very much a way of life for the literati and that calligraphy and literature were mutually complementary.

Besides this elegant practice of presenting one another with calligraphic poems in the hope of honing one's skill, "courtesy

calligraphy" was sometimes produced for entertaining requests and the contexts involved were multifarious. If the request was made by a friend, it can largely be deemed elegant bonding among the literati. In this regard, *Siti Qianziwen Juan (Thousand-character Essay in Four Scripts)* by Wen Zhengming, housed in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, comes with an interesting story.¹⁷ Throughout his life, Wen Zhengming has repeatedly wrote out the *Thousand-character Essay* and has followed Zhao Mengfu's precedent in writing it out in four scripts. Written in the regular, cursive, clerical and seal scripts, the scroll carries an inscription that relates rather self-deprecatorily that it is a pity that the scroll, which takes seven years to complete, is too poorly written for the appreciation of Zichun, the recipient, who has insisted that his wish be granted. In the circumstances, what should have been a pleasure to do in the first place was understandably reduced to a drudgery that lasted seven years. Although Zichun was a nobody in history, Wen Zhengming took his calligraphy seriously. The scroll is so meticulously written that his second son Wen Jia describes the calligraphy as sublime and immaculate in his colophon. Also written as a gift for a friend is the album in running script by Wang Wenzhi (1730-1802, Plate 71) in the Bei Shan Tang Collection. It was written for a friend Ye Tang, who presented Wang with a blank album when he made the request. Obliging, Wang wrote out a selection of his past poetic compositions and the pains he took have made the album a masterpiece. Wan Jing (1659-1741) was approached by his friend Song Luo (1634-1713), who specifically requested the *Mudan Fu (Fu-rhapsody on Peonies)* in clerical script so that he could appreciate the calligraphy and the flowers blooming in his garden all at the same time. Appealing in its rich variation, the album indeed ranks among Wan Jing's best.

There are times that requests cannot be declined and are grudgingly entertained. "Courtesy calligraphy" done out of obligation calls for little elaboration in this paper as it has been made the subject of many recent researches.¹⁸ It suffices to say that examples abound in the Bei Shan Tang Collection alone. Wu Yi's letters (Plate 19) contain references to requests for calligraphic works received by his uncle Wu Kuan. In a family letter by Zhang Tingji (Plate 78), it is mentioned that Weng Fanggang (1733-1818), who is too advanced in years and too frail from a previous illness to practice calligraphy frequently, would charge 10 taels for a couplet of medium size and would decline all requests for scrolls, whatever the offer. These show how people in good standing were to deal with requests of this kind on a regular basis in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Literary gatherings were common activities for the literati, the most celebrated being the one at the Orchid Pavilion in the Eastern Jin, thanks to the seminal calligraphic masterpiece *Preface to the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion*. As the name implies, the activities at such gatherings are literary in nature and often involves the writing of calligraphy. The congenial atmosphere at a typical literary gathering is vividly portrayed in an inscription by Chen Yixi accounting for the occasion for his copy of *Model-calligraphies from the Chunhua Archive*.¹⁹ Indeed, the pleasure of writing calligraphy in the company of friends can never be surpassed by engaging in the same practice in one's solitude. Another rare masterpiece borne out of literary gatherings is

Wuling Shengji (*Wuling Anthology*, Plate 6) in the Bei Shan Tang Collection. It was on the second day of the twelfth lunar month of 1287. Bai Ting (1248-1328), Zhang Yang (1260-1325), Deng Wenyuan (1257-1328), You Zai, Qiu Yuan (1247-1326), Xianyu Shu (1246-1302) and Yu Boqi met at a literary gathering in Hangzhou. As it was snowing heavily, it was suggested that each of them was to contribute a poem of pentasyllabic lines that rhymes with a certain character from a heptasyllabic line by Sheng Cizhong (*jinshi* 1061) of the Northern Song. The poems were subsequently faired and mounted into a scroll with a preface written by Bai Ting, providing us with a testimony to the stylish entertainment in which literati of former days heartily engaged.

Even when it is a matter of courtesy, the same preference for poetry in calligraphy is also perceivable in colophons to calligraphic works. Poetry is the genre of choice for Gu Ying (1310-1369), Zhou Boqi (1298-1369), Chen Ji (1314-1370), Zheng Yuanyou (1292-1364) and many other renowned men of letters from the Jiangsu-Zhejiang area in the Yuan dynasty who have graced with colophons the encomium that Shen You (ca.1320-ca.1360) wrote for the Chinese medical doctor Shen Boxin as a token of gratitude for the latter's treatment of his grandmother (Plate 13). A further example presents itself in Wang Chong's loan agreement. Ma Shaoji, its collector during the Qianlong reign, brought the masterpiece from Suzhou to Beijing to solicit colophons from prominent figures from every quarter. Many of those who had viewed it, possibly at literary gatherings, eulogized it in poetry and calligraphy in their colophons. Much more than a means for expressing one's evaluation of the calligraphic work in question, colophons have provided the literati with an opportunity to demonstrate their poetic and calligraphic competence.

Conclusion

Chinese calligraphy is bewitching although it is no more than a form of art involving the writing of characters. Aesthetically, it is a feast for the eyes to take in the artistry in the way the strokes are delineated while being intrigued by the multitudinous styles arising from the complex interaction between inheritance and innovation. Textually, it is a feast for the mind to take in the calligrapher's literary cultivation and life observations, implicit or explicit, while pondering the enshrined moral values that have enabled the work to survive the ravages of time. Chinese calligraphy is artistic beauty and traditional culture all rolled into one. For this reason, the Bei Shan Tang Collection of calligraphy will surely leave its viewers enraptured and deep in thought.

(Translated by Tina Liem)

Notes

- 1 For a detailed discussion of Southern Song imperial calligraphy, see Chu Hui-liang, "Nansong Huangshi Shufa," *The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 4 (Summer 1985), pp. 44-52.
- 2 Zhao Yiguang, *Hanshan Zhoutan* (SKQS, vol. 816), *juan xia*, *fashu* 7, p. 33.
- 3 Dong Qichang, *Rongtai Ji* (Taipei: National Central Library, 1968), *beiji juan* 4, pp. 23b, 22b & 65b.
- 4 See Dong Qichang, *Huachanshi Suibi* (SKQS, vol. 867), *juan* 2, p. 1a.
- 5 See Wang Duo's inscriptions to his two albums of calligraphy as included in Huang Siyuan ed., *Wang Duo Shufa Quanji* (Zhengzhou: Henan Meishu Chubanshe, 2000), vol. 5, pp. 1648 & 1650.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 1668.
- 7 Ouyang Xiu, *Wenzhong Ji* (SKQS, vols. 1102-1103), *juan* 129, p. 6; Su Shi, *Dongpo Quanji* (SKQS, vol. 1108), *juan* 93, p. 11a.
- 8 Zhang Yanyuan, *Fashu Yaolu* (SKQS, vol. 812), *juan* 2, p. 19a.
- 9 For a discussion of Song calligraphic letters, see Mok Kar-leung, Harold, "Songdai Shufa zhongde Chidu," in Li Yu-chou ed., *Shangfa yu Shangyi: Tang Song Shufa Yanjiu Lunji* (Taipei: Wanjuanlou Tushu Gufen Youxian Gongsi, 2013), pp. 491-523.
- 10 Huang Tingjian, *Shangū Ji* (SKQS, vol. 1113), *juan* 30, p. 2.
- 11 Zhou Bida, *Wenzhong Ji* (SKQS, vol. 1147), *juan* 16, pp. 17b-18a.
- 12 For a discussion of cultural preservation in the Southern Song, see Mok Kar-leung, Harold, "Nansong Shufa zhongde Beisong Qingjie," *The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Summer 2011), pp. 59-84.
- 13 For a study of this loan agreement, see Mok Kar-leung, Harold, "Xianggang Zhongwen Daxue Wenwuguan Cang Wang Chong Jiequanjuan," in Li Yu-chou ed., *Shanggu yu Shangtai: Yuan Ming Shufa Yanjiu Lunji* (Taipei: Wanjuanlou Tushu Gufen Youxian Gongsi, 2013), pp. 325-358.
- 14 Wen Zhengming, *Futian Ji* (SKQS, vol. 1273), *juan* 31, pp. 1b-2a.
- 15 Ouyang Xiu, *Wenzhong Ji*, *juan* 130, p. 3b; *juan* 129, p. 3a.
- 16 Wang Chong's *Thousand-character Essay in Running Script* is now collected in the Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. See Lam Yip-keung, Peter, ed., *Three Decades of Acquisition at the Art Museum* (Hong Kong: Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2001), pp. 116-117, Plate 29.
- 17 This calligraphic work is included in ZGSFQJ, vol. 50, Plate 22, pp. 254-255.
- 18 For relevant studies, see Bai Qianshen, *Fu Shan de Jiaowang he Yingchou: Yishu Shehuishi de Yixiang Ge'an Yanjiu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Fine Arts Publisher, 2003); He Yan-chiuan, "Zhang Ruitu (1570-1641) Xingcao Shufeng zhi Xingcheng yu Shufa Yingchou," *Taida Journal of Art History*, no. 19 (2005), pp. 133-162; Liu Yang, "Yingchou: Shihuishi shijiao xiade Qingdai Shiren Shufa," in Mok Kar-leung and Chen Yafei eds., *Shuhai Guanlan 2: Yinglian, Tiexue, Shuyi Guoji Yantaohui Lunwenji* (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts & Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008), pp. 97-127.
- 19 Chen Yixi, *Lüyingting Ji*, in MQSFLWX, pp. 478-479.

