

米芾：海岳名言

On Calligraphy

By Mi Fu

Translated by Carl Gene Fordham

This is an essay by an educated Song dynasty scholar on the beauty, form, and meaning of the Chinese script when written by a skilled calligrapher. It highlights the unique Chinese art of veneration, respect, and creative engagement of the form of the Chinese script, a tradition that really has no parallel in any other civilization. Feel free to skim read this, just to get a sense of how an educated Chinese elite thinks and talks about his script.

Translator's Introduction

'On Calligraphy' is a collection of Mi Fu's (1051–1107) sayings and ideas in which he discusses his calligraphic practice and aesthetic, and compares them critically with the great calligraphers both of and prior to his time. Despite its important contribution to the calligraphic thought of ancient China, this is the first time an English translation has been published.

The name of the text in Chinese is 'Haiyue mingyan' 海岳名言, literally, 'The Renowned Remarks of Haiyue', 'Haiyue' being one of Mi Fu's sobriquets. However, it is unlikely that a learned gentleman of the time would refer to his own remarks as renowned, even for someone like Mi Fu, who had a reputation for being eccentric. The title was probably added to the text by later generations, presumably to honour his contributions to calligraphic discourse. In the interests of brevity, the title has been translated simply as 'On Calligraphy', since the text contains the most representative remarks Mi Fu made on calligraphic theory.

This translation is based on the earliest and most circulated edition of the text, namely the Song edition by Zuo Gui 左圭 included in the series *One Hundred Rivers Flowing into the Sea of Learning* 百川學海. The various collated and annotated versions were also consulted, as well as the commentaries by Sha Menghai 沙孟海 (1900–1992) and Hong Pimo 洪丕謨 (1940–2005).¹

¹ See Sha Menghai, 'Haiyue mingyan zhushi' 海岳名言注釋 [Annotated 'Haiyue mingyan'], in *Sha Menghai luncong shugao* 沙孟海論叢書稿 [Collected papers of Sha Menghai] (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua, 1987), pp. 134–151, and Hong Pimo, annot., *Haiyue mingyan pingzhu* 海岳名言評註 [Annotated 'Haiyue mingyan' with commentary] (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua, 1987).

1. Having reviewed all the remarks on calligraphy made by the masters of previous generations, I note that the citations are convoluted and abstract, and the metaphors are outlandish. Take, for example, the phrase 'powerful as a dragon jumping over the Heavenly Gate, or a tiger crouching in the Phoenix Pavilion'.² What kind of language is this? Some who strive to adopt flowery rhetoric come nowhere near to elaborating on specific techniques, and thus their comments are of no benefit to those wishing to learn calligraphy. Therefore, in my commentaries, I shall discuss each calligrapher in question truthfully, and refuse to use exaggerated language.

2. I write small-character running script in the same way I write large characters.³ But I only write that way from time to time as colophons of the original pieces of calligraphy in my personal collection, not as gifts to people who seek samples of my hand. I keep this ancient writing technique in my innermost thoughts, so that when I put brush to paper, it manifests itself in a natural and classically elegant fashion. When I was in my prime, I had not developed a calligraphic style of my own. People said all I could do was collect and copy the styles of the ancients. I had, in fact, assimilated the fortes of each master, which I brought into a synthesis. It was not until my senior years that my own style was established. Now when others see my writing they are at a loss as to which master's calligraphy I have studied.

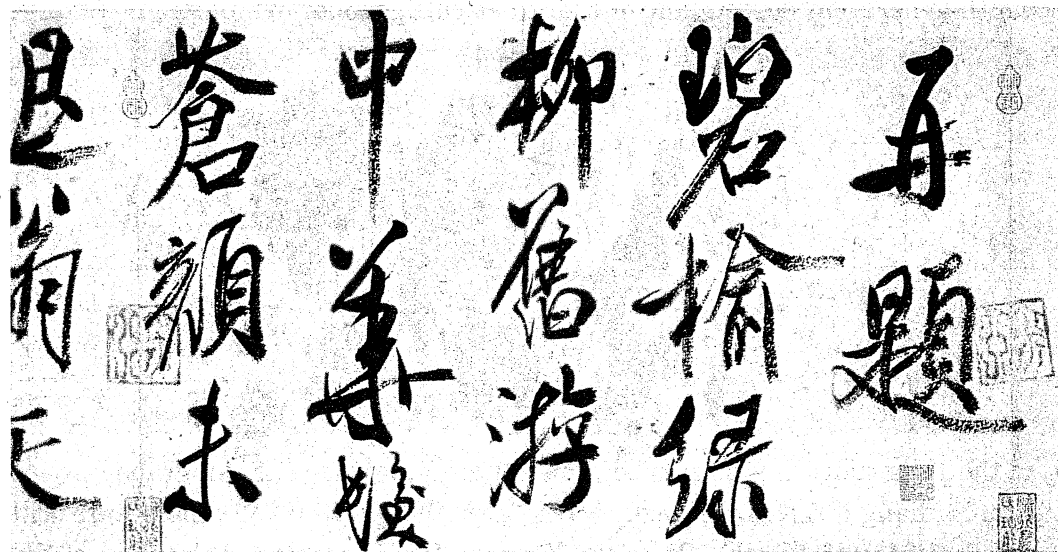
3. The large-character plaque inscriptions written in the clerical script by my contemporaries Wu Wan 吳峴 from Jiangnan and Wang Zishao 王子韶 from Dengzhou very much exude the charm of the ancients. My son Youren 友仁 writes large-character clerical script in the same style. As for my younger son

² This phrase describes the hand of the great calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361). The original sentence is taken from 'Evaluation of Past and Contemporary Calligraphers' 古今書人優劣評 by Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (464–549), and reads: 'The calligraphy of Wang Xizhi is as powerful as a dragon jumping over the Heavenly Gate, or a tiger crouching in the Phoenix Pavilion. Thus, subsequent generations have treasured it and forever taken it as a model' 王羲之書·字勢雄逸·如龍跳天門·虎臥鳳閣·故歷代寶之·永以為訓.

³ In Chinese calligraphy *dazi* 大字 refers to characters written at a large scale, which are often found on plaques, while *xiaozi* 小字 are characters written small, and are commonly seen in letters and copies of scriptures. 'Large' characters are usually written in a loose, stretched way, while 'small' ones tend to be compact and well knit.

Youzhi 友知, if he inscribes a stele or writes large-character calligraphy on my behalf, nobody can tell our writing apart. Vice Director of the Chancellery Xu Jiang 許將 particularly likes his small regular-script hand. He once said to me, 'For short notes, you could just ask your son to write on your behalf.' He was referring to none other than Youzhi.

4. In his poem celebrating the early-Tang master Xue Ji's 薛稷 calligraphy of the name of Huipu Temple (*Huipu si* 慧普寺), Du Fu 杜甫 writes: 'Three large impressive characters, like imposing dragons coiled around each other.' Now that we can get a look at the original stone rubbings, with one glance it is clear that the stroke-ends of the characters are so ostentatiously sketched that they look like round, plump flatbread. Take, for instance, the character *pu* 普, which resembles a man standing straight with his arms stretching out, his fists clenching; it is too strange and unattractive to be put into words. From this one may deduce that the ancients clearly did not practise large-character calligraphy in any real sense.



Detail of *Poem on Hong County* 虹縣詩卷(局部) in running script by Mi Fu dated 1106. Courtesy of Tokyo National Museum. Written only a year before Mi Fu passed away, this piece of calligraphy is representative of his 'own style' established in his senior years as mentioned in quote 2. It is also noteworthy that this is one of Mi Fu's few existent large-character works, with its dimensions being 31.2 x 487.0 cm.

5. The work by the Eastern Jin scholar Ge Hong 葛洪 that features the characters *Tiantai zhi guan* 天臺之觀 (Tiantai Temple)—written using the ‘flying white’ technique⁴—is the epitome of large-character calligraphy, and remains as unrivalled today as it was in antiquity. The characters *Daolin zhi si* 道林之寺 (Daolin Temple) written by Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢, the famous early-Tang calligrapher, are weak, shabby, and listless. As for the characters *Guoqing si* 國清寺 (Guoqing Temple) written by the renowned mid-Tang calligrapher Liu Gongquan 柳公權, they are unsuitably sized and extremely pretentious. On the other hand, the plaque calligraphy of Pei Xiu 裴休, another mid-Tang master, features an unrestrained style with genuine charm that prevents it from falling into unsightliness. The difficulty in the regular script lies not in the writing of the characters themselves, which is rather easy, but in generating momentum within their structure. The momentum of the brush-work can only be sustained if one can avoid drawing the characters like stiff counting rods.

6. When a character is written down, it is oriented in eight directions;⁵ this can only be completely observed in the regular script, and different techniques are required for writing large and small characters. While Zhiyong 智永—the seventh-generation descendant of the great calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之—was capable of taking care of the eight directions in his calligraphy, he failed in inheriting the technique of Zhong You 鍾繇 from the Three Kingdoms period. Since the Sui and early Tang dynasties, calligraphers like Ding Daohu 丁道護, Ouyang Xun, and Yu Shinan 虞世南 started to produce characters that were neater and more proportioned, which marked the end of the ancient style of calligraphy. Liu Gongquan learned his calligraphy from Ouyang Xun but was far from matching his teacher; instead, he established himself as the originator of deviant and unsightly calligraphy. From Liu onward, vulgar calligraphy became part of the world.

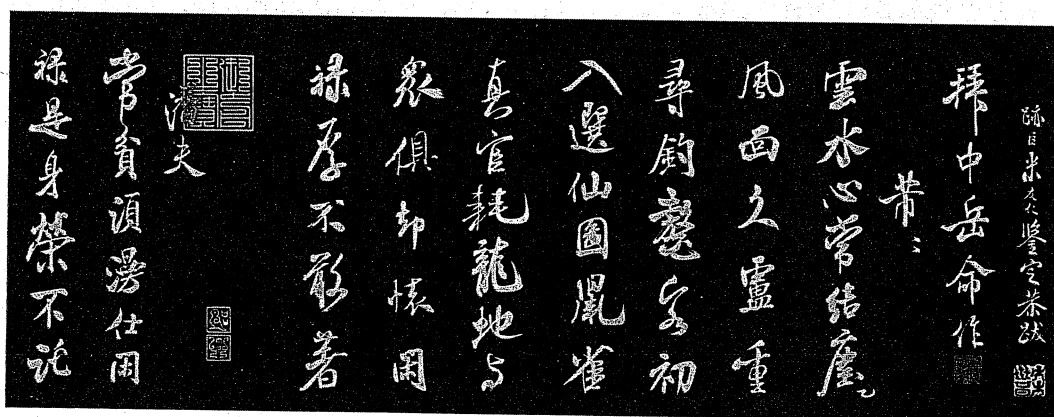
7. In the Tang court, letters of appointment were written in the calligraphic styles of Chu Suiliang 褚遂良, Lu Jianzhi 陸柬之, and Xu Jiaozhi 徐嶠之; there were still a number of tasteful works. Since the Kaiyuan 開元 era, it is only because of the

⁴ The ‘flying white’ technique (*feibai* 飛白, or *feibai shu* 飛白書) involves using a half-dry brush, which leaves uneven white streaks within each stroke.

⁵ ‘Eight directions’ 八面, also called ‘four directions’ 四面, is a technical concept in regular script stressing that all sides of a single character should be evenly proportioned, with its constitutive elements coordinated in every direction; characters should also be organized in relation to each other.

plump and vulgar calligraphic style of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang 唐玄宗 that there emerged the likes of Xu Hao 徐浩, who adjusted their styles to ingratiate themselves with the emperor of the time; from then on, copiers of Buddhist scriptures also started to adopt a plumper hand. Thus, the calligraphic style of the ancients in use before the Kaiyuan era was no more.

8. The people of the Tang inappropriately compared Xu Hao to Wang Sengqian 王僧虔 of the Southern Dynasties. Xu wrote the characters the same size in a single piece, his writing resembling the rigid regular script seen in official documents. On the other hand, Wang Sengqian and Xiao Ziyun 蕭子雲, also of the Southern Dynasties, carried on the calligraphic technique of Zhong You, which was identical to that of the Eastern Jin calligrapher Wang Xianzhi 王獻之—in their writing there are variations in size according to the number of strokes of each character. Xu was a general enlisted by the Tang calligrapher Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿,⁶ and his calligraphic style, as was Yan's, originated with the Zhang Xu 張旭 school. Zhang taught Yan that in the same piece he should reduce the size of large characters, and write small characters in a larger size,⁷ which is contrary to the practices of the ancients.



Detail of *Poems on the Occasion of Visiting the Zhongyue Temple* 拜中岳命作(局部) in running script by Mi Fu dated c.1094. Courtesy of the National Palace Museum. In this work we can see variations in the size of characters, illustrating that Mi Fu is following the 'practices of the ancients'.

⁶ It is possible that here Mi Fu confused two people who shared the name Xu Hao. For one thing, the Xu Hao who was enlisted by Yan Zhenqing (709–785) was a military officer of lower ranks, whereas the calligrapher Xu Hao (703–782), a governor and a defence commissioner, was approximately of the same rank as Yan. There is no historical record of the latter serving under Yan. See Hong, *Haiyue mingyan pingzhu*, pp. 13–14.

⁷ Here 'large' and 'small' describe the number of strokes instead of the size of the characters.

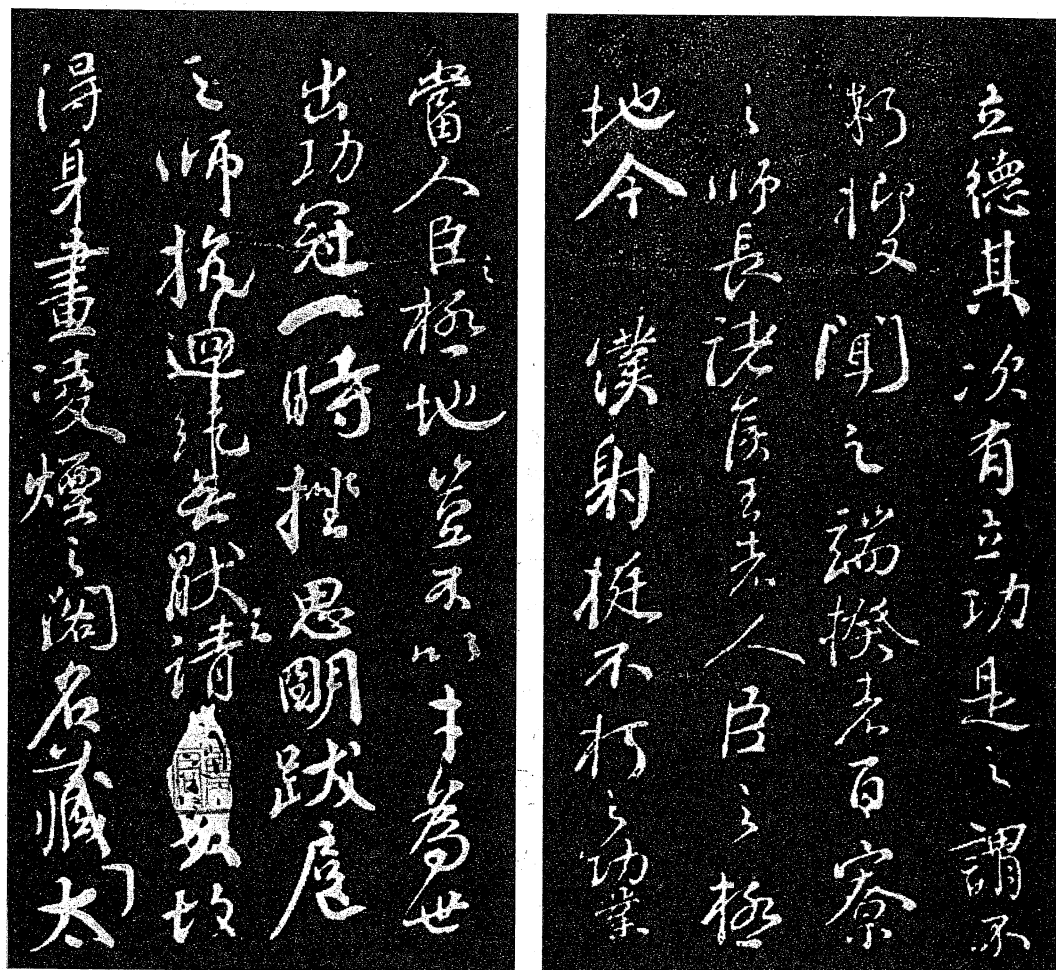
9. Stone inscriptions cannot be studied for their calligraphy, because characters that are originally written down change form when they are inscribed by another person. Thus, it is through the study and appreciation of the original, handwritten works that their true essence can be comprehended. Yan Zhenqing would often ask his servants to inscribe his calligraphy on stone. His servants, merely guessing their master's wishes, would make changes to the strokes, resulting in major distortions of Yan's original calligraphy. There is the singular case of the calligraphy he produced on Mount Lu in Jizhou: he completed it and immediately left, so later generations could use the original writing to make inscriptions which preserved the true face of Yan's hand. Without a hint of pretence or vulgarity, this piece of work shows that Yan's calligraphy was based on that of Chu Suiliang. Furthermore, Yan's original, handwritten works did not exhibit any strokes starting with a silkworm's head and ending in a swallow's tail.⁸ Yan's *Letter on the Controversy over Seating Protocol* 爭座位帖, which he wrote to Guo Zhiyun 郭知運,⁹ showed hints of the seal script, and is a masterwork in Yan's repertoire. Liu Gongquan and Ouyang Xun were the originators of unsightly and vulgar calligraphy; however, the hand of Gongquan's brother Liu Gongchuo 柳公綽 did not feature such vulgarity. The 'muscle-and-bone' theory was put forth by Liu Gongquan;¹⁰ later generations believed that 'muscle-and-bone' writing could be produced by simply pressing the tip of the brush when writing a stroke, but little did they know the same effect can be achieved naturally by refraining from exaggerated expression.

⁸ In Chinese calligraphy, the term 'silkworm's head' 蠶頭 refers to the technique of writing a horizontal stroke slowly so it resembles the head of a silkworm, while the 'swallow's tail' 燕尾 refers to writing the end of a right-slant stroke swiftly and making it graceful, so that it resembles the tail of a swallow. They are often associated with the calligraphy of Yan Zhenqing.

⁹ This seems to be a mistake made during the transmission of the source text, as by all accounts Yan wrote the letter to Guo Yingyi 郭英乂 (?-765), not his father Guo Zhiyun (?-721).

¹⁰ If calligraphy is described as having 'muscle and bone' 筋骨, it is appraised as muscular yet imbued with bamboo-like elasticity.

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Detail of *Letter on the Controversy over Seating Protocol* in running-cursive script by Yan Zhenqing dated 764. This work is widely applauded as one of Yan's best three pieces of calligraphy; unfortunately the original copy has long been lost, while a stone rubbing is available in the Stele Forest in Xi'an.

14. Calligraphers like Ouyang Xun, Yu Shinan, Chu Suiliang, Yan Zhenqing, and Liu Gongquan all only had one technique, a deliberately pretentious one mastered with painstaking effort. How could such calligraphy as theirs be handed down from generation to generation? Though the calligraphy of Li Yong 李邕 of the Tang grew out of that of Wang Xianzhi, it lost its appropriate regulation of thinness and plumpness. In his twilight years, the calligraphic vigour of Xu Hao declined, his characters so lacking in vitality that they could not even compare to the *Wuzhou Stele* 婺州碑 he wrote during his time as vice minister of personnel. His *Stele of Dongxiaozi Temple* 董孝子廟碣 and *Stele of Monk Bukong* 不空和尚碑 are both calligraphic failures produced in his old age that are not in the least pleasing to see, as is clear to anyone with a discerning eye. The late-Tang calligrapher Shen Chuanshi 沈傳師 blazed a new trail, and his writing is of genuine and extraordinary interest; Xu Hao cannot compare to him. The *Inscription in Taiyuan* 太原題名 by Censor Xiao Cheng 蕭誠 is superior to any other during the Tang dynasty. His *Stele of Nanyue Zhenjun Temple* 南嶽真君觀碑, its text composed by Adjutant Zhao Yizhen 趙頤貞, heavily resembles the styles of Zhong You and Wang Xizhi; it is better than any other work.

15. The characters copied by Zhiyong in his version of the *Thousand-Character Classic* 千字文 are pretty and plump, round and vigorous, and command presence in all eight directions. A fragment of his original handwritten calligraphy from the part that reads *dianpei* 顛沛 (drifting from place to place) onward has been collected by Tang Jiong 唐炯. The collections of others are not comparable to this one.

16. For a written character to stand on its own, its figure must have flesh, which wraps around the sinews, and the latter in turn hide its flesh. Only characters written in this way are pretty and plump. Though they need a steady structure, they must not confine themselves to convention. They must be dynamic, but not strange;¹¹ advanced in years, yet not withered by them; shapely, but not swollen. To seek change and pursue the new, one must achieve mastery of the form, but

¹¹ The word 'dynamic' is used here to denote the adjective *xian* 險 in the source text, which in calligraphic contexts refers to a kind of technique in which characters are written on a slightly skewed angle, with particular strokes written longer or shorter than usual. According to Mi Fu, whose calligraphy abounds in this technique, using it excessively or ineptly will only produce strange-looking calligraphy.



Detail of *Thousand-Character Classic* in regular and cursive scripts by Zhiyong. It is said that in his lifetime Zhiyong made over eight hundred copies of *Thousand-Character Classic*, among which the only extant original, as is claimed, is a private collection of the Ogawa 小川 family in Kyoto.

not use brute force, as it brings about rage and thus makes one's hand aberrant. The key is to achieve mastery of the form without falling into pretentiousness. A pretentious hand produces but a painting, and a vulgar one at that. These are the pitfalls of calligraphic art.

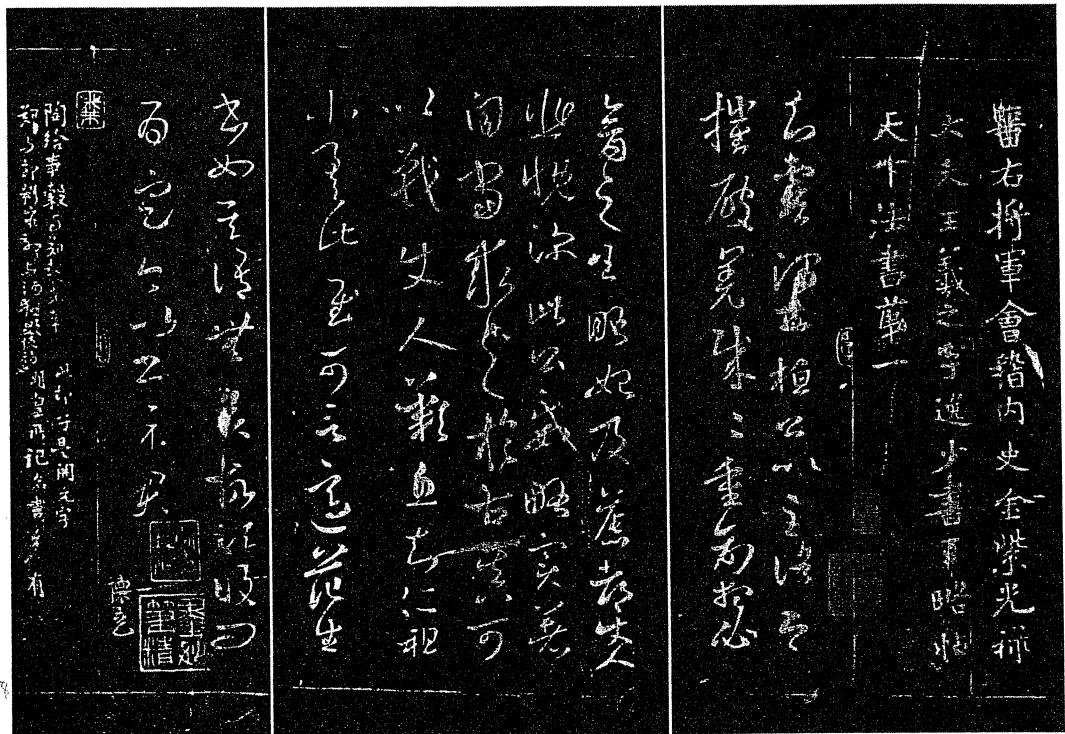
17. As the ancients said, 'Habits acquired in youth are no different from one's natural instinct.' I once dreamed that a man dressed in the ancient style taught me how to fold paper and write characters; since then, my calligraphy has improved subtly. When I showed my writing to others, they could not tell the difference. Only Cai Jing 蔡京 responded with amazement, 'How is it that your technique has changed so dramatically?' This gentleman is truly perceptive. Zhang Dun 章惇 prides himself on his regular-script calligraphy, and yet he merely praises my running-cursive script, while suggesting that I should write regular-script characters like setting counting rods. However, characters written in the regular script must have form and momentum to be exquisite.

18. When it comes to Yan Zhenqing, his running script is worth studying, but his regular script is vulgar.

19. Though my son Youren has studied the calligraphic style of the ancients, my style nonetheless takes up the bulk of his learning. Youzhi's cursive script is somewhat interesting.

20. Zhiyong wrote calligraphy until his ink-stone became a mortar; it was in this way that he learned how to write like Wang Xizhi. Should he have continued until he broke his ink-stone, I suppose he would have attained the heights of Zhong You and Suo Jing 索靖 of the Western Jin. Such is the arduous nature of calligraphic practice, which one should always bear in mind!

21. One day without putting brush to paper, and I already feel my proficiency in calligraphy wanes. Presumably, the ancients never let one single moment pass without practising. I am reminded of the work *On Lord Huan's Recovery of Luoyang* 桓公至洛帖 by Wang Xizhi in Su Zhichun's 蘇之純 collection. Wang's writing is clear, and his technique is extremely refined. One may say that this work reigns supreme throughout the realm as a calligraphic model.



On Lord Huan's Recovery of Luoyang in cursive script by Wang Xizhi dated 356, as collected in Mi Fu's *Books of Calligraphy from the Studio of Jin-Dynasty Treasures* 寶晉齋法帖. According to his *Shushi* 書史 [History of calligraphy], Mi Fu managed to acquire the copy of *On Lord Huan's Recovery Luoyang* after Su Zhichun died. Mi's studio was named after three Jin-dynasty calligraphic treasures in his collection, this one included.

22. There used to be a large amount of calligraphy by Wang Anshi 王安石 collected in his former residence. However, I am not sure if much of it remains there today. Wang learned the calligraphic style of Yang Ningshi 楊凝式 of the late Tang, a fact that is largely unknown. I once talked with him about this, and he very much appreciated my keen eye.

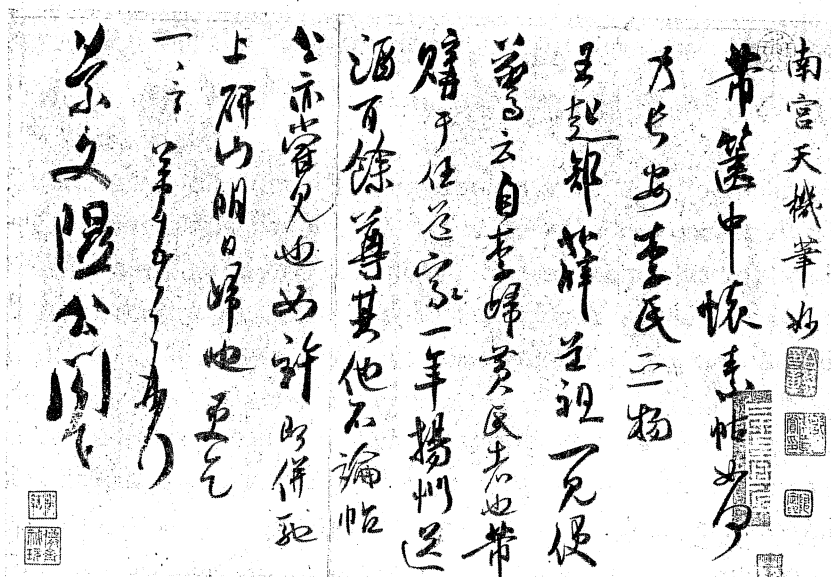
23. The plaque inscribed in clerical script at the pavilion on Mount Mu in Jinling was produced twenty-one years ago by Guan Weizong 關蔚宗. I suppose all the palatial plaques were inscribed in such a fashion during the Six Dynasties period.

24. Du Fu believed that the three characters *Huipu si* 慧普寺 written by Xue Ji resembled 'imposing dragons coiled around each other'. Having seen the

original stone rubbing, I can say that they better resemble flatbread being held up by men of unusual strength. Evidently, Du Fu was a poor calligrapher.

25. To learn calligraphy, one must derive pleasure from it, and only by forgetting one's other interests can one reach the realms of ingeniousness. Those whose hearts have other lingering fancies will fail to calligraph with skill.

26. Haiyue was once summoned to appear before the emperor as erudite of the Calligraphy School. The emperor named some of Haiyue's contemporaries who had a fine hand and asked him to comment on each of them. Haiyue responded, 'The hand of Cai Jing has not attained the true essence of calligraphic technique. The hand of Cai Bian 蔡卞 shows technique, but lacks ingenuity and character. The hand of Cai Xiang 蔡襄 resembles that of a carver. Shen Liao 沈遼, a typesetter. Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅, a copyist. Su Shi 蘇軾, a painter.' The emperor asked another question, 'What, then, of thy calligraphy?' Haiyue replied, 'Thy vassal wields his brush in a free and easy fashion.'



Letter to Jingwen 致景文隰公尺牘 in running script by Mi Fu dated c.1091. Courtesy of the National Palace Museum. This is a letter Mi Fu wrote to his friend Liu Jisun 劉季孫 (courtesy name Jingwen 景文) at the peak of his calligraphic career. Although mostly done in running script, it also features elements of cursive script, showcasing Mi Fu's elegant brushwork and untamed spirit.

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