

Sailing the Boat of Tradition: Mi Fu's Revision and Innovation in Calligraphy

by

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Abstract

The affiliation of text and visual material in the Chinese calligraphic tradition has a rich history informed by ancient models and continual innovation. My thesis explores the Northern Sung dynasty calligrapher Mi Fu's (1051-1107) appropriation and contention of the legacy of the Jin Dynasty calligraphers Wang Xizhi (307-365) and Wang Xianzhi (344-388), both icons in the history of Chinese calligraphy. Following the Wang's rise to fame in the fourth century, historical texts delineate the importance of the father, Wang Xizhi, and discredit the son, Wang Xianzhi. Over half a millennia later, Mi Fu boldly negated this claim, asserting that Wang Xianzhi's father could not compare to his son's "transcendent and untrammelled" perfection.¹ My research regarding Mi Fu's study of the Two Wangs brings forward Mi Fu's disruption of the conventional adherence to the father's style, demonstrating Mi Fu's appropriation of the calligraphic model of Wang Xianzhi. As a scholar-official, Mi Fu's manipulation of the foundations of calligraphy was a daring transformation of calligraphy into a form of individual expression. Resulting from his study of past calligraphic models Mi Fu developed a distinctive approach to calligraphy. This is exemplified by Mi Fu's pivotal work *Letter About a Coral Tree*. Informed by Francois Jullien's theory of detour and access, I discuss Mi Fu's stylistic development as an oblique approach guided by ingenious detours. Furthermore, I situate Mi Fu's manipulation of text through Derrida's theory of writing and difference. In conceptualizing Mi Fu's work in this way I consider both the ideological and technical innovation of Mi Fu's calligraphic oeuvre in eleventh century China.

¹ Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 54.

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Dedicated to David and Eli with love

Sailing the Boat of Tradition: Mi Fu's Revision and Innovation in Calligraphy

Introduction

The *Letter About a Coral Tree*, completed by the calligrapher Mi Fu in c. 1101 (In the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing. Ink on paper, measuring 10 ½ x 18 inches, this work will be referred as *the Coral Tree*, hereafter), exemplifies the revolution of calligraphy and painting in the 11th century. This piece of calligraphy describes an inventory of antique scrolls and curios collected by Mi Fu (1051-1107) and makes oblique reference to his own personal and political plight. A distinguishing feature of this work is a large imposing coral tree on a gold stand that is painted within the calligraphic text, along side its mention. It is upon this work that my thesis pivots. With *the Coral Tree* Mi Fu made a sudden and powerful break with the established orthodox traditions of both painting and calligraphy. A scholar-artist in the culturally sophisticated and classically educated circles of the Northern Sung dynasty (960-1127), Mi Fu was well versed in the history of calligraphic practice. With his conscientious and creative subversion of the classical tradition through the interplay of text and image, Mi Fu secured an individualized mark on Chinese art. This thesis explores the conventions and aberrations in the trajectory of calligraphy's history from which the artist's novel ideas arose. Mi Fu's evolving response to calligraphic styles is evident throughout his work, especially with respect to his rejection of modern scripts and his adaptation of elements of the classic Two Wangs' calligraphy from the Jin dynasty (265-420) and other ancient scripts. The role of the Two Wangs in Chinese culture is paramount and their impact on Mi Fu's modes of writing and composition considerable. While copying past calligraphy always remained vital, the Sung period witnessed the rise of highly individualized styles

through the encouragement of personal expression. In deconstructing this moment in the history of calligraphic production, my theoretical argument hinges on the work of Francois Jullien and Jacques Derrida. Each offers a unique perspective from which it is possible to evaluate Mi Fu's novel calligraphic aesthetic in the Northern Song dynasty.

The Coral Tree

The Coral Tree resonates with meaning with respect to not only the circumstances surrounding Mi Fu's life but also in terms of the broader scope of the Chinese calligraphic tradition. These meanings are both obvious and subtle, both textual and imaged. The letter consists of two short calligraphy texts between which lies a sketch of a coral branch on a gold stand. The work lacks symmetry; on the left the characters are small and cramped, whereas on the right the characters are large and spaciouly placed. The texts also differ: one is a prose account whereas the other is a poem.² The bold painting of *the Coral Tree* in a stand is positioned above a sketch of three overlapping hills, separating the two calligraphic texts. The sequence of the calligraphy follows from right to left and begins with an inventory of objects composed in Mi Fu's energetic semi-cursive writing. Mi Fu proudly recounts several of his acquisitions, including two prized and rare Six Dynasties paintings as well as a branch of coral. The artists and paintings to which he refers are Zhang Sengyou's *Heavenly King* and Jingwen's *Inquiry about the Rites*.³ He also discusses duties associated with the Ministry of Rites, at which he was erudite of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices in 1103. The loss of his position is the theme

² Peter Sturman, *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 198.

³ *Ibid*, 200.

of his commentary and he laments his failure as an official.⁴ This work of calligraphy represents a decisive moment in calligraphic history. The unusual configuration of image and text solicits the viewers' attention in a provocative manner and ushers in a new mode of looking which inherently adds complexity to the textual message. While both text and image have a distinct place in calligraphic history, never before had they been combined so effectively by uniting an image reminiscent of an early pictograph, with calligraphic script. This juxtaposition would have been unusual to the viewer, thus challenging their perception and reading. Together, Mi Fu's novel design and incorporation of historical precedents signify a break with firmly established Chinese calligraphic tradition. The focus of this thesis is thus Mi Fu's study of the Jin dynasty calligraphers Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, and the unconventionality and ingenuity of Mi Fu's appropriation of elements of Wang Xianzhi's writing style.

Mi Fu Historical Background

Privileged as Mi Fu, whose mother was the wet nurse for the current emperor and therefore had unusual opportunities to view the masterpieces in the court collection, his achievement in calligraphy has placed him as one of the four great calligraphers of the Northern Sung dynasty. Along with Su Shih (1037-1101), Huang Tingjian (1045-1105), and Cai Xiang (1012-1067), Mi Fu redefined calligraphic practice and style. In studying Mi Fu's chronicle of calligraphy's history from his vantage point of the 11th century, I was struck by his emphasis on the importance and impact of Wang Xianzhi (344-388), the younger of the renowned Two Wangs. My interest was piqued for at times throughout this

⁴ Peter Sturman, *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 200.

history, scholars and calligraphers revered the imperially favoured father, Wang Xizhi (307-365), while severely downplaying the relevance of the son, Wang Xianzhi.⁵ Yet, over half a millennia later Mi Fu boldly negates this claim asserting that Wang Xianzhi's father did not compare to his son's perfection, described by Mi Fu as "transcendent and untrammelled."⁶ My research into Mi Fu's study of the Wangs contributes to this scholarship by emphasizing Mi Fu's disruption of the conventional preference for the father's style and establishing the significance of his break with an orthodoxy that had dominated calligraphic practice for over half a millennia. Rooted in the practice of calligraphy, the interplay of text and image stands at the forefront of this discussion and in approaching this from a new direction, I examine not only what Mi Fu negated, but also what he achieved. Mi Fu's decisive break with the recognized orthodoxy of Chinese calligraphy in Sung culture intimates how the politics of the personal trace resonate through an artistic and cultural negation. I begin with the historiography before turning to Mi Fu's career, his artistic practice, his autobiography, and how this influenced the history of calligraphy. I conclude by exploring the theoretical implications of his artistic strategies.

Calligraphy carried political, economical, and ideological implications.⁷

Throughout the Sung dynasty, as with other periods, knowledge of calligraphy not only reflected a social coherence among the educated elite, but was also required for entry into government positions.⁸ During this period the standard for writing and style was founded on the calligraphy of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420), and particularly the "Two

⁵ Peter Sturman, *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 72.

⁶ Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

Wangs”.⁹ While very few examples of original works by the artists of the Jin dynasty survived, many were known through copies. Between Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, while hundreds of pieces by the father were well known, there were less than ten well documented pieces by Wang Xianzhi.

Historiography

One of the preeminent calligraphers in the Sung dynasty, Mi Fu, his calligraphy and his study of graphic history, including references to the Two Wangs, are well documented in the literature. Indispensable contemporary histories written about Mi Fu include those by Lothar Ledderose and Peter Sturman. Histories on the Sung dynasty as a whole, with detailed commentary on Mi Fu, are Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*¹⁰, Wen C. Fong, *Images of the Mind*¹¹ and *Beyond Representation*¹², Ronald Egan, *The Problem of Beauty*¹³, Amy McNair, *The Upright Brush*¹⁴ and Peter Bol, *This Culture of Ours*.¹⁵ Equally important in the context of this thesis are texts dealing with the history and calligraphy of the Two Wangs. These are documented from the Jin dynasty onwards. Below is a short chronological synopsis of texts referencing the Two Wangs.

⁹ Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 3.

¹⁰ Susan Bush. *The Chinese Literati on Painting*¹⁰: *Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang. (1555-1636)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971)

¹¹ Wen C. Fong. *Images of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

¹² Wen C Fong. *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy 8th to 14th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992).

¹³ Ronald Egan. *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Amy McNair. *The Upright Brush: Yan Zhenging's Calligraphy and Song Literati Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998)

¹⁵ Peter Bol. *This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Song* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994)

Lothar Ledderose thoroughly investigates Mi Fu's interaction with calligraphic history in *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy*.¹⁶ He writes that Mi Fu preferred Wang Xianzhi and claims he was "dearest to his heart" as well as the most respected and admired as an artist and the most aesthetically ideal. He quotes Mi Fu's writing: "Wang Xianzhi's natural perfection is transcendent and untrammelled. How can his father compare?"¹⁷ Ledderose also notes that though Mi Fu claimed to prefer the work of the son, he always acknowledged the historical importance of Wang Xizhi.¹⁸

In *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China*, Peter Sturman discusses Mi Fu's interaction with the Two Wang tradition.¹⁹ He refers to the intersection of Mi Fu with Jin calligraphy as a "watershed event in the history of Chinese calligraphy."²⁰ Sturman acknowledges Mi Fu's greater interest in the younger Wang Xianzhi for a period, but also cites how much he valued the father's example. Sturman suggests that what differentiates Mi Fu's calligraphy most particularly from that of the Two Wangs is his "irrepressible energy."²¹

Throughout *The Upright Brush: Yan Zhenqing's Calligraphy and Song Literati Politics*, Amy McNair discusses the characteristics of Wang Xianzhi's "single-stroke calligraphy" as those preferred by Mi Fu and adds that Mi Fu was unusual for his preference for Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy. Mi Fu's judgement of Yan Zhenqing's scripts is also revealing for he considered Yan's regular script too "intentional,"

¹⁶ Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979)

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 54.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 54.

¹⁹ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

²⁰ *Ibid*, 74.

²¹ *Ibid*, 90.

mannered, constructed and artificial, whereas he admired the running script denoting it as organic, natural, Daoist and “unintentional.”²²

Classical references to the Two Wangs date from their lifetime. A major shift in the Two Wang domination occurred during the Tang dynasty (608-907) when Wang Xianzhi was recognized for his superior achievements in caoshu or cursive and running script. During the Tang, Tang Taizong circulated a letter written by Wang Xizhi in caoshu from 332. Titled “Sending Regards to a Friend (Yuan huan tie)”, the letter was mounted with other pieces in caoshu on a scroll; based on the copies and rubbings of this piece, Wang Xizhi gained paramount status as a canonical calligrapher.²³ This historically sanctioned attitude remained potent for centuries; Wang Xizhi was continuously revered for 1600 years, while Wang Xianzhi’s popularity shifted depending on which scholars became advocates of his style.

Referencing ancient sources, Ledderose quotes the critic, Yang Hsin (370-442), who knew Wang Xianzhi and claimed that the son “does not reach his father in structural force” but “surpasses him in beautiful elegance.”²⁴ According to Ledderose’s interpretation, this statement indicates that whereas Wang Xizhi’s style was older and more stable, Wang Xianzhi was the “modern artist” who demonstrated a new sense of fluency and ease in his calligraphy.²⁵

²² Amy McNair. *The Upright Brush: Yan Zhenqing’s Calligraphy and Song Literati Politics* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 92.

²³ Uta Lauer, Stockholm University, Sweden. The Association for Asian Studies (AAS) 2009.

²⁴ Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 15.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

The Two Wangs are mentioned in the biography of Liu Hsiu (429-483). Here it is claimed that in the Yuanjia era (424-453) everyone employed Wang Xianzhi as a model and did not take his father's example seriously. When Liu Hsiu shifted his interest to Wang Xizhi however, the father's style became more widely practiced. As such following the Liang dynasty (502-557) the study of Wang Xizhi became increasingly popular compared to that of Wang Xianzhi.²⁶

The Tang dynasty critic Li Ssu-Chen (end 6th century) introduced the idea that both Wang Xianzhi's and Wang Xizhi's calligraphy was untrammelled, meaning they were part of a class of artists so outstanding they did not fit into the usual nine grade classification system.²⁷ Following this, however, Tang Taizong (598-649) chose to favour Wang Xizhi and discredit Wang Xianzhi. Both opinions were pushed with such verve that he influenced the reception of the calligraphers for centuries to come.

According to Sun Guoting's *Treatise on Calligraphy* (687), Wang Xianzhi was asked by Xie An what he felt about his father's handwriting and answered that his own was better.²⁸ Xie An retorted "the critics do not think so," to which Wang Xianzhi responded: "they can't tell." Sun Guoting criticized Wang Xianzhi for this commentary, stating that Wang Xianzhi "only touched upon superficialities of his father's profundity."²⁹ He ends with an anecdote about Wang Xianzhi's touch up of his father's calligraphy which the father saw, believed it to be his own work, and claimed he must have been drunk when he wrote it. Sun Guoting ends his short synopsis of Wang Xianzhi with the conclusion that the younger Wang was inferior to his father. Mi Fu praised Sun Guoting for emulating Wang

²⁶ Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3

²⁸ Sun Guoting. *Treatise on Calligraphy*. The National Palace Museum, Taipei, 687.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Xizhi's cursive style.³⁰ In the first half of the 8th century, Zhang Huaiguan championed Wang Xianzhi's exceptional talent and claimed he developed an unrestrained and fashionable script different from both the cursive and the running styles.

Egan contrasts *Jigu lu (Collected Records of the Past)* by Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) with the imperially chosen collection of reproductions in *Calligraphy Models from Chunhua Pavilion* of 992.³¹ While the imperial text was devoted to the history and calligraphy of the Two Wangs and others working in the same tradition, Ouyang Xiu's collection included a greater variety of calligraphers and as such offered an important alternative perspective on calligraphic history.³² Advocating independence from convention and escape from "slave writing," Ouyang Xiu made an early break with the already historically sanctioned attitude regarding the position of the Two Wangs. At this point, the influence of the long honoured history of the Jin dynasty calligraphers was waning.³³

The Tradition of the Two Wangs

In the context of texts about Mi Fu and the Two Wangs, the story of Mi Fu's development and his referencing of the classical tradition unfold. A major shift took place with Mi Fu's incorporation of the style of the Two Wangs into his calligraphic practice; the history of graphic production was altered substantially when Mi Fu reintroduced the aesthetic of the Two Wangs into the calligraphic repertoire of the Sung dynasty. Mi Fu was breaking away from Ouyang Xiu's strict perspective on the

³⁰ Sun Guoting. *Treatise on Calligraphy*. The National Palace Museum, Taipei. 687.

³¹ Ronald Egan, *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Sung Dynasty China* (Harvard: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006)

³² *Ibid*, 16.

³³ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 26.

influence of the Two Wangs. He was subverting newly established conventions. Indeed, when Mi Fu took an interest in the history of calligraphy and the representation of the Two Wangs, their status was once again evaluated. While Mi Fu respected both artists, for a time he was attracted to the more subversive quality of Wang Xianzhi's dynamic and less controlled characters. Although at times he also practiced Wang Xizhi's style, Mi Fu demonstrated in his writings that Wang Xizhi was not as unique a figure as was once believed, and that in fact his peers in the Jin, including his son, were just as important in establishing the classical tradition. Importantly, the height of Wang Xizhi's achievement is taken to be the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* (Fig. 2), a work of calligraphy known only through copies and rubbings, as the original was buried with Emperor Tang Taizong.³⁴

Commentators on the Jin dynasty suggested that the elegance of the Two Wangs' writing led to its equating with "weakness, superficiality and obsequiousness."³⁵ Nonetheless Mi Fu championed their calligraphy and alone was able to resurrect the Two Wang tradition by reintroducing their aesthetic into the Northern Song dynasty.³⁶ Jin dynasty calligraphy became, as Sturman writes, "Mi Fu's personal legacy."³⁷ Mi Fu spent years filtering through fakes and misappropriations of the Two Wangs calligraphy, and in terms of the genuine classical tradition, Mi Fu's discussions were vital for its transmission to future generations.

³⁴ Richard Curt Kraus. *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 33.

³⁵ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 73.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 74.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 74.

Mi Fu: Artist and Innovator

Mi Fu, or Mi Fei as he was known until he changed his name shortly before his forty-first birthday, was born in Hsian-yang County in the Hupei province in 1051. Mi Fu's family was of Sogdian origin and had a long history of military service. His father was the General of the left army and the first in his family to be educated in the classics. His mother, Nee Yen, served as a wet nurse for the later empress and wife of Emperor Shenzong, who reigned from 1063 to 1067. On account of his mother's position, Mi Fu enjoyed the benefit of the experiences, opportunities and connections that accompany growing up on the palace grounds. These connections enabled Mi Fu to enter a career as a civil servant.

Having established himself independently of the traditional examination and chin-shih degree system, Mi Fu spent most of his life modestly employed as an official in bureaucratic and secretarial positions.³⁸ In 1070, when he was eighteen, Mi Fu was a reader at the Imperial Library and at twenty he became a collector in the Imperial Library. By 1074 Mi Fu was a district officer in the southern city of Kuei-lin. Following this Mi Fu spent twenty years in and out of office and in minor posts throughout the southern provinces. As a part of these posts Mi Fu also spent years travelling throughout China; these travels enabled his study of ancient calligraphy found in numerous private collections. Between 1086 and 1088 Mi Fu produced his first work on ancient calligraphy, the 'Catalogue of Precious Specimens of Calligraphy Visited.' By 1092 Mi Fu was a district magistrate in Hunan province and two years later, due to problems with a tax

³⁸ Wen C. Fong. *Images of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 84.

collector, he was dismissed from office altogether.³⁹ However, as a result of the patronage of Prime Minister Hui-tsung (1046-1126) Mi Fu was recognized in court as a calligrapher and was invited in 1105 to become a doctor of calligraphy and painting at the new Calligraphy and Painting Institute. This was the peak of his official career. Not long after Mi Fu was demoted and moved to a minor post in Kiangsu, where he died in 1107.⁴⁰

Mi Fu began studying calligraphy at the age of six and it remained his primary focus throughout his life. He spent many years copying and studying classical works of calligraphy and his records provide important source information regarding the history of masterpieces before the Northern Sung dynasty.⁴¹ Mi Fu's complex and detailed description of the historical and stylistic evolution of calligraphic scripts appears in extensive collections, which continue to serve as scholarly guides for understanding the social and artistic dimension of the history of calligraphy.⁴² It was also during this period that calligraphy was recognized as a vital, aesthetic means of self expression with respect to both personal and political affairs.⁴³ The subtleties of brushwork became important markers of individuality.⁴⁴

Text and Image

Bound together about the core of this thesis, then, is the complex interplay of text and image. Letter writing, a significant feature of this culturally vibrant period, was an ancient custom employed by scholars for personal communication, for the circulation of

³⁹ Wen C Fong. *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy 8th to 14th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 153.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 153.

⁴¹ Wen C. Fong. *Images of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 4.

⁴² *Ibid*, 5.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

ideas, and for the sharing of calligraphy styles among peers.⁴⁵ Mi Fu was an avid letter writer and many of his letters still survive, demonstrating repeatedly the ease and spontaneity with which they were written. Not only is calligraphy an established means of literary communication, it is also a highly visual language which leaves room for style in choice of script and in the formation of the characters. Every choice a calligrapher makes is significant and lends deeper meaning to the syntax of the work. In Mi Fu's calligraphy there always exists a relationship between the calligraphic style and the content.⁴⁶

The poem and prose found in *the Coral Tree* have been translated by Peter Sturman. The poem reads as follows:

Three branches of crimson grass emerge from golden sand;
It has come from the house of the commissioner, himself a heavenly branch.
That day imperial grace received, I prepared the roster of names;
I fear, however, no flowers sprouted from the head of a rainbow brush.⁴⁷

The former owner of the coral, or "crimson grass," was likely one of two close friends of Mi Fu's. Both men were collectors and scions of the Royal Family, and thus known as "branches of heaven".⁴⁸ The last line of the poem alludes to two poets and their magical inheritance and sudden loss of literary talent. Metaphorically, this narrative as a whole refers to Mi Fu's lost position at the court which is attributed to his lack of talent rather than his documented unusual behaviour.

⁴⁵ On letter writing see: Amy McNair, *The Upright Brush*.

⁴⁶ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 206.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 198.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 200.

The placing of the coral tree was carefully planned for above and below the sketch, as well as on both sides, Mi Fu added key terms which frame its presence in puns. The coral rises up above the hills of Jiangnan, Mi Fu's adopted home South of the Yangtze River, recognizable from a 10th-century painting by Dong Yuan. Likewise, the words on the edge of the calligraphic script are to be read upwards, in reverse: gold basin, golden sand, rises, crimson grass, three branches.⁴⁹ Sturman suggests that if Mi Fu meant to refer to Dong Yuan's painting then *the Coral Tree* is in fact commentary on the Northern Song scholars and their practice of prose writing, poetry, painting and calligraphy as well as life in and out of office.⁵⁰ This comes together to symbolize unappreciated virtue and references a previous work of calligraphy in which Mi Fu employed a coral-like langgan tree to represent virtue undetected beneath a body of water.⁵¹

The text and image function in unison in this context; the coral tree and the characters together reveal the complex situation in which Mi Fu found himself. The branches of the coral tree, which stands in the southern landscape, are all pointing in different directions depicting what Sturman describes as conflicting fates.⁵² Sturman's explanation is compelling: the right hand branch touches the character for branch while the left hand branch is restricted and stunted. These fates are described by the subject of each side. On the one hand, the branch touching the character for branch is a symbol of a life in the arts of painting and calligraphy and the crowded branch is amidst discussions of politics and official work. The characters which describe officials and work are

⁴⁹ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 201.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 202.

⁵¹ Ibid, 202.

⁵² Ibid, 202

orderly, equal and compressed, while the characters on the side of the arts are energetic and unbounded.⁵³

Mi Fu's calligraphy varies in size, corresponding with his knowledge of archaic writing. Fong suggests that *the Coral Tree* was meant to be reminiscent of the pictographs of early writing in China, documented on bronze Shang dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) ritual vessels.⁵⁴ In fact the coral tree itself may be considered a specific pictograph, based on its similarity to the seal script character for 'mo' which signifies the farthest reaches of the tree or the tips of the branches. And here yet another allusion appears possible: 'mo' is often used to mean both the very end and the insignificant. Sturman concludes his analysis of *the Coral Tree* with the observation that according to the Book of Rites, when 'de', virtue, was established, the human attributes in which it is represented, such as wisdom and honesty, became the ultimate in human characteristics. However, the manifestations of the arts, such as music and calligraphy, are secondary, and as such, 'mo'.⁵⁵ In referencing the roots of Chinese writing, Mi Fu was asserting his still vital and honest virtue and perhaps at the same time his failure (based on a reading of 'mo') to accomplish all that he felt he should have.⁵⁶

The text of Mi Fu's letter is where the fundamental information is described and yet with the Coral Tree amongst the characters an oblique message, a far more complex and personal account, is revealed. Employing the very roots of calligraphic text Mi Fu was able to add not only visual complexity to his work, but also to dramatize and deepen its meaning. He cleverly employed two languages with rich histories, that of writing and that

⁵³ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 202.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 203.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 203.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 204.

of visual representation, to describe the facets of his life. Following centuries of the Wang dogma, this was a bold transgression. Mi Fu was breaking through an established history and changing its conventional syntax. The message to be conveyed in his letter was enriched by the syntax of an image. Equally important, he employs a derivative of Wang Xianzhi's calligraphic style, both in his characters and in the placement of the text.

Mi Fu and the Two Wangs

Mi Fu preferred the younger Wang, Wang Xianzhi whose “calligraphy of one single continuous brushstroke” he combined with the imagery he found on archaeological materials such as bamboo slips, stones and bronze inscriptions. His place in the evolution of scripts did not follow a straightforward development, but instead is positioned among a vast network of sources that he brought together in an unprecedented fashion. Wang Xizhi had been held in high regard for centuries: Mi Fu unconventionally, however, valued Wang Xianzhi and emphasized the importance of many calligraphers in transmitting the orthodox tradition of calligraphy.⁵⁷ Comparing a detail from *the Coral Tree* (Fig. 3) with Wang Xianzhi's *Zhong qiu tie* (Fig. 4) suggests how Mi Fu manipulated the example of the Jin dynasty master. In writing this Mi Fu emulated the spirit and style of Wang Xianzhi's one-stroke cursive technique, or running style, which blends all characters together in a steady series of strokes. He writes that he changed the style of his characters to that of Wang Xianzhi in order to imitate his “conception of being aloof from the crowd”.⁵⁸ Mi Fu idealized the qualities of the Jin dynasty and the

⁵⁷ Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 54.

⁵⁸ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 84.

legends of its “cultured free spirit”.⁵⁹ He attempted to copy the spontaneous quality of Wang Xianzhi’s letters in order to achieve the spontaneity Sung dynasty artists believed was ingrained in Jin dynasty calligraphy.

Wang Xianzhi’s strokes lack the modulation of width that his father demonstrates, and they follow one another in a manner denoted as one-brush writing whereby the brush is lifted less often.⁶⁰ Exemplifying this is a rubbing from Wang Xianzhi’s *Pao-Chin chai fa-t’ieh* (Fig. 5) where the characters on the right side flow entirely differently than the far more structured characters on the left side. The right hand strokes lack the modulation of width and follow along effortlessly.⁶¹ The animation that arises from the varied weight and size of Mi Fu’s Characters, as in *the Coral Tree*, parallels the sense of movement in Wang Xianzhi’s work; the mix of thin and thick and heavy and graceful lines adds complexity to his calligraphy. Wang Xianzhi moved beyond his father’s even strokes and movements that proceeded in a placid and measured pace.⁶² The use of rhythm in Wang Xianzhi excelled that of his father and Mi Fu incorporated a similar rhythmic unity into his strokes and characters. Mi Fu emulated the “ease and fluency” of Wang Xianzhi’s handling of his brush.⁶³

Mi Fu describes Yan Zhenqing’s *Letter on the Controversy over Seating Protocol*:

“Each character from the worn brush is intentionally connected to the next in a flying movement, yet their fantastic shapes and strange forms are unpremeditated.”

⁵⁹ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 73.

⁶⁰ Lothar Ledderose. *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 86.

⁶¹ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 86.

⁶² *Ibid*, 67.

⁶³ Lothar Ledderose. *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 15.

Amy McNair focuses on the two key concepts in this note. These are that the characters are connected and that the calligraphy is unpremeditated (unconscious). Both of these characteristics are found in Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy of a "single-stroke".

The dynamic animation of the characters in Mi Fu's *the Coral Tree* stands in contrast to the order of other scripts, especially the popular clerical script. Mi Fu's text is a clear dismissal of the clerical script, which had ordained "equalizing the large and small" characters.⁶⁴ According to Mi Fu, restless animation, as apparent in his composition of variously positioned and sized characters enabled the characters to interact. Mi Fu emphasized repeatedly his belief that every character in a particular context intuitively had its own size. He wrote: "the small characters are expanded and thus forced large while the large characters are contracted and thus ordered small. This is the mistaken theory...the characters each have their own calling in size".⁶⁵

Size represents a significant point of study in terms of Mi Fu's calligraphy. *The Coral Tree* contains two sections of calligraphy, both of which are entirely different sizes. What is interesting is the comparison with Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy and the similar pattern found in several of his works. These include the rubbing of *Shih-erh yueh t'ieh* (Fig. 6) from *Pao-Chin chai fa-t'ieh* and *Sung-li t'ieh* (Fig. 7) from *t'ang fa-t'ieh*. Both of these exhibit a tight organized character formation on the left and a much looser more vertical and sketched quality on the right hand side. There is a striking visual similarity between the overall format of these works with *the Coral Tree*. In comparison with other scholar officials and scholar artists in these circles, the sizing of Mi Fu's

⁶⁴ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 163.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 163.

characters was a point of departure from his peers. Mi Fu qualified these size derivations as forced by the innate calling of size each character had.⁶⁶

Sturman positions Mi Fu's interest in antiquity and his study of early calligraphy within the broader 11th-century cultural trend of *fugu*, or the 'return to antiquity.' Confucius' belief in the superiority of the early Zhou dynasty for the sage-led utopian society he believed it fostered, led to an idealized notion of antiquity that continued through the Northern Song. Ouyang Xiu and Wang Anshi promoted "ancient prose" in their "New Law" policies of the 1070s and Daoism also shared the focus on the return to antiquity, the aim for the Daoist being to experience a pre-civilization moment of both chaos and the Great Unity.⁶⁷ Emulating the Daoist persona, Mi Fu's approach to the history of calligraphy mirrors the Daoist return to the roots of civilization. Mi Fu advocated a natural approach to calligraphy; he criticized the systemization of characters, or "slave writing" that allowed for their placement in organized boxes. Sturman cites Mi Fu commenting on the variation of strokes in calligraphic characters: "variation results from the fact that the process of 'self-so naturalness' makes them different. This was the way it was with the men of antiquity."⁶⁸ This attitude played an essential role in Mi Fu's subversion of the contemporary expectations for works of calligraphy.

Mi Fu's Study of the History of Calligraphy

Mi Fu's search into the historical roots of calligraphy began when he started studying calligraphy in his youth. His own description of his studies reveals the models which he found to be vital for his stylistic development.⁶⁹ Mi Fu began with Yen

⁶⁶ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 163.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 171.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 171.

⁶⁹ Wen C. Fong. *Images of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 86.

Chenqing (709-785), a Tang dynasty calligrapher whose *Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew* (Fig. 8) demonstrates the use of the standard, running and cursive script, all written in varying thicknesses with obvious corrections and a seemingly spontaneous style. Aged six or seven at this point, Mi Fu practiced writing the characters only in large format.⁷⁰ Soon after, the tight composition of the Tang dynasty Liu Gongquan (778-865) intrigued Mi Fu and he studied his *Diamond Sutra*. Learning that this style was based on that of Ouyang Xun (557-641) Mi Fu looked back to Ouyang Xun, also of the Tang dynasty, only to find, disappointingly, that his writing looked like printed blocks. Following this Mi Fu studied the Chu Suiliang (596-658) style as he was enamoured with the “multidimensional quality” of the calligraphy. Mi Fu discovered that this style was based on Wang Xizhi’ *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering* (353) and this led him to study both Wangs extensively through all of the anthologies of their rubbings. Subsequent to this considerable undertaking, Mi Fu shifted his focus even further back in time to the Wei styles in search of the ‘plain and light.’ Following this he studied a stele by Tso-Kwan in the official script (ca. 168-88 CE). Finally, Mi Fu mentions discovering his love of two seal scripts from 320 BCE and 420 BCE and discusses insights he gained with respect to even earlier writing on bamboo slips and inscriptions on bronze vessels.⁷¹

Mi Fu’s renown came in part from his intimate knowledge of calligraphy’s lengthy progression of evolving script styles. The cursive script was a source root of Mi Fu’s calligraphy and had undergone two major transformations by the 11th century. In the 4th century, the time of the Two Wangs, it was named modern cursive or Jincao and in the 8th

⁷⁰ Wen C. Fong. *Images of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 86.

⁷¹ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 170.

century evolved to wild cursive, or Kuangcao. In a society dominated by expected adherence to established codes of behaviour, the concept of Kuangcao, which denotes rawness in execution, was appealing. Kuang connotes unpredictability or “inconsistency of behaviour.”⁷² Artists searched for “the unbounded” and one’s own innate character; as Sturman writes, they searched for “that which existed somewhere beneath those countless strata of learned rules and manners: one’s original nature”.⁷³ Mi Fu’s studious progression through the history of calligraphic styles played an important role in his creative manipulation of established tradition.

Evolution of Calligraphic Scripts

According to Dong Qichang (1555-1636) the distinct periods of calligraphic practice from the Jin to the Sung can be characterized by three ideologies that frame art theory. During the Jin dynasty calligraphers established principles with focus on resonance, or *yun*, while during the Tang the emphasis was primarily on proper technique and method, or *fa*. In the Sung dynasty, style derived from individual ideas, or *yi*, which were newly required to elevate the already developed proficiency in the proper use of principles and techniques.⁷⁴ Once the foundations of calligraphy stabilized there was pressure for innovation on the part of calligraphers. The encouragement of such innovation allowed Mi Fu’s *Coral Tree* to be admired.

Mi Fu’s place in the evolution of scripts did not follow a straightforward development, but instead is positioned among a diverse network of sources that he brought

⁷² Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997),132.

⁷³ Ibid, 132.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 18.

together in an unprecedented fashion. Mi Fu's analysis of calligraphy's history enabled him to work through many calligraphy styles. He studied thousands of examples and pieced together a distinct interpretation of Chinese calligraphy. Mi Fu's vantage point was a moment in which he was able to navigate his way through multiple calligraphic sources, by their very nature text and images, which he learned from, and incorporated versions of into his own calligraphic script. In the works studied here, Mi Fu incorporated the example of Wang Xianzhi, whose "calligraphy of one single continuous brushstroke" he combined with the imagery he found on archaeological materials such as bamboo slips, engraved stones and bronze inscriptions.

The earliest recorded script, the Oracle Bone script, has roots in the middle to late Shang dynasty and dates from approximately 1600 BCE to 1000 BCE. This pictographic script was etched onto turtle shells and bones which were then employed for divination rituals. The script that ushered in the late Shang, following the oracle bones, was the greater seal script and was found primarily on cast bronze vessels. The lesser seal script evolved as a more linear and even less pictographic script than the greater seal. The clerical script was developed, as the name suggests, by government bureaucrats around 500 BCE, and became widely used during the Han and Jin dynasties as a fast and efficient script. This script was extremely flowing and made of fewer strokes. Due to its simpler construction this script was able to be standardized in order to remove regional variations. Emerging after this point, the scripts used in calligraphy are those that evolved out of the clerical script and are increasingly cursive in nature. The standard script appeared at the end of the Han dynasty (220 CE), while the running or cursive script, which is similar but with merged characters, was popularized shortly after the Han dynasty. The Grass script is

the most cursive script and appeared during the Qin dynasty. In this script many features of the characters as seen in the clerical and standard script are simply left out for the sake of ease and speed of execution.

The Northern Sung Dynasty Scholar

For the ambitious man there was but one career in China during the Sung dynasty, and that was the scholar official or scholar artist. The Sung was the first dynasty in which men could establish themselves in high-level posts of privilege and prestige through merit, as opposed to their position within established families. In this “aristocracy of merit,” the scholar-artists formed an elite group and understood themselves as such.⁷⁵ Scholars’ art theory appeared during the Sung period and with it evolved new painting, poetry and calligraphy styles. It was social class and not artistic aims that brought them together as they dealt with different subjects and represented these with varying styles. Among the scholar class, moral seriousness was of great importance and permeated all parts of life and forms of culture.⁷⁶ The arts of calligraphy, poetry and prose flourished during the Sung and culturally set the tone of the period, while underlying their creation was a movement against the artificial conventions of the early Sung court.⁷⁷

The scholar-officials and scholar-artists were in the highest ranks of society. With this role came the power to judge others on the basis of morality, policy, administrative abilities and finally, art. All of these were believed to display “inner qualities of virtue,”

⁷⁵ Susan Bush. *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1104) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), 10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 6.

including art which was often employed to illustrate worth.⁷⁸ Mi Fu was no less self-conscious than his fellow Northern Sung scholars, whom as a group, were the most self-conscious when it came to the issue of personal style.⁷⁹ Developing individual approaches to the arts was vital in this environment, and especially important was self-expression through calligraphic style. An important feature of scholars' calligraphy was that it offered the opportunity for innovation and experimentation through copying the masters of the past. Su Shi, one of the leading Northern Sung scholars, upheld the importance of expressing new meaning and suggested that this was linked to "transforming earlier models".⁸⁰ This is precisely the path Mi Fu took with respect to the history of calligraphic practice, and especially the Jin dynasty masters, the Two Wangs.

Mi Fu's Critical Study of the Two Wangs

Mi Fu's writings reveal his lifelong fascination with the Two Wangs and for a period of time Mi Fu looked to the Two Wangs and the culture of the Jin dynasty for inspiration and escape from the modern scripts such as the clerical script. Wang Xianzhi and Wang Xizhi were both extraordinarily influential and are a part of the canonical legacy of calligraphy's history. The second Tang dynasty Emperor Taizong, however, who idolized Wang Xizhi, influenced the historical representation of the calligraphers. He had Wang Xizhi's works copied for widespread distribution and ordered that many of the originals be sent with him to his tomb, including the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* dated 352 CE. The emperor's devotion laid the groundwork for the continued prestige and study of

⁷⁸ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 8

⁷⁹ Ibid, 8.

⁸⁰ Ronald Egan. "The Problem of the Repute of Tz'u During the Northern Sung." *Voices of the Song Lyric in China*, ed. Pauline Yu. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 279.

Wang Xizhi. The influence of Wang Xizhi's son, Wang Xianzhi, was limited as a result of Emperor Taizong suppression of his calligraphy to promote that of his father.⁸¹ The emperor employed the metaphors of autumn snakes and spring worms, allusions to tangled and messy forms, to describe Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy. This was not a proper form of expression for a gentleman. Despite Wang Xianzhi's exceptional calligraphy such as *Zhong qui tie*, the Emperor often credited his work as that of his father.

Mi Fu studied both Wangs and like many before him, initially focused on Wang Xizhi. By 1090, however, Mi Fu realized that he was striving for something more akin to the manner of Wang Xianzhi. The visual analysis of Mi Fu's calligraphy alongside that of the Two Wangs is revealing. Wang Xizhi's calligraphy is compared to that of Mi Fu in rubbings of the same characters in the Ping An Tie script. While the similarities are evident, Mi Fu's more "fluid and individualistic" strokes are easily discerned.⁸² One of the most pronounced differences between the calligraphy of Mi Fu and that of Wang Xizhi lies in the start and the end of the brushstrokes. It is evident that Mi Fu lifted his brush less often and executed his brushstrokes without Wang Xizhi's cautionary precision. At times where there are two or three distinct characters in Wang Xizhi's model, Mi Fu has joined a series of characters. It is useful to consider details of the execution of individual characters by Wang Xizhi and Mi Fu. Wang Xizhi's brushstrokes, for instance, exemplify the traditional brush method of never entering or exiting the character directly. The beginnings and ends of the strokes are begun, then turned back into themselves, thus lending to smoother and thicker ends. Mi Fu's delineations, on the other hand, are bold

⁸¹ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 69.

⁸² Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 62.

and less obviously controlled. He allows the line reversals to be seen, and at times leaves the tips extremely sharp. The harshness and boldness of Mi Fu's calligraphy are reminiscent of the Chu nomads of the Northern Wei dynasty. Having moved to China between the 5th and 7th centuries they settled in central China and not only established the practice of Buddhism in the area, but also influenced calligraphic styles. Although they adopted Chinese modes of living, the idiosyncratic boldness of their calligraphy infiltrated Chinese script and became known as wei style calligraphy.

With regards to the Two Wangs, Mi Fu's appropriation of Wang Xianzhi's style is a key feature of his calligraphy. The rugged energy of Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy stood in contrast to the conventional grace and beauty of his father's. Mi Fu said of Wang Xianzhi's writing style in *The Twelfth Month* (Fig. 9),⁸³ which he acquired in 1084: "The brush in this tie moves like a firehook drawing in ashes. The strokes are continuously connected with neither beginning nor end. It is as if he wrote it unconsciously. This is the so-called one-stroke writing. It is the number one piece by Wang Xianzhi under heaven".⁸⁴ In composing *Grand Preceptor Li* and *Zhang Jiming* (Fig. 10; Fig. 11)), likely on the same scroll in the mid to late 1080s, Mi Fu not only establishes a direct connection between himself and the Jin masters, but he also emulates the one-stroke technique. He connects the characters as they move across the page in ease and aloofness.⁸⁵ The reference to firehook delineates the energetic strokes and suggests notions of power and unexpected

⁸³ "The Twelfth Month" (Rubbing from Bao-jinzhai fatie. From Song ta Bao-Jinzhai fatie, juan 1) in Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 85.

⁸⁴ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 84.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

manner. Together they form a statement about the new standards for style.⁸⁶

A detail from Mi Fu's *Coral Tree* compared with Wang Xianzhi's *Zhong qiu tie* suggests how Mi Fu adapted the example of the Jin dynasty master. In writing this Mi Fu emulated the spirit and style of Wang Xianzhi's one-stroke cursive technique, which blends all characters together in a steady series of strokes. He writes that he changed the style of his characters to that of Wang Xianzhi in order to evoke his "conception of being aloof from the crowd".⁸⁷ Mi Fu idealized the qualities of the Jin dynasty and the legends of its "cultured free spirit".⁸⁸ He attempted to copy the spontaneous quality of Wang Xianzhi's letters in order to represent the spontaneity Sung dynasty artists believed was ingrained in the Jin dynasty documents.

Wang Xianzhi's strokes lack the modulation of width that his father demonstrates, and they follow one another in a manner denoted one-brush writing whereby the brush is lifted less often.⁸⁹ Exemplifying this is a rubbing from Wang Xianzhi's *Pao-Chin chai fa-t'ieh* where the characters on the right side flow entirely differently than the far more structured characters on the left side. The right hand strokes lack modulation of width and follow along effortlessly.⁹⁰ The animation that arises from the varied weight and size of Mi Fu's Characters, as in *the Coral Tree* parallels the sense of movement in Wang Xianzhi's work. The mix of thin and thick and heavy and graceful lines adds complexity to his calligraphy. Wang Xianzhi moved beyond his father's even strokes and movements

⁸⁶ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 83.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 84.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 73.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 86.

⁹⁰ Lothar Ledderose. *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 86.

that proceeded in a placid and measured pace.⁹¹ The use of rhythm in Wang Xianzhi exceeded that of his father and Mi Fu incorporated a similar rhythmic unity into his strokes and characters. Mi Fu emulated the “ease and fluency” of Wang Xianzhi’s handling of his brush.⁹² Mi Fu described the image of a rubbing of Wang Xianzhi’s calligraphy as the “Best Wang Xianzhi under heaven” and it was after him that Mi Fu named his studio.⁹³ At a time when the dogma of the older Wang played a central role in creating calligraphy pieces with a specific heritage, the stakes in making such decisions were considerable.

Francois Jullien Theory: Detour and Access

Informed by Sinologist Jullien’s theory of detour and access, I now discuss Mi Fu’s stylistic development as an oblique approach to establishing new modes of representation while maintaining the legitimacy of historical precedents.⁹⁴ Moreover, I apply Jullien’s theory of allusive and indirect meaning to Mi Fu’s calligraphy, illustrating that in his texts, through the use of personal and historical referents, Mi Fu subtly augmented the complexity of his calligraphy and its reading. I also situate Mi Fu’s manipulation of text through Jacques Derrida’s theory of writing and difference and the concept of blandness from Chinese theory, discussed by Francois Jullien, which touches on the same issues as Derrida’s theory.⁹⁵ In conceptualizing Mi Fu’s work in this way I consider both the ideological and technical innovation of Mi Fu’s calligraphic oeuvre in 11th-century Chinese society.

⁹¹ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 67.

⁹² Lothar Ledderose. *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 15.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 86.

⁹⁴ Francois Jullien. *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2000)

⁹⁵ Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London & New York: Routledge, 1978).

Jullien begins his text *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece* with a series of questions. The first of these asks what the benefit of speaking of things indirectly is. He follows with questioning how distancing might enable more thorough discovery and description of people and objects. Further, Jullien asks, how distancing creates a novel understanding and what in fact can we arrive at by approaching the world obliquely? How does detour grant access? The theory Jullien outlines and then builds is applicable to this thesis in terms of Mi Fu and his appropriation and transformation of calligraphic style in the Sung dynasty.

Jullien's text is a comparative study of philosophy, literature and science in ancient China and Greece.⁹⁶ In his discourse on the underlying phenomena in Chinese and ancient Greek thought, Jullien discusses the strategies involved in the production of meaning in historical Chinese aesthetic and political texts. He queries employment of indirect, oblique and allusive meaning as a means of unpacking how detour, as a technique, allows access to subtleties in meaning that are not available when approached directly. Employing both the traditions of ancient Greece and China as a base, Jullien does not compare the civilizations but instead distils characteristics of each which reveal the anchoring of Chinese culture on the indirect approach in speech and the written word. He envisions the oblique approach as fundamental to Chinese thought, and employs the example of military tactics to elaborate this perspective. Jullien finds that the use of this rhetorical strategy in China leads to an extremely complex world of meaning that is open to multiple perspectives and adaptable to a range of situations. The symbolism inherent in Chinese

⁹⁶ Francois Jullien. *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, trans Sophie Hawkes. (New York: Zone Books, 2000).

culture, where sometimes what is not there is as important as what is, stands in contrast, for Jullien, to the mimetic and objective nature of Western culture.

Jullien's theory of detour and access is based on the complexities of practice and thought in China. Scholars employed their calligraphy to express their discontent with the political system indirectly; under the cover of imagery they were able to insinuate powerful critiques. "Poetry" he writes, "is oblique speech par excellence".⁹⁷ While Mi Fu's posts were in the lower echelons of the government, his good friend Su Shih was involved with more complex political dealings and he completed several pieces of calligraphy commenting on troubling political situations, such as those brought about by Wang Anshi's reforms in the late 11th century.

According to Jullien the notion of access and detour plays out in many areas of culture and theory. In China, in terms of expressing dissidence, Daoism offers escape from the political sphere, but is without recommendation for confronting and solving problems. The talent for indirection thus developed. Similarly, the Confucian method taught that insight came through detour. The oblique approach can be employed as an analytical tactic with history and tradition, an approach that resonates with Mi Fu's use of calligraphic precedents in order to legitimize his novel calligraphic style.

Mi Fu's use of the oblique approach, or the tactic of detour and access, functions in two ways. Employing the oblique approach in his calligraphy, Mi Fu was able to convey ideas without directly stating them. *The Coral Tree*, while overtly a list and a discussion of political affairs, provided Mi Fu with a venue to promote both his virtue and calligraphic talent. Sturman suggests this scroll was entirely about talent. My proposition takes this

⁹⁷ Francois Jullien. *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, trans Sophie Hawkes. (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 58.

one step further to incorporate Su Shih's dictum on the necessary elements of scholar's calligraphy as well as Mi Fu's conception of his role as calligrapher.

Sturman's argument that *the Coral Tree* is about Mi Fu's personal style and talent resonates with several important factors in Mi Fu's life and Northern Sung society. Su Shih was in many ways the preeminent scholar in the Northern Sung dynasty and his writings reveal ideologies that were prominent in the arts in China and in Sung culture. He judged skill to be ephemeral and superficial, and he contrasted it with virtue (de), which is conveyed, through words and actions and is enduring and timeless.⁹⁸ On one hand, Mi Fu's calligraphy corresponds with Su Shih's view of the four necessary cultural accomplishments in the Sung dynasty. Each component of *the Coral Tree* mirrors Su Shih's list: prose, poetry, calligraphy, and painting.⁹⁹ Furthermore, Su Shih stresses that it is the downfall of calligraphers to limit themselves to only one style of calligraphy. He encouraged being able to employ many styles and as such a calligraphers' understanding of the art would transcend the formal qualities of the script. In this view, Mi Fu fulfills each of Su Shih's guidelines for mastering the talents of a scholar-artist.¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, *the Coral Tree* was a means of legitimizing his personal rendition of calligraphy. Mi Fu's study of the history of calligraphy enabled him to justify his manipulations of calligraphic script as mere derivations of already extant ancient scripts. This applies to his relationship to the Two Wangs. Early in his career Mi Fu derived aspects of his calligraphic mannerism from Wang Xizhi, the more famous of the

⁹⁸ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 194.

⁹⁹ Peter Bol. *This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 295.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 296.

Two Wangs. In gaining recognition for his work that emulated the ideals of the great Jin dynasty through Wang Xizhi, Mi Fu was then able to shift focus to the less famous son, Wang Xianzhi and still maintain his artistic integrity. Mi Fu's manipulation, or detour around the established value system within Sung dynasty visual culture, through the appropriation of Wang Xianzhi, enabled him to negate history and access a new mode of representation. His circumvention through tradition furthermore illuminates the culturally and politically coded nature of calligraphy. As a visual system of both language and cultural iconography, the image and text in Mi Fu's work convey his immediate situation as an only moderately successful scholar-artist in the Sung dynasty as well as his role in transmitting the classical tradition. The ideals Mi Fu ascribed to calligraphy suggest the underlying currents of thought that dominated not only his own calligraphic production, but also those of the contemporaneous social order of the Sung dynasty.

Derrida: Trace, Writing and Difference

The Derridian notion of trace, and writing and 'differance' are pertinent to the analysis of Mi Fu's calligraphic development and style.¹⁰¹ The foundational theory, of writing and 'differance' is based on the idea that in writing there is always something unspoken that can be uncovered and in doing so another realm of meaning is revealed. The use of 'differance' has its source in the French language. The word difference and 'differance' may sound identical, but they have divergent meanings thereby demonstrating the importance of deconstruction to investigate alternate unknown or unspoken meanings and histories. Trace is this unspoken other.¹⁰² Linked to the ideas of writing and

¹⁰¹ Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998)

¹⁰² Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London & New York: Routledge, 1978)

‘differance’, trace is described by Derrida as the absence of presence. It is never the master word, it is instead the radically other, and plays within a structure of difference. The sign is a play of identity and difference. With respect to the trace, half of the sign is “not there”, while the other half is “not that”.¹⁰³ The end result is that a sign always leads to another sign. As such, we are not aware of the presence of a thing through a sign, but instead through the absence of other presences. We then presume what the absence might be. In terms of Mi Fu’s calligraphy, trace prompts consideration with Mi Fu’s practice that helps to understand how a new concept of writing was generated.

At times calligraphy is a play of ideas about what is not there, as opposed to what is physically apparent. According to Chinese theory, blandness suggests without displaying. Applied to language, deconstruction invariably brings into play the question of the trace in terms of language influencing how a text is interpreted. The trace problematizes the appeal to presence that occurs in history which gives privilege to speech over writing in phenomenology. The “appeal to presence” is equated to the appeal to the complete “self-presence of meaning” in the consciousness of the speaking subject.¹⁰⁴ Without having complete control over the language we use, language can be said to have its own force.

Deconstruction thus refers to the failure of the “appeal to presence” in the text. The question can be asked if the text signifies only what it claims to signify on the surface. The answer is in the details of the text. Importantly in this line of reasoning, signs only signify in relation to each other. This suggests that meaning is not in the signifier, but exists in a network – in relation to other things. In this context the trace is a mark of future and past in a present moment, but it is neither. Nonetheless, our present depends on this trace – an

¹⁰³ Victor E. Taylor, Charles E. Winquist. *Postmodernism: Critical Concepts* (Routledge, 1998) 289

¹⁰⁴ Jaques Derrida. *Positions*. Translated by A. Bass. 2nd ed. (London & New York: Continuum, 2002), 7.

effect of writing. Derrida's 'differance' indicates the limitations of prioritizing spoken language over written matter, while trace "allows meaning to be articulated as a structure."¹⁰⁵

Blandness and Trace

In terms of Chinese calligraphy, the concept of blandness may be compared to the notion of the Trace in Derrida's theory. One view of blandness, summarized by Francois Jullien in his text *In Praise of Blandness*, is that which is suggested but not displayed.¹⁰⁶ The preference for blandness is for instance, to value "the flavourless rather than the flavourful."¹⁰⁷ It is the search for subtlety that is valued. Likewise, with respect to calligraphy, the more faint the ink or the more sketched the calligraphy, the more blandness it is said to evoke. Blandness and pleasure are brought together in that the absence of one thing heightens the experience of pleasure as a new space for ideas is made available. As Jullien explains, in a culture that values the presence of absence, "blandness" or "dan," "is recognized as a positive quality – in a class, in fact, with the center' (zhong) and the "root" (ben).¹⁰⁸ Clearly this was important to Mi Fu who wrote: "Relishing poverty and delighting in the bland – these are the eternal affairs of the scholar."¹⁰⁹ During the Sung, blandness was emphasized at the forefront of aesthetic theory as it is in line with Confucian thought. The interplay between the visual, intellectual, sensational and emotional is expected to conclude in unity based on the visual and subject cues of

¹⁰⁵ Peter R. Sedgwick. *Descartes to Derrida: an introduction to European philosophy* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001) 207.

¹⁰⁶ Francois Jullien. *In Praise of Blandness. Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*. Translated by Paula Varsano (New York: Zone Books, 2007)

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 27.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997),37.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 139.

calligraphy, painting and poetry. Jullien elaborates the philosophy: “the more the ‘edge’ of the flavour is bland, the more consciousness is called upon to free itself from its superficial attachments and to evolve spontaneously.” As for Mi Fu’s calligraphy, underwritten in his text is his desire for independence from convention, his subversion, or the Chinese ‘Bian,’ of powerful historical antecedents and commentary on his current circumstances.

Mi Fu advocated brush force, speed and movement, as opposed to structure in calligraphy.¹¹⁰ He favored calligraphy with “oblique” instead of “frontal and upright forces,” thus composing characters that tilt to the side. According to Wen C. Fong, Mi Fu, advocating simplicity and spontaneity or the “plain and natural,” found his style in old age.¹¹¹ The abbreviated nature of Mi Fu’s calligraphy provides an entrance to the work that is less defined than that presented by the systemized organization and formation of the clerical script and its derivatives. The looseness of the characters and the sketched quality of the composition as a whole, including the simply notated coral branch and simply marked hills, intensifies the search for the intended message.

Letter Writing and the Coral Tree

Mi Fu devoted himself to letter writing as a fine art as well as a vehicle for personal expression. Calligraphy was a means of self-identification for the higher classes and contributed to social unity, in part through its use as a form of communication among scholars.¹¹² According to Ledderose the aesthetic and stylistic unity of the calligraphic

¹¹⁰ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 154.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 154.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 3.

canon was powerful and paralleled the social coherence of the educated elite.¹¹³ Interpretation of the classic models of calligraphy could anchor ideas into forms of communication. *The Coral Tree*, the touchstone of this thesis, is an example of a letter in which he incorporates the very origins of the Chinese script. *The Coral Tree* itself resembles a Shang dynasty monogram; the pictograph is: “alive and full of motion, round and complete...a self-contained image” as Sturman writes.¹¹⁴ The convoluted brushstrokes impart a three-dimensional quality in the characters which Mi-Fu called the “eight-sided” appearance. “Eight sided” was the term Mi Fu assigned to the notion that ancient calligraphic characters were suspended in space and able to be seen from any angle. Semantically, the letter contains both a list of the art and curios in Mi Fu’s collection and commentary about his current political circumstances. Neither topic is unusual in the broad spectrum of calligraphic works from the Sung. What is particularly notable about *the Coral Tree* is the novel syntax in the visual representation of the coral stand itself. Each theory referenced in this thesis provides a perspective from which to consider this work. Derrida’s conception of writing and difference and its corollary of the trace function as schemas through which to analyze both the semantics and physicality of calligraphy itself.

Sailing the Boat of Tradition

Sailing the boat of tradition carries multiple significances in terms of Mi fu’s calligraphy and life. Mi Fu composed *Sailing on the Wu River* in c.1096 (Fig. 12). Much like *the Coral Tree*, this work demonstrates the impressive range of his calligraphic skill through

¹¹³ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 91.

the display of different styles and the variations he applied to each. The modulation of sizes of individual characters, the varied thickness of the brushstroke and the shifting amount of ink he employs differs throughout this, his longest composition. Forty-four columns in cursive and semi-cursive scripts culminate in an 18 foot by 12 inch scroll describing a trip in a river boat. The characters' idiosyncrasies vary according to the drama of the dialogue, and Mi Fu's expressive brushstrokes carry the reader along in rhythm with the scenario itself. Here the intimate relationship between text and image is apparent. Su Shih, describing Mi Fu's calligraphy, claimed it was like a "sailboat in a gust of wind or a war-horse charging into battle."¹¹⁵ Wen Fong concludes that Mi Fu found his style in old age. Although he had technically mastered many scripts, Mi Fu aspired to express the "plain and natural" or simplicity and spontaneity.¹¹⁶ Mi Fu sought to exert brush force with speed and movement, but without heavy structure and he favoured calligraphy with "oblique" and not "frontal and upright forces."¹¹⁷

It is fitting to speak of intent in concluding this discussion of Mi Fu's calligraphy. At a time when individuality was sought and treatises were written on the importance of virtue, its expression and its immortality, it is of no surprise that Mi Fu was driven to prove himself in terms of artistic individuality, talent and virtue.

One last image ties into the theory of Mi Fu's self-aware presentation as an accomplished calligrapher in *the Coral Tree*. Sturman describes Mi Fu's *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 13) as an act of presentation, as the artist portraying himself the way he wished to

¹¹⁵ Metropolitan Museum of Art (Sailing on the Wu River) www.netmuseum.org (2000-2002)

¹¹⁶ Wen C Fong. *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy 8th to 14th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 154.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 155.

be seen.¹¹⁸ A continuing theme underlying his actions and his calligraphy was Mi Fu's desire to display a sense of his virtue to his peers. The scholars were self-conscious about personal style and virtue. Mi Fu was not only of non-Chinese origins, but he had risen to prominence without following the usual scholarly and official path. As a result, he may have searched for both legitimacy and distinction through the virtue of his calligraphy. Sturman also discusses Mi Fu and his conception of 'san buxiu,' the path to immortality in Chinese culture through the 'Three Non-Decays' which include virtue, successful public service, and wise speech. Not confident in his virtue, and not having achieved successful public service or wise speech, Mi Fu boldly proclaimed that one's art could express an individual's essential qualities with more tenor than notable public service, and with more longevity.¹¹⁹ He prefaced his 'History of Painting' with the theory that one's art was a means of achieving immortality, as the fourth non-decay.¹²⁰ As such, Mi Fu sought immortality through his skill with art and virtue through his style.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Wen C Fong. *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy 8th to 14th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 90.

¹¹⁹ Peter Sturman. *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 51.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 91.

Conclusion

Mi Fu's calligraphy represents a pinnacle of individual achievement in the history of visual art in China. Mi Fu created calligraphy at a time when individuality was especially valued. His appropriation of the Two Wangs' calligraphic styles was both subversive and innovative following a period which downplayed their significance. Mi Fu abandoned newly established rules for calligraphic style and incorporated elements from the entire history of calligraphic development. This is exemplified by *the Coral Tree* which demonstrates Mi Fu's innovation and achievement in the Sung dynasty. Writing by Francois Jullien and Jacques Derrida has contributed to my theoretical framework that provides a new perspective for understanding Mi Fu's calligraphy. Especially important in this discussion is the interplay of text and image apparent in Mi Fu's calligraphic works, and especially *the Coral Tree*. My research has also brought forward a new interpretation of Mi Fu's sources. Most previous scholarship has focused on the older Wang, Wang Xizhi, while the importance of the younger Wang, Wang Xianzhi, has been downplayed. With Mi Fu's oeuvre as it is presented in this paper the intent is to clarify the significant role that Wang Xianzhi played in Mi Fu's artistic development. In reassessing the historiography of Mi Fu's oeuvre, the evaluation of his calligraphy in terms of works by Wang Xianzhi reveals the immense influence the 4th-century calligrapher had. At the same time, considering the position of Mi Fu within the context of his peers, his distinction in terms of calligraphic theory and innovation is appreciable. My reconsideration of Mi Fu demonstrates how the choice of an unexpected model was an artistic strategy used to call attention to his innovations, thereby altering his position in the history of calligraphic production.

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