Chinese Art

1. Ancient times to the end of the Tang Dynasty

Pinyin spelling mostly approximates to English pronunciation apart from, notably,

Q = "ch" in cheap. X ="sh" in sham. Zh = "j" in jasmine. Z = "ds" hands. C = "ts" as in tsar.

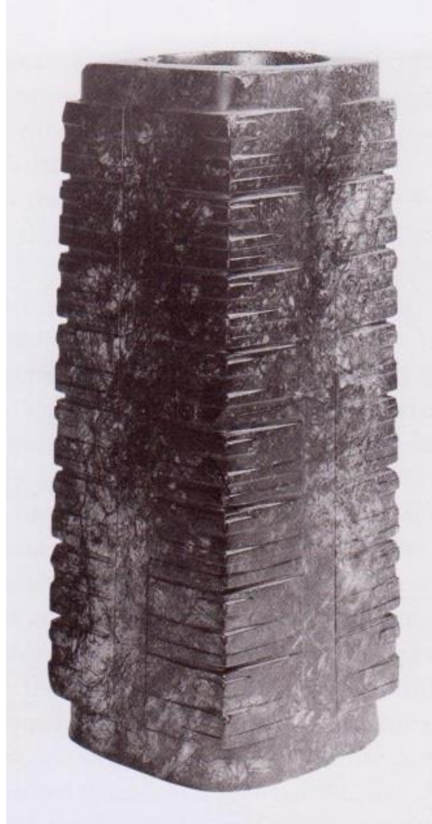
Names are given with surnames first

Contents

Shang (c 1600 – 1046 BC) and Western Zhou (c 1046 – 770 BC) Dynasties 3
Warring States Period (400 – 221 BC) 10
Qin (221-207 BC) and Han (206 BC – 220) Dynasties 15
Period of Division: Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties (220 – 589) 23
Calligraphy and Painting 23
Gu Kaizhi (also spelled Ku K'ai-chih, c 344-406) 29
Buddhist Art 32
Sui and Tang Dynasties (618-907) 36
Wu Daozi (also spelled Wu Tao-tzu, 685-758) 37
Yan Liben (also spelled Yen Li-pen, c 600 – 673) 39
Zhou Fang (c 740 – 810) 42
Landscape Painting 46
Wang Wei (699 or 701- 761) 51
References 54

Shang (c 1600 – 1046 BC) and Western Zhou (c 1046 – 770 BC) Dynasties

Like Egyptian and Early Christian art, ancient Chinese pieces were produced for ritual and ceremony. Most were made from jade and bronze. Jade is so hard it can be shaped and decorated only by using abrasives. The stone provoked mystical reverence among ancient Chinese communities - even today jade invokes a sense of spirituality - and was used to make *zong*; a square object with a circular tube inside. Jade ceremonial pieces date from Neolithic times.



Zong c 2500 BC

The *zong* was used to worship earth and the corresponding *bi*, also made of jade, to worship heaven. *Bi* remained for millennia the instruments of imperial sacrifice to heaven.

Bi, c 2500-1700 BC

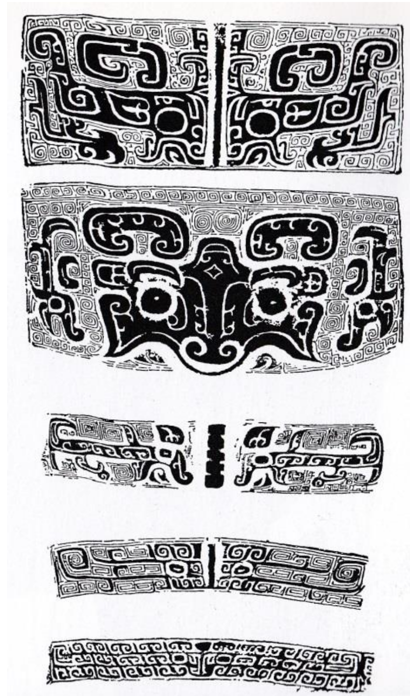
The Shang used the lost-wax process for small bronze pieces. For larger ones, they developed piece-moulding – more accomplished bronze-casting has never been achieved. When molten alloy was poured into the assembled mould metal would spill from the seams. This metal was replaced by flanges, adding to the decorative effect. The vessels were used for ritual sacrifices of food and wine to ancestors.

Ritual wine vessel or *Hu*, c 1300-1100 BC

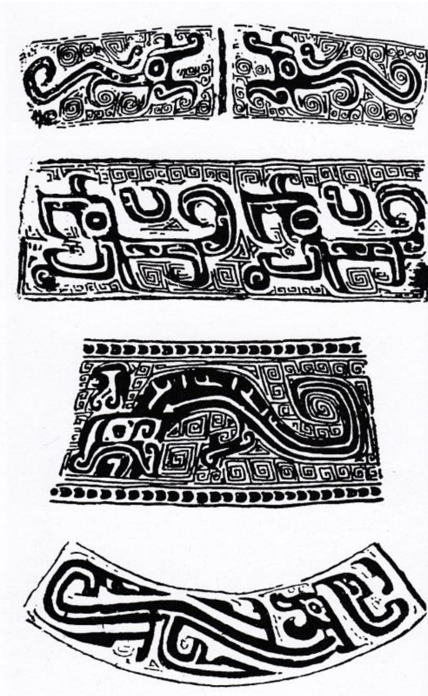
The rounded rectangles on this vessel - *taotie* masks - pervade Shang bronze art.

Bronze *zun* from Funan, Anhui, 12th-11th century BC

The masks were intended to avert evil. Many designs were used. *Kui* dragons also served the same purpose and were often used in friezes around bronze vessels. Dragons were also associated with the ancient Chinese ritual of rainmaking: a rite continuously performed until modern times. Confucius later spoke of the principle of *lei* – each following its own kind – and among the ancient examples he mentioned was; *"the wind follows the tiger, clouds follow the dragon."* Thus, dragons appear on bronzes used in rainmaking ceremonies performed in humble villages and imperial courts alike.



Shang *taotie* designs



Shang *kui* dragon design

Protection from evil was also the purpose of zoomorphic sculptures created by the Shang.

Tiger-headed monster, from Xibeigang near Anyang, 1400-1100 BC

Some sculptures resembled no living creature, but a hybrid, and it is easy to see why they were thought to provide protection. The muscular force and ferocity of the tiger-headed figure is obvious. Vitality, rather than realism, was always the prime aim. However, the Shang also produced more realistic forms. The water-buffalo is recognisable, but still seems magical; her form accentuated by the rectangular pattern.

Water-buffalo, white marble, Shang Dynasty

Realistic forms appear in ritual bronze vessels. The rhinoceros is modelled with great accuracy. The species with two horns and without heavy skin folds is now found only in Burma and the Malay peninsula but, like the elephant, ranged as far north as the Yangtze valley in the second millennium BC.

Bronze ritual vessel, Late Shang/Early Zhou dynasty

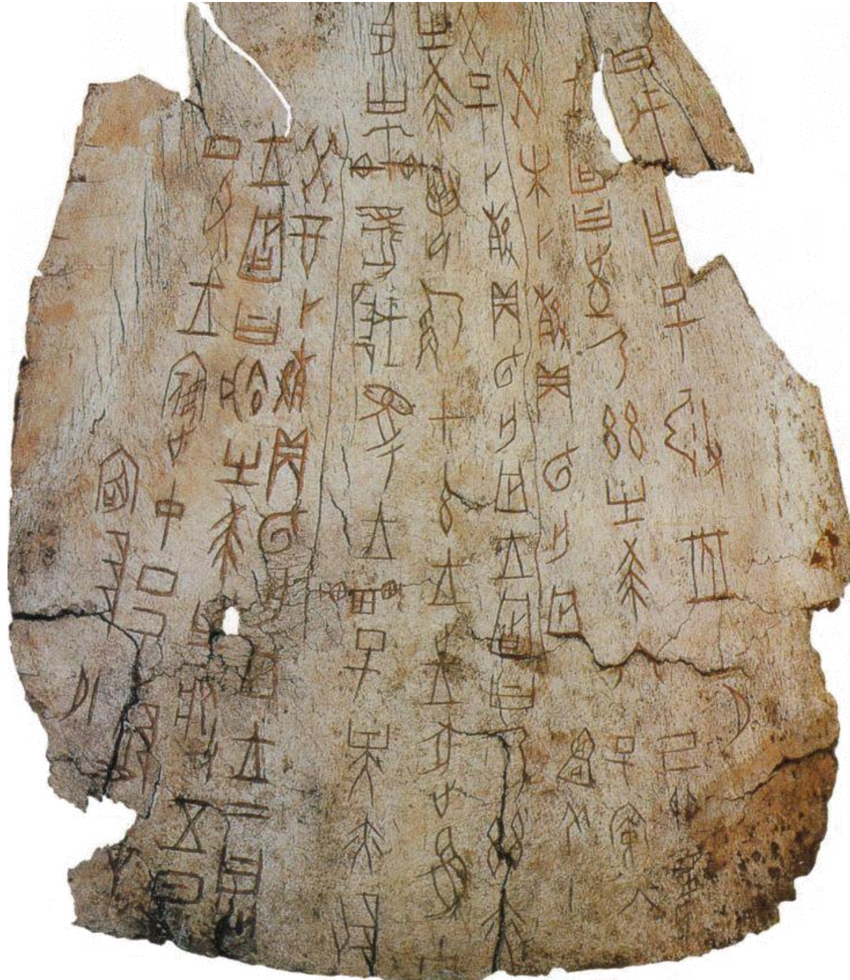
Hybrid zoomorphic designs and decorations occur in ceremonial vessels, often wonderfully elaborate. This late Shang vessel is covered with cats and serpents, and a small deer forms the knob of the cover. Shang ceremonial bronzes were buried with their owners so the deceased could continue to sacrifice to higher powers after death.

Ceremonial bucket with swinging handle (*yu*) cast bronze, 11th century BC

A Shang wine vessel in the form of a duck with a monster mask on the tail and an owl on the shoulder is another fine zoomorphic example.

Ceremonial wine storage and pouring vessel (*kuang*), cast bronze, 12th century BC

The Shang left more than 100,000 ‘oracle bones’, usually ox shoulder-blades but sometimes turtle shells. Oracle bones were used for divination on such topics as the health of the ruler, the weather, the best times for hunting and warfare, and (most importantly) what sacrifices should be made to ancestors from whom the ruling class derived its authority. As well as asking questions of ancestors through oracle bones, Shang kings used their ancestors as intermediaries to communicate with spiritual forces, especially Di, the Lord of High, who could grant bountiful harvests, lend divine assistance in battle, send rain, thunder, wind or epidemics.



Oracle Bone, c 1300 BC

A king would ask his priest questions. The priest would heat the bone or shell until it cracked and read the answers from the cracks. The question, the prediction and actual events were then engraved or inscribed on the bone using symbols, many of which are early forms of the Chinese script still in use today.

Thus, writing in China was first used not for temple or palace accounts (as in Mesopotamia and the Aegean) or for monumental inscriptions (as in Egypt) but for communications with the other world. This is partly the reason calligraphy came to be held in such high regard and with almost superstitious reverence.

Later Shang vessels had short inscriptions and this practice of using calligraphy on ceremonial vessels developed more under the Western Zhou dynasty. Inscriptions also appear on Zhou bronzes given as gifts or cast as celebrations after successful military ventures. Under the Zhou, ritual vessels became heavier and broader, suiting the introduction of bird motifs, which proved popular. The pheasants with upswept tails fit neatly on a wider piece.

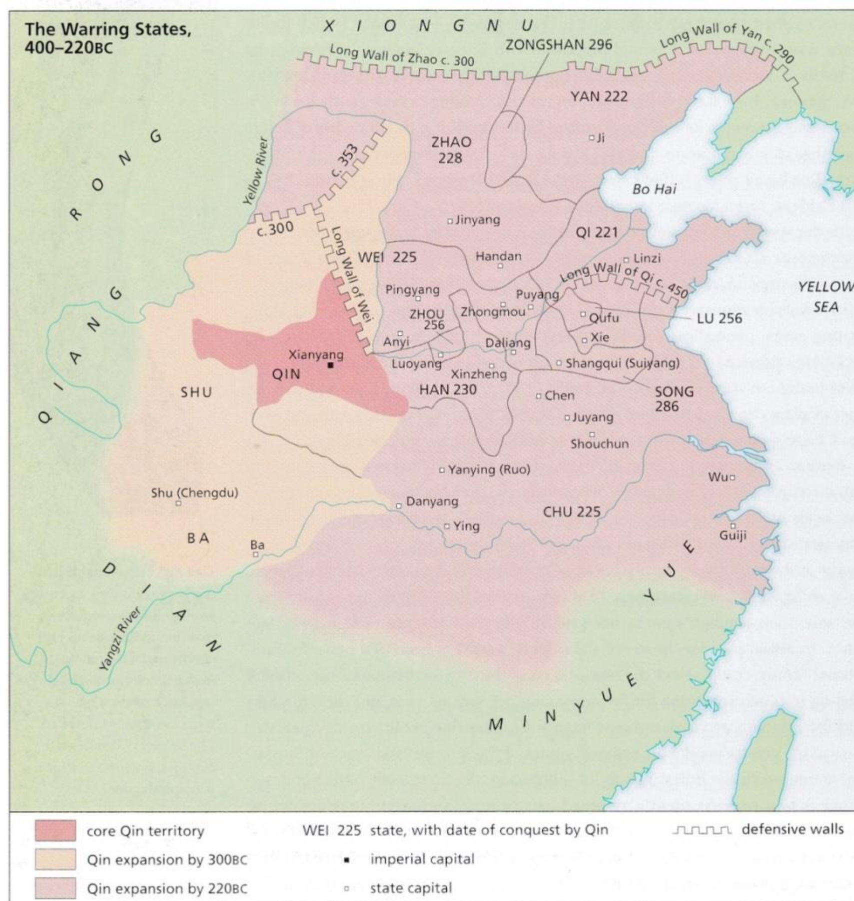
Ceremonial *yu*, 9th century BC

Inscriptions became longer under the Zhou, written in calligraphy closer to modern script and, thus, with a larger vocabulary. Inscriptions on vessels used in sacrificial rites often recorded events to be reported to ancestors in the hope that the present-day ruler would continue to receive their support. These inscriptions were intended only for ancestors and the vessels were usually kept covered. The famous bronze *Cauldron of Duke Mao* bears 497 characters (the longest inscription so far found) which describe the history of the rule of Emperor Xuan in the 9th century BC. Bronzes from the Western Zhou dating from the 8th – 6th centuries BC covering the move of the capital from Chang'an to Luoyang are important historical documents because of these inscriptions.

Cauldron of Duke Mao, 8th century BC

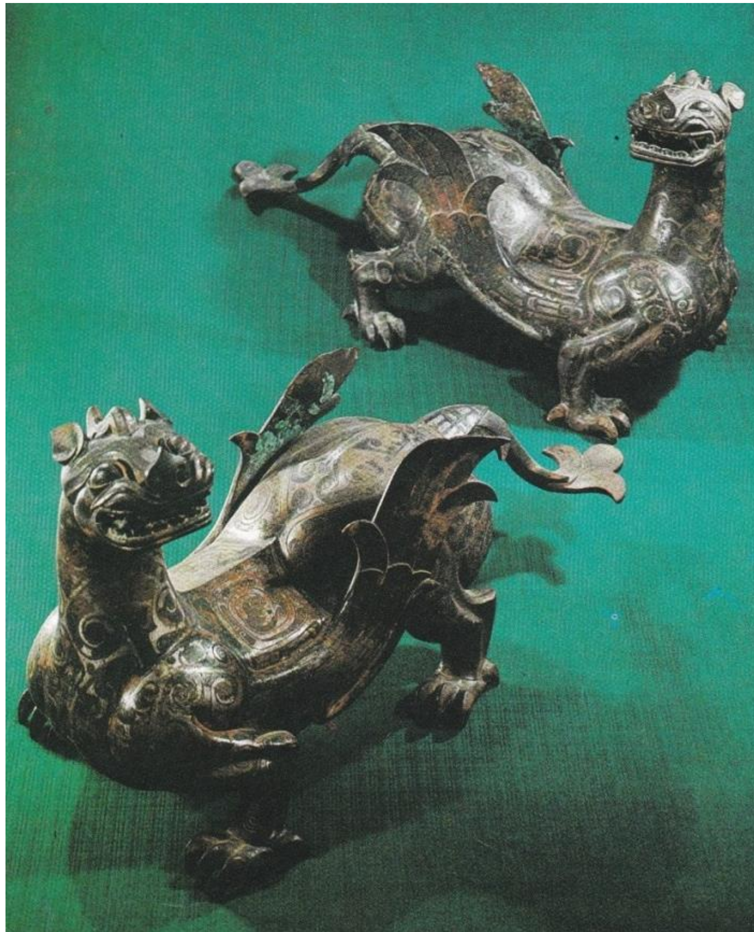
Inscriptions inside the *Cauldron of Duke Mao*

These examples of early Chinese art - jade, bronze, zoomorphic forms and calligraphy used for ritual and ceremony - continued to dominate until China was unified under the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BC to 220) when they were supplanted by the emergence of painting and calligraphy. Before unification in 221 BC art was used for a different function.



Warring States Period (400 – 221 BC)

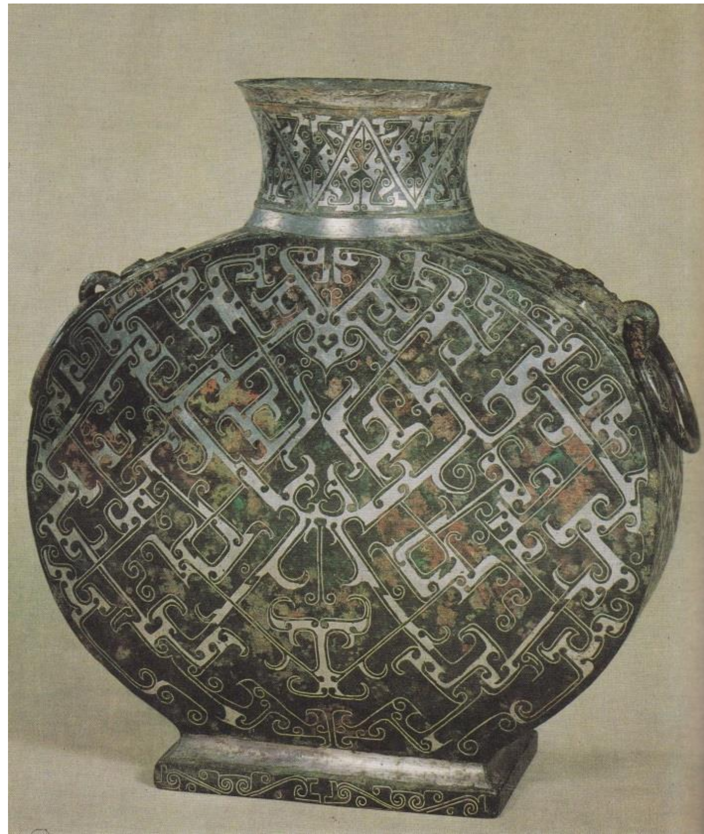
Under the Warring States period feudal rulers lavish display was used to justify the rule of a warlord as divine. Bronze pieces, and other artefacts, became more elaborate and the idea of ‘art’ emerged: one piece being judged as ‘better’ than another. Independent workshops, no longer controlled tightly by a central authority, served a wide clientele. Many ritual pieces, like the tripod cauldron, now became rather plain and insignificant. In contrast, objects for feasting and display became the more lavishly decorated. Inlay appears often and was beautifully worked. Mythological creatures and animals remained popular.



Mythical Creatures, bronze inlaid with silver, from a royal tomb of the state of Zhongshan in Hebei, late 3rd century BC.

Screen stand with tiger devouring a deer, bronze inlaid with gold and silver, Hebei, late 3rd century BC

Inlaid bronzes imitated other materials – such as a leather water flask. A beautiful example of these, a *bianhu* (flat vessel), has lively geometrical pattern.



Bianhu flask, bronze inlaid with silver, late 4th to 3rd century BC, from tombs at Jincun (the area of the Zhou capital)

Bi were still used for sacrificial rituals but they became more decorative; here with two dragons on the circumference and a third in the centre.

These ornate pieces were typical of the Warring States period which saw the emergence of a wealthy middle-class. A rich man would give his daughter inlaid vessels as part of a dowry, and would adorn his furniture and carriages with bronze inlaid with gold, silver and malachite, taking them with him to the next world when he died. Criticism of this extravagance was countered by the philosophical and economic treatise, *Guanzi*:

> *"Lengthen the mourning period so as to occupy people's time, and elaborate the funeral so as to spend their money. To have large pits for burial is to provide work for poor people; to have magnificent tombs is to provide work for artisans. To have inner and outer coffins is to encourage carpenters, and to have many pieces for enshrouding is to encourage seamstresses."*

Items found in tombs dating from this period are more elaborate, as wealthy people had precious possessions buried with them. Of course, only the well-constructed tombs of the rich survive. Burial practices became more complex. Mythical creatures, particularly the phoenix and the dragon, which might help the deceased travel to heaven, appear in tomb decorations and garments. In one respect, however, burial became simpler, and much less frightening for servants and the local citizenry: the practice of burying humans alive in tombs was replaced by the burying of figurines (*yong*).

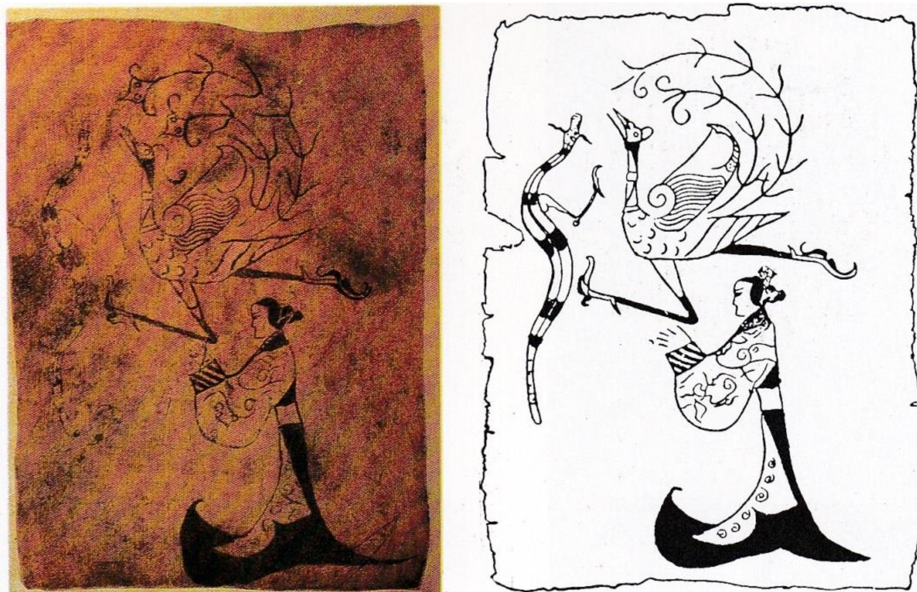
Painted wooden *yong*, from Hunan, late Warring States period

Textiles were used as burial pieces in the Warring States period. The Chu, in the lush valleys of the Yangtze, developed a rich culture in poetry and visual arts. Burial conditions in Chu tombs were favourable for preserving textiles, and the finest are found there. They included plain woven silk, brocade with fine embroidery. Beautiful designs of dragon and phoenix were found on embroidered silk in Hubei and on quilt in Xinyang.

Embroidered silk shroud, c 300 BC, Mashan, Hubei Province

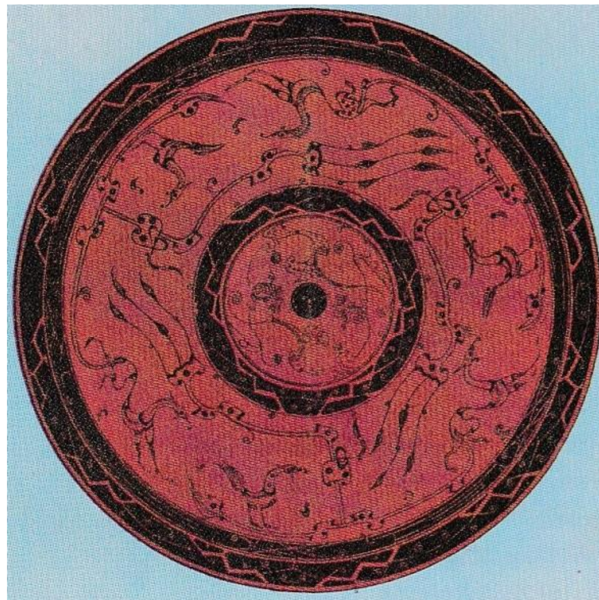
Embroidered quilt, Chu culture pattern, 4th century BC

Chu graves house one of the oldest paintings yet found in China. Sketched deftly with a brush on silk, a woman is shown attended by a phoenix and a dragon which will carry her soul to heaven.



Painted silk panel from a tomb at Changsha, Hunan, 3rd century BC

Beautiful painting also appears on the lacquerware of the Chu, and in late Zhou and Han tombs in central China large quantities of lacquer bowls were buried in tombs. Often they are decorated in black on red ground or red on glossy black, with tigers, phoenixes and dragons amid clouds.



Painted lacquer bowl, late Warring States period

Qin (221-207 BC) and Han (206 BC – 220) Dynasties

Under the Qin and Han this interest in immortality expanded, so old myths are depicted on tomb decorations and fabrics. The Qin imposed stern laws and brutally quelled dissent, but paved the way for the prosperity of the Han. People welcomed the peace and stability of the Han dynasty, which allowed them to pursue pleasurable activities. Thus, the Han took great pleasure in everyday life, and created a new emphasis in art.

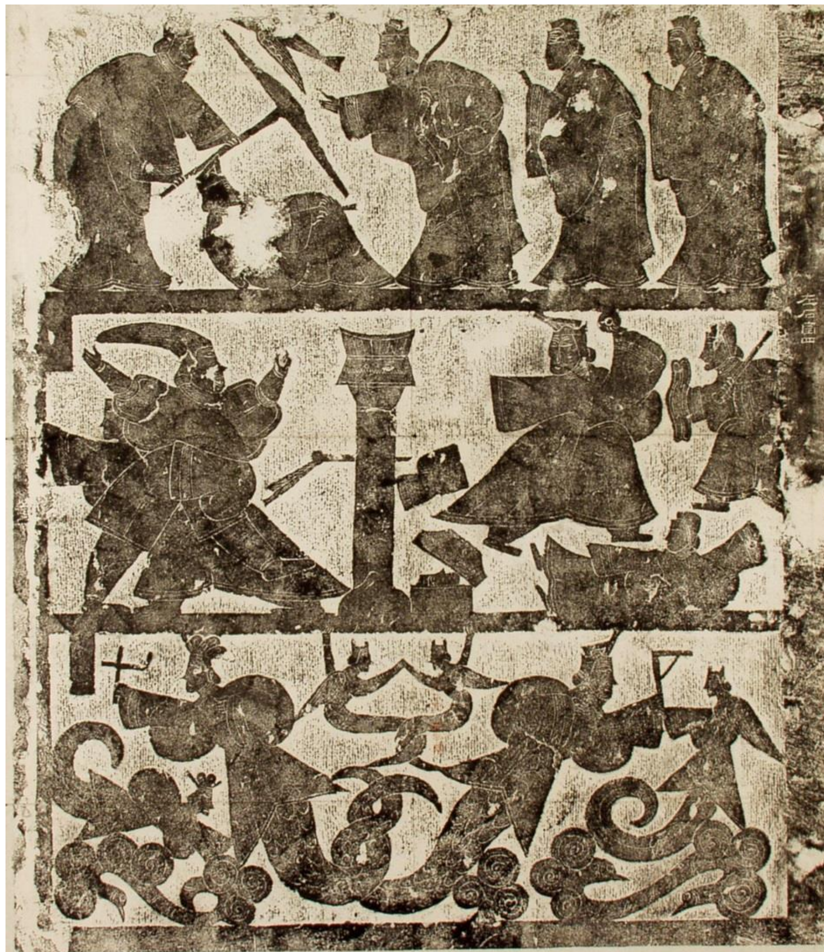
Narrative paintings were popular with the Han, appearing on the walls of palaces and halls (none of which survive) and on the walls of tombs. These images depict with lively naturalism the daily life of a country estate; salt mining, harvesting and threshing in the rice fields, hunting at a lakeside. The tomb painting of guests arriving at a funeral feast conveys a sense of great movement from right to left even though there is only cursory landscape and no ground.

Guests Arriving, wall painting in tomb in Luoyang, north-eastern China, Eastern Han

Some underground tomb walls were made of bricks stamped with such scenes. This from Szechuan is typical of Han delight in ordinary activities. The stances of the archers and threshers depict their activities unequivocally and the postures convey a sense of movement.

Tomb wall brick from Chengtu, Szechuan, 25-220 AD

The Wu family funeral chapels have engraved stones in the silhouette style used by the Han, and again show action. Many of the stones survive and because of ink impressions are among the best-known monuments of Han art. All the compositions depict movement and intention by gesture and pose. Much skill is shown in attaining this within the limitations of a silhouette.



Scenes engraved on wall of Wu Family funeral chapels, Shandong (rubbing), 147 AD

The upper scene has not been identified. The middle panel shows with great force an attempt to assassinate the future Qin emperor. At the bottom Fuxi on the left (male genie, holding compasses) and Nuwa (female genie holding set square) are shown entwined and surrounded by their messengers. The Wu Family tombs contain many scenes. Three-quarter views are used. Hand gestures identify extreme passion. Various methods are used to show recession; overlapping figures, oblique rows and, as in the battle scene below, distant figures suspended above closer ones. None of these schemes, however, used a reduction in scale.

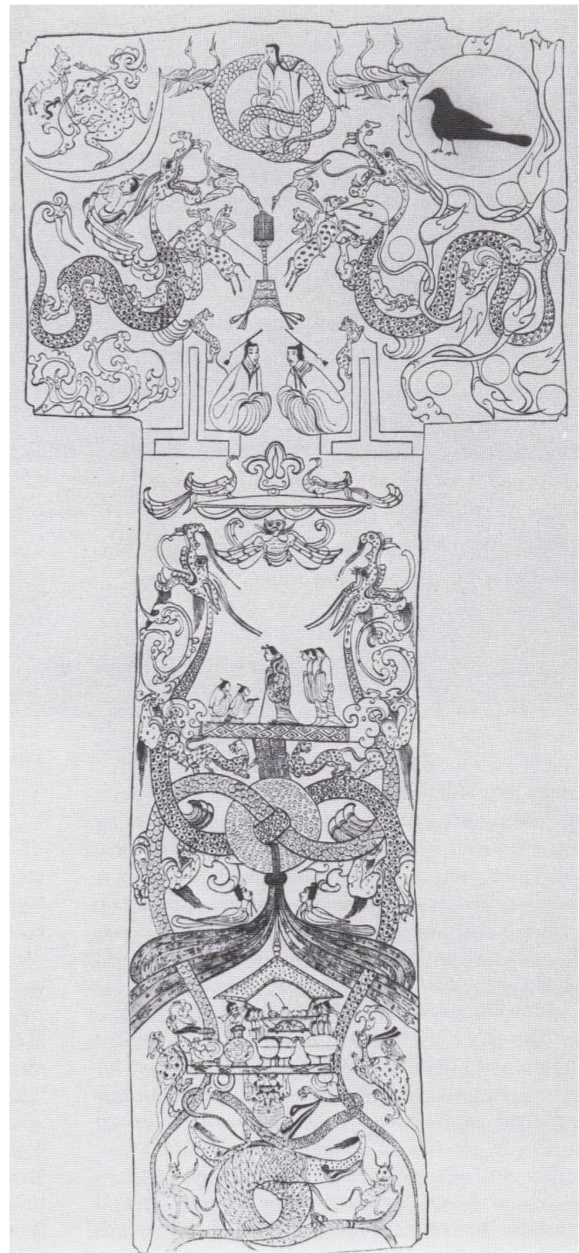
Bridge battle scene, Wu Family funeral chapels, Shandong (rubbing), 147-168 AD

Wall paintings were common in Han palaces and halls. The Lingguang Palace had well-known wall paintings celebrated by the great poet Wang Yanshou (c 118 – c 140), who died in his twenties through an accidental drowning:

Upon the great walls
Flickering in a dim semblance glint and hover
The Spirits of the Dead.
And here all Heaven and Earth is painted, all living things
After their tribes, and all wild marryings
Of sort with sort; strange spirits of the sea,
Gods of the hills. To all their thousand guises
Had the painter formed
His reds and blues, and all the wonders of life
Had he shaped truthfully and coloured after their kinds.

Narrative scenes also appear in grave goods which began to show a greater preoccupation with the journey to heaven. “Flying garments” - T-shaped banners - draped over swathed corpses were placed in tombs because they were believed to bear the soul of the dead aloft. They show beings of the netherworld, of the world of men and of heaven, and usually include a portrait of the deceased and a sacrifice scene. One was found at Mawangdui in the tomb of the wife of the Marquis of Dai and of her son.

The silk banner of Mawangdui continues the lively depiction of creatures. The vitality of the tigers is shown by tension or contortion of limbs and trunk. The banner has accurate human figures and objects and, for the first time, an illusion of space. The lady and attendants are in strict side view, drawn in a delicate uniform line but with smooth and varied curves. Within the line only the eyes are indicated. Lacquer ware of the same period shows humans in the same style; long even lines with a minimum of detail.

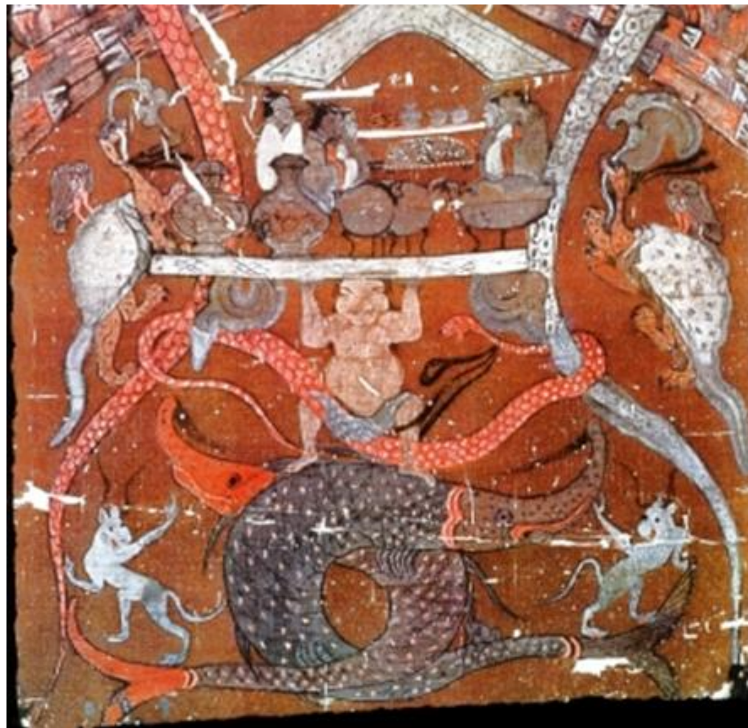


T-shaped funerary banner painted on silk (and line drawing), from Tomb No. 1 at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan, c 168 BC.

The upper section has Nuwa (also known as Nugua), the Chinese goddess best known for creating mankind and repairing the pillar of heaven, depicted as a human with a serpent's body. Han cosmological myths populate the rest of this scene: the sun inhabited by its crow; the moon with toad and hare. The hare pounding the elixir of immortality had a special meaning for the cult of longevity which grew among the Han cognoscenti preoccupied with eternal life. Below the sun are eight luminaries (denoted by pink circles) which the Divine Archer Yi was obliged to shoot down for the salvation of mankind. The two squatting figures wearing mortarboard caps of Confucian court dress are likely Masters of Heaven, guarding entry to the celestial sphere.

Below appears a small scene of the deceased (Xin Zhui) and her three maids of honour – a portrait not a symbolic representation – travelling over the road to heaven and being greeted by minor officials.

Below that is the banquet held as a funeral rite, with the painted coffin in the background behind two rows of seated men in ceremonial dress. This scene depicts Xin Zhui's family making sacrifices and offering prayers. In the underworld a giant stands on the backs of whales while holding up the earth. The tortoises in this scene reflect the Han belief that the animal was sacred and immortal: it had long been considered so because of the use of its shell in divination.



As Han authority spread, officials were sent to distant regions, and grand Chinese tombs have been found in remote rural places. Rock tombs found at Mancheng, 100 miles southwest of Peking, are an example and date from the late 2nd century BC. They were built for Prince Liu Sheng and his wife Princess Duo Wan, who were closely related to the Imperial family. They were buried in jade 'suits' and surrounded by riches. Some bronzes were cast because of the new interest in immortality. The incense burner, or censor, is a tangible depiction of the spiritual realm. It is in the form of a mountain, a paradise where the princess's soul might dwell after death in the company of magical beasts and immortals. Some of those beasts became standard decorations on burial censors.

Incense burner in the form of a mountain, Prince Liu Sheng tomb, Hebei, Late 2nd century BC

More mundane bronzes were also placed in tombs. The princess's tomb contains a gilt bronze of a kneeling servant girl holding a lamp, with her sleeve forming the chimney. The lamp's inscription shows that it belonged to the princess's grandmother.

Lamp in gilt bronze, probably made in 173 BC; from tomb of Duo Wan (died c 113 BC)

Han tombs contain many lively horse sculptures cast in bronze. The bronze horse discovered in 1969 in a Han tomb in Leitai, Gansu is poised as if flying. The flying horse was an auspicious sign much loved by Han emperors and their subjects. The wife of the Emperor Chengdi (32-6 BC) was a famous dancer, known as Fei Yan, Flying Swallow. The horse is beautifully balanced yet the vigour of the beast is obvious. A Greek would have scorned the modelling, but the energy is wonderful.

Pacing horse, bronze, Han dynasty, 2nd century AD

The greater emphasis placed on immortality during the Han produced mirrors to help the deceased find their way to heaven. TLV mirrors, first appearing in the Zhou as evidence of wealth, ensured the owner was in a correct relationship with the cosmos. A square set in a circle, representing the earth surrounded by the heavens, was the usual form. The terms for the twelve divisions of time (Rat, Ox, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Cock, Dog and Boar) were usually marked within the square. The motifs of four of the Five Elements: water, fire, wood and metal were shown; the boss at the centre was the fifth, earth. In this part can be found markings which resemble the letters T, L and V, which may be diviner's marks. The border of the mirror was frequently decorated with a scroll representing the bank of clouds which the soul may mount to join the world of immortal beings.

Bronze TLV mirror, late Western Han (206 BC – 9 AD) or Eastern Han (25-220 AD) dynasty

The five elements depicted are: Water (which puts out fire, is coloured black and symbolised by a "black warrior" – snake and tortoise); Fire (which destroys metal, coloured red and symbolised by a phoenix); Metal (which destroys wood, coloured white and symbolised by a tiger); Wood (which overcomes earth, coloured green and symbolised by a dragon) and, Earth (which absorbs water and is coloured yellow). The first four are associated with, respectively, winter, summer, autumn and spring.

Daoist mirrors with motifs depicting fairies and immortals were also used. Two venerated deities, the Queen Mother of the West (Xi Wang Mu) and the King Father of the East (Dong Wang Kong), are usually seated opposite the central knob. Each is attended by immortals, identified by their whisks. Horse-drawn chariots are vehicles to escort the soul on its journey between this world and the next.

Bronze mirror with Daoist Deities, Eastern Han dynasty

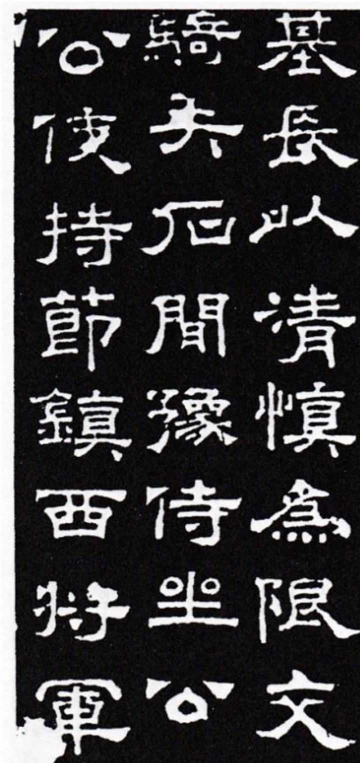
Period of Division: Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties (220 – 589)

<u>Calligraphy and Painting</u>

During the later years of the Han the traditional bamboo slip records began to be replaced by scrolls of paper and silk.

Bamboo Slip No. 22 of the Book of Odes, Warring States period

Calligraphy had developed partly because the skill was necessary for the Confucian studies introduced in the formal education and examination system which prepared civil servants. All Confucian scholars were adept in the clerical script, *lishu*, used for government records.

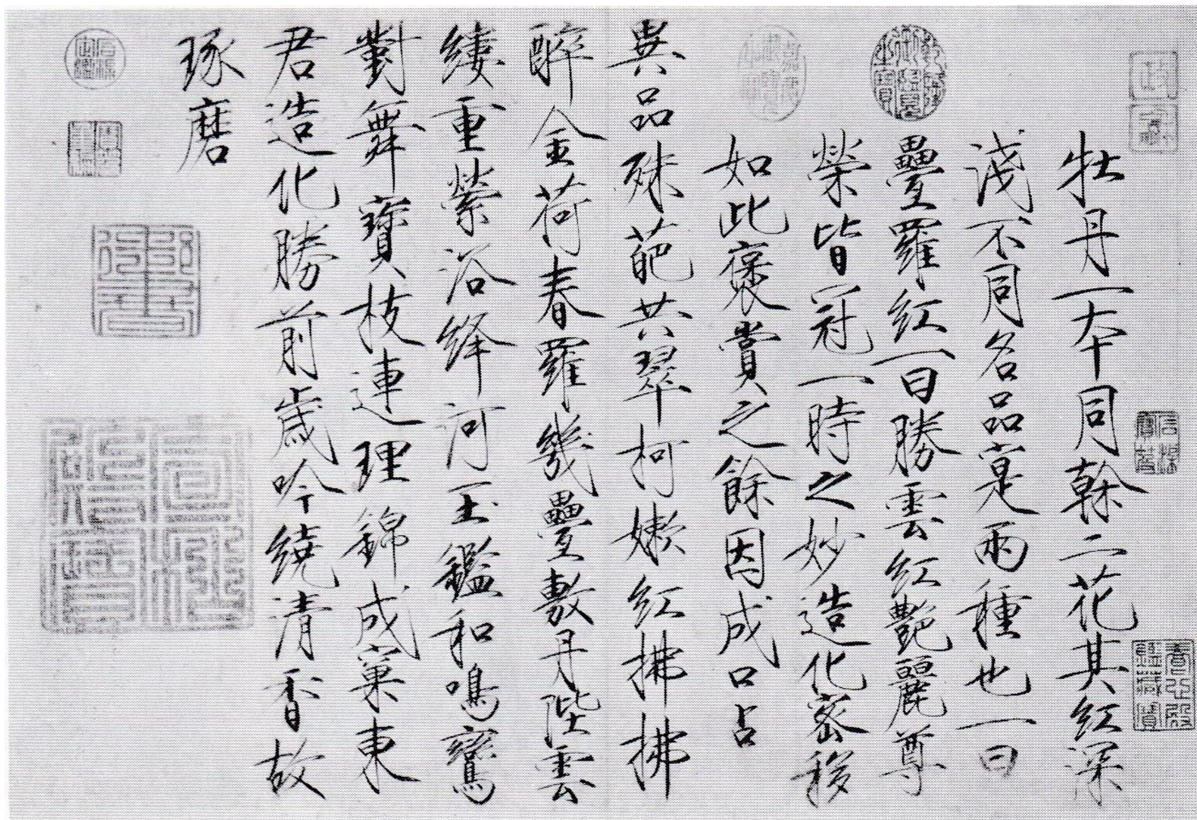


Clerical Script (*lishu*), Han Dynasty style (rubbing from a stone slab)

This formal and angular clerical script evolved into the more flowing and harmonious regular script (*kaishu* or *zhengshu*)

Early *Kaishu* script

Kaishu script has, with its variants, remained the standard form learned by every child up to the present day. Some variations of *kaishu* allowed some freedom. The 'thin gold' style (*shoujin*) was used by Emperor Huizong (whom we will meet later).



Kaishu shoujin script: *Poem on the Peony* (extract) Emperor Huizong (1080-1135)

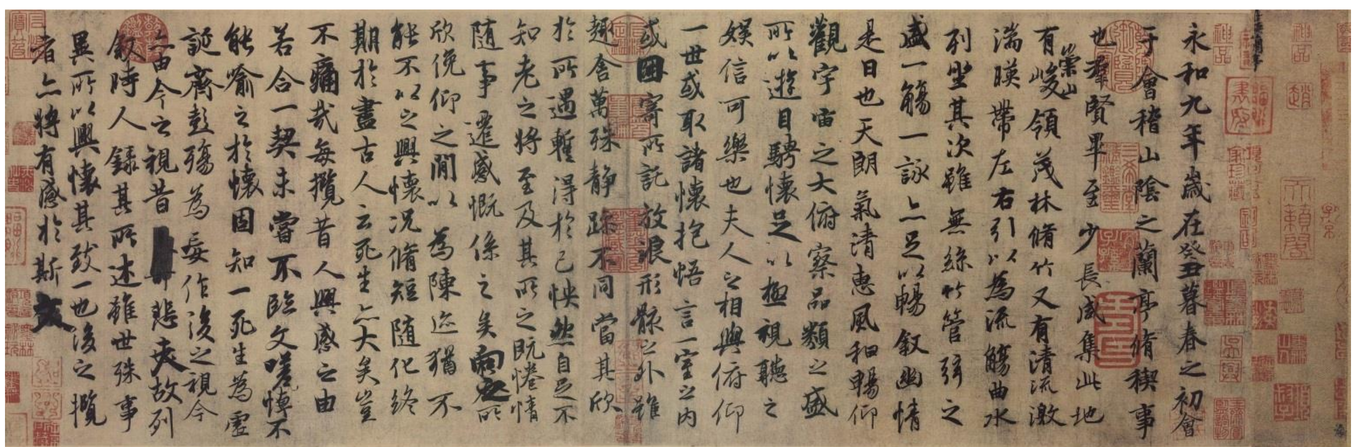
Greater freedom of expression elevated calligraphy to an art in the early centuries AD. The idea emerged of the artist whose personality produced work of a higher quality than simple scribes. Underlying this idea was the development of cursive scripts, less angular than formal script which revealed more of the writer's worth and personal characteristics; writing as communication of the spirit rather than mere message. Cursive script had developed under the Qin dynasty and its subsequent use artistically was lamented by a Confucian of the old school, Chao I, in the third century:

At the end of the Ch'in [Qin] Dynasty the official script was troublesome and laborious. Battles and incursions arose on all sides, military messages were exchanged at a gallop, feathered dispatches flew thick and fast, therefore they made the clerk's grass hand, aiming at rapidity and nothing more. This script was merely an intent to abridge and render writing easy … but now devotees of the [new artistic] cult spend time slavishly cultivating every nuance. They will work for ten days at perfecting one stroke, and in one month use several cakes of ink. Their collars and sleeves are as though dyed dark; their lips and teeth are perpetually black.

Draft or grass hand script (*caoshu*)

Despite this criticism, this new art was highly esteemed by scholars and thinkers of the Later Han; *"it was this cursive hand more than any other which taught those with a sensitive eye and good artistic judgement the beauty of impetuous and vigorous brushwork as nothing else could have done, since no other script, not even the finest Arabic writing, has anything like the freedom and fluency of line revealed in caoshu (Sullivan)."*

From the Period of Division can be dated the most celebrated calligraphers. The man revered in later centuries as the greatest calligrapher of all time was Wang Xizhi (303-61) who was taught by Wei Shuo, known as Lady Wei (272-349). None of their work survives. Pieces of calligraphy revered for centuries as Wang Xizhi's work are all now regarded as copies. Wang Xizhi's most famous work is the *Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion* (or *Lanting Xu*) composed in 353. A Tang era copy dated 627-650 is regarded as faithful, as it was made because the Tang Emperor Taizong decided that the original would be buried with him on his death: a move more or less guaranteeing the work's status as fabled relic.



Copy of Wang Xizhi, *Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion (segment)*

Curators of the Palace Museum in Beijing assert that a letter by Wang Xun, nephew and student of Wang Xizhi, is the only authentic 4th century relic of calligraphy: *Letter to Bo Yuan* was done in cursive script on paper. Only the five vertical lines of larger characters are by Wang Xun. The texts in smaller characters are by two chaps to be met much later; Dong Qichang to the left and by the Qianlong emperor to the right. The painting is also by the emperor.

Wang Xun, *Letter to Bo Yuan* (augmented by later additions, right and left)

Huai Su, *Autobiography* (segment), 777 in *crazy draft* script

A piece of calligraphy almost as famous as anything by the Wang family is the *Autobiography* of the Buddhist monk Huai Su (active 730-80). The scroll, formed from 15 sheets of paper mounted consecutively, was written in 777. Huai Su lived south of the Yangtze River far from the Tang court at Xian. His reputation was based on his development of crazy draft script, valued for spontaneity which pushes legibility to the very limits. He reckoned his inspiration came from alcohol which fuelled his light and rapid touch with the brush.

We have strayed beyond the Period of Division to include Huai Su and so complete the set of cursive and draft scripts. The Chinese calligrapher was expected to exploit all the possibilities: control of the brush, of the absorbency of paper and the density of ink, all of which resulted in the full richness of thick and thin strokes, subtle contrasts between heavy and light strokes, and the expression of line. A clear sense of composition was also needed to achieve balance within a single character and to link the characters to the page. From the first, Chinese scholars (*literati*) were conscious of their calligraphy and the skills they developed will be seen in their painting. Indeed, the possibilities of calligraphy were mirrored by those expected in painting, which became much more prominent in these centuries.

Xie He (also spelled Hsieh Ho, active c 500) wrote *Guhua pinlu* (*Ancient Painters Classified Record*) in the second quarter of the sixth century, grading 43 painters of former times, and listing the six principles of painting:

> *Qiyun shendong* (*spirit resonance or vitality*). *Qi* is the cosmic spirit which vitalises all things, gives life and growth to trees, movement to water, energy to human beings, and is exhaled by mountains as clouds and mist *("gives horses their horsiness, man his humanity, the quickness of intelligence and the pulse of life", Soper*) – resulting in life movement or animation. The artist allows this cosmic spirit to infuse him with energy so he becomes a medium for the expression of *qi*. Xie He said this was the most important element, and if absent, one need not look further. A famous calligrapher explained he dug his ink-stained fingers so deep into the hairs of his brush when he was writing because only thus could he feel the *qi* flow down his arm, through the brush and onto the paper.
>
> *Gufa yonghi (bone).* The bone, *gu*, is the structural strength of the brush-stroke which expresses the *qi*. As in a skeleton the strength of *gu* varies according to function or nature, and is also an expression of the personality of the artist.
>
> *Yingwu xiangxing (correspondence to the object)*. Maintaining fidelity to the object when portraying it, but not just in mere visual accuracy.
>
> *Suilei fucai (suitability)*. Using appropriate colours and layers of tone. Almost without exception all early Chinese paintings were coloured.
>
> *Jinying weizhi (division and planning)*. Proper placement of elements; composition.
>
> *Chuanyi muxie (transmission by copying).* Reverence for the past, consonant with Confucian ideals. Making exact copies of ancient masterpieces was an important part of the education of a painter. This is very important in the history of Chinese art, as old works are reliably preserved by later copying.

Painting and calligraphy were linked. The predominant characteristics in writing of vitality (*qi*) and bone (*gu*) were regarded as the hallmarks of art. Vitality had long been held important, as seen in the marble sculptures and the poses of figures on tomb walls. Bone emphasised the brush-stroke and, in painting, produced the linear style: strong outlines with sweeping strokes, with very little detail of faces or anatomy.

These connections with calligraphy would remain in Chinese painting. *"Painting came more and more in succeeding centuries to be judged on the basis of calligraphy – rhythm and vigour of line, nervous vitality of form which were valued far above mere verisimilitude and technical proficiency" (Sullivan).* Despite what Westerners might consider to be limitations, early Chinese art based on these features was lively, as can been seen by this characteristic work.

Gu Kaizhi, *Wise and Benevolent Women (section)*, 13th century copy of the original, Palace Museum Beijing.

Reflecting calligraphy, sinuous lines and floating draperies were the style in the 4th century. These can be seen to best effect in Gu Kaizhi's work, *Wise and Benevolent Women*, which illustrates some of the 125 notable Chinese women recorded in *Biographies of Exemplary Women* compiled by Han scholar Liu Xiang in 18 BC. The picture is part of a long horizontal scroll of images of these women. Just as paper replaced bamboo slips, the handscroll and the hanging scroll quickly became the favourite media for painting. Both could be stored easily and the handscroll was designed to be looked at in segments perhaps two feet wide, showing episodes or figures, or a complete narrative broken into scenes.

Hand in hand with the link between calligraphy and painting came the association between those two arts and the educated and wealthy classes. Confucian philosophy saw virtue as the right and proper way of doing things, and influenced art too:

> *"Painting promotes culture and strengthens the principles of right conduct. It penetrates completely all the aspects of the universal spirit".*

Painting - but not sculpture or architecture, which were regarded as manual skills - was part of the education of senior civil servants and imperial family members. Every educated person was a connoisseur of painting and calligraphy, and many were very able practitioners, including some emperors. The Han period left a dual legacy: Daoism - deeply concerned with the spiritual and the supernatural, encouraging individuality, passion and imagination - and Confucianism – stressing conformity, moderation and logical thought. These were complementary, and were to be found in scholar-artists; a class which would exert tremendous influence on Chinese art over the succeeding centuries.

Gu Kaizhi (also spelled Ku K'ai-chih, c 344-406)

Gu Kaizhi embodies the turbulent forces in the Period of Division. He was wildly unconventional but a friend of the court, moving unharmed between rival politicians and warlords, protecting himself by the aura of idiocy that Daoists held to be the only true wisdom.

Gu Kaizhi, as portrayed in an art book published in 1921

He was famous for his portraits which captured the very spirit as well as appearance of his sitter. Gu said, *"In figure paintings the clothes and the appearances were not very important. The eyes were the spirit and the decisive factor."* Only three paintings associated with him survive, all of them as later copies. One we have seen already.

> Three copies were made in the Song dynasty of his handscroll illustrating a poem written by Cao Zhi (192-232), *Nymph of the Luo River*. The copies preserve Gu's style. One is shown on the next page. The landscape is primitive but with some sense of depth. The final scene shows the nymph, with her escorts, bidding farewell to the young scholar who fell in love with her and who sails away in her magic boat.
>
> *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies,* was attributed to Gu Kaizhi in the Song dynasty, and a copy of the original exists from the 8th century (looted from the Summer Palace by British troops during the Second Opium War and now in the British Museum). The scroll was intended as advice to a girl entering the palace. There were many duties in the palace more suitable for female than male courtiers. For the emperor 14 grades of concubines were allowed, and promotion was possible. Moreover, the emperor needed to provide a male heir to receive Heaven's mandate when he died, and concubines were used for this purpose, infant mortality being high. The legal heir and his mother were treated very differently to other sons the emperor may have sired. The *Admonitions* scroll originally showed twelve scenes (the first two scenes and one other are now missing), each with an accompanying text, providing examples of correct conduct or alluding to stories of honoured concubines, based on a political satire written by Zhang Hua (c 232 – 302). They are told economically and with great elegance of line, which was admired as much as Gu Kaizhi's portraits.
>
>> The scene with the emperor and his concubine on a screened bed[1] bears the text (more accurately directed at him): *"his dictum is good for a thousand leagues but if it is unjust, it will be questioned under the blanket."*
>>
>> Adjacent is a lady at a mirror painting eyebrows on her forehead while a maid combs her hair: *"people know how to trim their looks, but how much better to adorn their nature."*

Gu's contemporaries judged him not to be amongst the most dynamic artists of the day. However, five centuries later Zhang Yanyuan in his work of famous painters (see below) considered Gu's work of high value and advised collectors to pay anything to acquire even a tiny fragment.

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[1] The raised viewpoint and inverted recession (the canopy getting larger as it recedes) are typical of the method which was passed to Japan in the 8th century and was revived there later by the Yamato school of painting.

Gu Kaizhi, *Nymph of the Luo River*, copy of the original made in the Song Dynasty, 960-1279, Palace Museum Beijing

Gu Kaizhi, *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies,* 8th century copy of the original, British Museum

By the 6th century the style of figure painting that Gu Kaizhi's successors had developed in Nanjing was established in north China. The works of those early northern masters are lost – the most famous was ***Yang Zihua.*** His style survives in the wall paintings in the tomb of Lou Rui, nephew of the first queen of the northern Qi.

In the style of Yang Zihua, *Riders on Horseback*, wall painting in the tomb of Lou Rui, Shanxi Province, 550-577

The figures are painted in a fine springy line with long oval faces. The riders on horseback trotting, jostling, pausing to look back are full of animation. The Qi dynastic history said of Yang Zihua's horses that; *"sounds of stamping and whinnying, like begging for water and food could often be heard from Yang's paintings of horses."*

Buddhist Art

With the fall of the Han, China descended into anarchy and insecurity, the old ways lost. During the Period of Division, Buddhism made deep in-roads into China. By the 6th century the whole of Northern Chinese society was suffused with Buddhism: *"… it penetrated economic life and affected customs at all levels of society. Its monasteries and shrines dotted the landscape; its clergy assumed many social roles; that of preacher and teacher, medical doctor and chanter of magic spells, performers of masses for the dead and guardians of temples that also served as family shrines. Elite families were for the most part Buddhist in belief. They made gifts to monasteries and shrines, used clergy for family and seasonal observances."*

Tanyao Cave 20, Yungang temples, 460-493

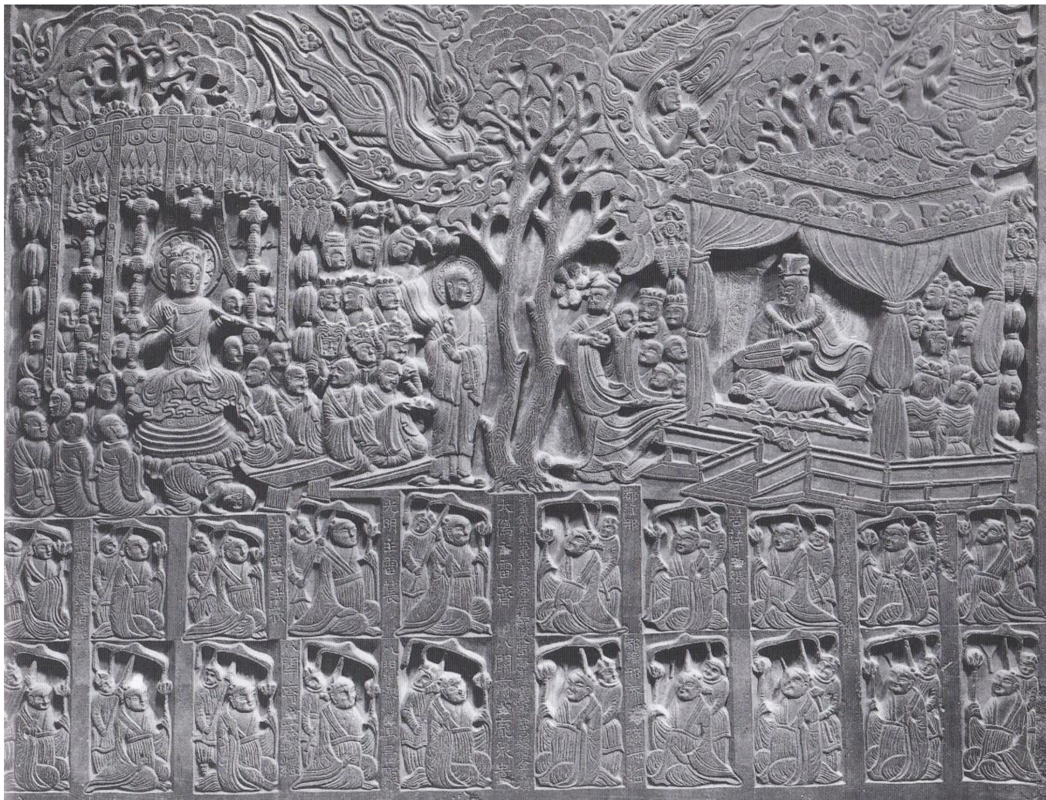
The powerful Northern Wei dynasty was a great patron of the religion throughout the 5th and 6th centuries; 13,272 monasteries were built during the reign. Buddhists had been persecuted from 444 for seven years. When that policy was reversed the Chinese monk Tanyao suggested cave temples should be created as an act of expiation. This would also bolster the claims of the Wei ruling house as they would be seen as important patrons of Buddhism. The idea of rock temples came from India, and the first one built by the Wei at Yungang (image on previous page) followed that model.

Heavenly King and Guardian, Longmen cave temples, 6th century

When the Northern Wei moved their capital to Luoyang in 494, they started a new complex of cave temples at Longmen, which were worked on over the next four centuries. The *Heavenly King and Guardian* carved just after the Period of Division are much more Chinese than Indian; they bend and flex realistically. Surrounding them are niches with sculptures paid for by donors.

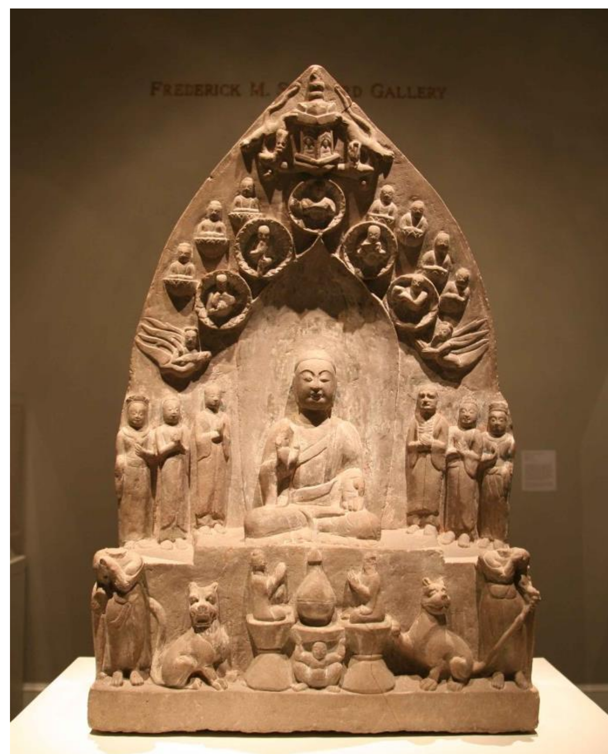
Side-wall donations, Yungang, 5th century

Many smaller caves were excavated at Yungang and Longmen for ordinary citizens to donate sculptures. As would be the case for altarpieces in Roman Catholic churches, donors would be identified within the work – in China by calligraphy as opposed to image in Europe. In both instances, the donor was considered to have gained heavenly merit by paying for the image.



Trubner Stele, (stone) mid-6th century

Stone steles were also popular forms of donation, paid for by subscription and set up in temples or their courtyards. Two or three hundred individuals might club together for the more elaborate examples. The *Trubner Stele* shows a debate between the virtuous citizen Vimalakirti and the Bodhisattva Manjusri (each in a pavilion), with animated monks talking among themselves about the points made. At the bottom are the rows of donors each with an umbrella-wielding attendant. They are identified by the Chinese characters next to them, the most prominent (making the largest donations) in the middle. Simpler steles would be paid for by villagers and erected as roadside shrines. Popular images were a single Buddha in high relief against a leaf-shaped mandorla.



Buddha Stele, (sandstone), 550-560

Richer donors provided gilt bronze altar shrines in a similar form, but featuring the preacher of the law, Sakyamuni, with Prabhutaratna who came from Nirvana to hear the sermon.

Prabhutararna and Sakyamuni shrine, (gilt-bronze), 518

Donor pieces during the Period of Division show that the most popular object of devotion became Guanyin, a compassionate bodhisattva who “hears the cries of the world” (much like the Virgin Mary for Rome). Guanyin’s identity is often made clear by a flask and a jewel. In Northern Zhou versions towards the end of the Period of Division the figure is typically upright but gently flexed, natural in stance with abundant jewels.

Guanyin (or Avalokitesvara), stone, c 570

Buddhism brought from India a new style of painting, best represented by in the work of ***Zhang Sengyou (active 490-540)***, the greatest of the painters working for the Liang emperors (502-587). According to contemporary accounts, his work was remarkable for its realism. He painted dragons on the wall of Anlesi and when, in spite of his warnings, he was persuaded to paint pupils in their eyes, they flew away amid thunder and lightning. Hence the expression; "painting the dragon's eyes" to spark someone to life.

His many temple frescoes are long-lost. But *The Five Planets and 28 Constellations,* showing celestial bodies in imaginative ways, demonstrates his Indian technique of shading to give an effect of roundness and solidity which China had not seen before, and is rare thereafter.

Zhang Sengyou, *Saturn* from *The Five Planets and 28 Constellations*, 6th century

Sui and Tang Dynasties (618-907)

The Sui re-unified China through force of arms. They conquered the south with land and naval attacks, razing the southern capital at Nanking and forcing the nobles and officials living there to move to the new capital at Chang'an, thus eliminating them as a threat. The Sui performed much the same role as the Qin, imposing order in a repressive regime, leaving the ensuing dynasty to enjoy the prosperity of peace. The Tang dynasty is one of the greatest ages of China; a period of unprecedented prosperity, growth and creativity in the arts.

Figure painting came into its full power under the Tang. The supernatural world of dragons and witches faded against the bright worldliness and wealth of the age, replaced by pictures of emperors, ascetics and poised court beauties. Tang art has vigour, realism and dignity – the art of a people thoroughly at home in a world they know is secure. There is an optimism and energy.

All leading artists of the Tang painted religious themes for Buddhist temples. However, from 843 to 845, during the death throes of the Tang dynasty, all foreign religions were proscribed and the wealth of Buddhist temples confiscated. The looting was thorough: 4,600 temples and 40,000 shrines were destroyed, so that little survives of Buddhist art of the 7th and 8th centuries. The monasteries at Nara in Japan (itself a replica of Chang'an) preserve the finest of Tang art. As well as this destruction, secular wall-painting declined in demand, so the remnants of Tang art are scrolls. These were not designed to be permanently displayed but moved between palaces and courts and enjoyed by a select audience.

Wu Daozi (also spelled Wu Tao-tzu, 685-758)

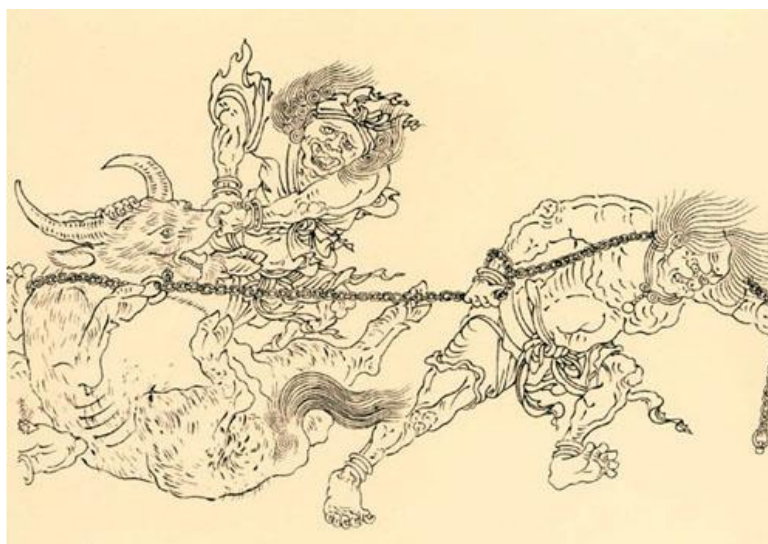
The great Tang painter, Wu Daozi, worked in a purely Chinese style. He is said to have painted 300 hundred frescoes (on dry plaster, not true fresco). His line was calligraphic – thick and thin, nervous and energetic and its bravura was much admired. All spoke of the whirlwind energy of his brush, and crowds used to gather and watch him as he worked. A 12th century writer said;

> *"Wu Daozi's figures remind me of sculpture. One can see them sideways and all around. His line work consists of minute curves like copper wire … however thickly his red or white paint is laid on, the structure of the forms and modelling of the flesh are never obscured … when Wu Daozi paints a face, the cheekbones project, the nose is fleshy, the eyes hollow, the cheeks dimpled. But these effects are not got by heavy ink shading. The shape of the features seems to have come spontaneously, yet inevitably."*

No original work by Wu Daozi survives. His famous portrait of Confucius was preserved by having been copied in a stone engraving.

Wu Daozi, *Confucius*, 8th century (rubbing from stone engraving)

Wu Daozi was considered able to transmit actual life into his pictures – his painting of a horse was said to have galloped away. A stone engraving, taken as a faithful representation of a design by him, shows how he conveyed the energy of his subjects with economy.



His court style is best shown in the mural he painted on the emperor's palace wall.

Wu Daozi, *Eight-Seven Immortals* (section), 8th century (painting of fresco)

This fluent depiction of ladies was adopted by professional painters, employed by the aristocracy to decorate their tombs; the wall paintings in the tomb of Princess Yung T'ai in Chang'an being a fine example. These images by Wu are one reason for the greatness of Tang figure paintings. They are simple but capture life and vivacity.

Professional craftsmen, *Tang Court Ladies*, 706, wall-painting

A contribution to Tang figure-painting was made by foreign artists from Central Asian cities such as Khotan. The Tang was open to foreign influences. The capital Chang'an was at the end of the Silk Road and was considered the greatest city in the world, the radiating centre of civilisation for the whole of Eastern Asia.

In 847 ***Zhang Yanyuan*** completed his *Lidai Ming-hua chi* (*Record of Famous Painters of Successive Dynasties*). The book survives and shows how influential foreign painters were. The Khotanese painter Yuchi Yiseng came to Chang'an in the Sui dynasty. He specialised in Buddhist subjects but also strange objects from foreign lands and flowers which he painted with great realism. He used heavy impasto piling up the pigment so that flowers stood out from the wall. As with shading from India, while the Chinese delighted in these novel foreign techniques, they did not penetrate far into Chinese art. Emperor Taizong (reigned 627-649) honoured Yuchi Yiseng;

> *"his paintings whether votive images, human figures, or flowers and birds were always foreign-looking and not like Chinese things … [his brushwork] was tight and strong like bending iron or coiling wire … he used deep colours which he piled up in raised layers on the silk."*

<u>*Yan Liben (also spelled Yen Li-pen, c 600 – 673)*</u>

Yan Liben was appointed court painter by Emperor Taizong while Yuchi Yiseng worked there. Yan Liben was commissioned to paint portraits of the 24 greatest contributors to the emperor's reign and the 18 scholars who had served under him when he was a prince. His most famous work is his scroll of thirteen emperors from Han to Sui, half of which is preserved in an exact copy from the Song dynasty. Yuchi Yiseng's Khotanese influence can be seen in this work. Shading is used on garments to emphasise the folds and on faces to suggest solidity and form.

Yan Liben, *The Thirteen Emperors: Emperor Wu of Jin*, 10th century copy, scroll colour and ink on silk

Yan Liben, *The Thirteen Emperors*

Yan Liben's work is the epitome of the Confucian ideal. Each group makes a monumental impression, but together they form a royal pageant of incomparable dignity. The figures are full and the robes ample. Against a plain background the emperors possess a quality of bulk and weight, to which shading makes an important contribution, quite different from the almost ethereal figures of *Admonitions* or, indeed, the *Eighty-Seven Immortals*.

Taizong, like all Chinese emperors, much enjoyed receiving tribute from foreign emissaries. This tradition emphasised the superiority of China (which would run to the 19th century and provoke much diplomatic affront). Yan Liben painted two tribute scenes (shown below). One includes the portrait of his patron. The other emphasises just how many folk would travel in a single tribute mission to China and the variety of strange wares they brought. Yan Liben became imperial architect and Minister of Works for Taizong's successor Emperor Gaozong who reigned from 650 to 683 (although after a stroke in 655 Gaozong's concubine Wu Zhao – the famous Empress Wu - took command). Court artists were not always treated respectfully. Yan Liben was once rudely summoned to sketch ducks that were swimming on the palace lake in front of Emperor Taizong. After this humiliation, Yan advised his sons and pupils never to take up art.

Yan Liben, *Emperor Taizong Receiving Ludongzan the Tibetan envoy* (detail of scroll), 641

Yan Liben, *Tribute Bearers*, 7th century (Song Dynasty copy)

The arbitrary shading used by Yan Liben in his *Thirteen Emperors* died out later in the Tang. To the Chinese, *chiaroscuro*, developed fully centuries later by European painters, violated the proper nature of a flat surface and, more importantly, was an obstruction to imagination because it defined a specific source of light and so suggested a transient moment in time. Moreover, shading distracted from the vital element of a painting; its bone or brush strokes, reflecting the important link to calligraphy. Nonetheless, shading continued to be used for a time to emphasise solidity, as the artistic influence from Khotan provoked a new interest in volume among the Tang. The fragment of an old monk's head in a wall-painting at Dunhuang is a good example, as well as once again showing the Tang's predilection for liveliness.

Fragment of a wall painting from Dunhuang Cave 139A, latter half of 8th century

Yan Liben's paintings of tribute-bearers are one element of an important branch of Tang art, the depictions of the refinement and luxury of the palace circle. As well as tributes, hunting, polo games and foreigners in strange clothing were favourite subjects. Above all, palace ladies engaged in their elegant pleasures delighted Tang courts.

Zhou Fang (c 740 – 810)

Zhou Fang, who (like Yan Liben) was appointed imperial painter of temples, produced delightful scrolls. His, *Court Ladies wearing Flowered Head-dresses* repeats Yan Liben's processional layout, albeit with some interaction between the figures. His art develops in *Ladies playing Double Sixes* which has a plain background but a sense of space given by the skilful arrangement of figures and furniture. The soft colouring in green and red, with the patterns of white and black produce a restrained but decorative effect; just the thing to display to visiting courtiers and aristocrats before a feast. *Tuning the Lute and Drinking Tea* is another composition of Zhou Fang, but this one remains only as a 10th or 11th century copy. Again, a sense of space is created and the two trees and flat rock create a quiet corner; a mood of timeless security.

The fashion in feminine beauty had changed between Wu Daozi and Zhou Fang, in little more than half-a-century, from the slender, swaying figures, popular since Gu Kaizhi's time, to a more substantial beauty of the moon-faced plump matrons with small hands.

A famous scroll of the *Silk Beaters* is well-known, originally painted by ***Zhang Xuan (713-755)*** but now preserved through a later copy. The picture is in brilliant colour, but painted with great delicacy. The little girl, given the job of fanning the fire used to heat irons, shields her face with her sleeve. There is the same skilful arrangement of figures against a plain background. There are, however, tinges of the greater sophistication and elegant precision of the age in which this copy was painted.

Zhou Fang, *Court Ladies wearing Flowered Head-dresses*, late 8th century

Zhou Fang, *Ladies Playing Double Sixes*, late 8th century

Copy of Zhou Fang, *Tuning the Lute and Drinking Tea*, 10th or 11th century copy

Zhang Xuan, *Silk Beaters*, 10th century copy by Song Emperor Huizong

The height of the Tang dynasty came under Emperor Xuanzong (also referred to as Minghuang – "Brilliant Emperor") who reigned from 713 to 756, when he was deposed by the An Lushan Rebellion which began the long slide to the demise of the dynasty. Xuanzong was passionately fond of horses, particularly the tough stock ponies from the western regions, and is said to have had over 40,000 in his stables. ***Han Gan (c 715-781)*** came from a poor family but was discovered working in a wine shop by Wang Wei (below) who then sponsored him. Han was the Tang's noted horse painter, even though he also painted portraits and Buddhist themes. Han Gan painted all of Emperor Xuanzong's best horses.

Han Gan, *Man Herding Horses*, 8th century

Han Gan, *Night Shining White*, 8th century (restored)

The striking painting of Emperor Xuanzong's favourite horse, *Night Shining White* is attributed to Han Gan. Tethered to a post the horse rears up with eyes dilated as though the painter has startled him. The lower legs and hoofs in this painting (now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York) are the work of a restorer (who forgot to restore the tail), but enough remains of the original to suggest the dynamic energy and movement.

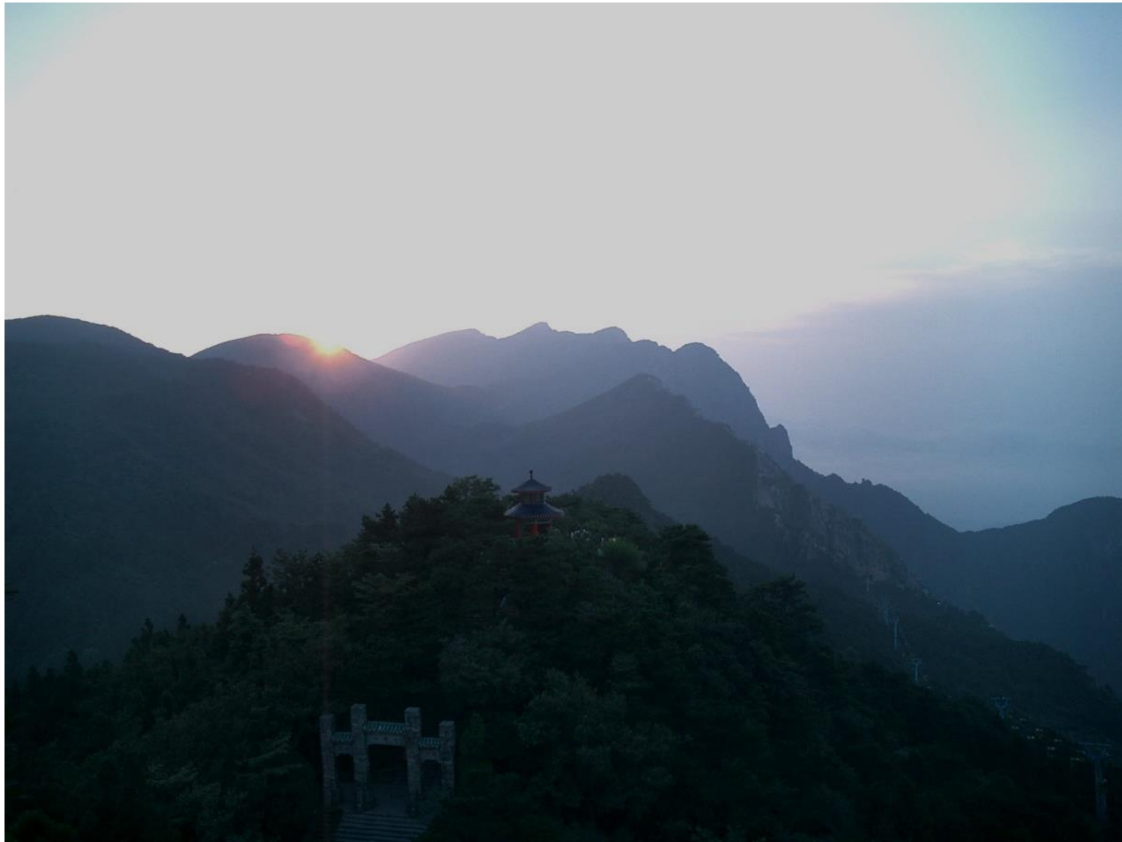
Landscape Painting

Mountains and rivers have long been held sacred in Chinese thought. Since remote times the Chinese have held that cosmic forces, energy and harmony are in some way manifest in mountains. In popular belief the mountain is the body of the cosmic being, the rocks its bones, the water the blood, the trees and grasses its hair, the clouds and mists the vapour of its breath – the cosmic spirit or *qi* (as mentioned in the principles of painting above); the visible manifestation of the very essence of life. The Five Great Mountains have been places of worship for over 3000 years. Sacrifices were made to them by imperial courts from the Zhou period on. Mount Tai, regarded as the foremost of the Five, was visited regularly by Qin and Han emperors.

Those same emperors built huge imperial parks, partly to provide a stock of animals for ritual sacrifices as well hunting but, more importantly, as places of meditation. Mountains were built in the parks to replicate the mountains of paradise; steep cliffs, stocked with precious animals and plants, and filled with Buddhist images (similar mountains were built in Korea and Japan). An observation tower was built so the emperor could ascend to commune with nature, sinking into a mystic trance; "*far above the impurities of the dusty world*". Smaller paradise gardens would later become popular with the aristocracy as meditative retreats.

The South Gate to Heaven at Mount Tai

To the Chinese wandering in the mountains was an act of meditation and adoration. The cosmic force linked man with nature, a key element of Chinese thought. Daoism, growing from the 4th century BC, maintained that *qi* dwelt in the individual as 'life-breath' but could be diminished through emotional wrenches such as grief, joy, anger and delight. Pilgrimages to sacred mountains, source of the cosmic breath, would thus rejuvenate the spirit. Moreover, virtuous men, sages and immortals, had lived as recluses in the mountains embodying the idea of harmony with nature, and had found the Way. Pilgrims, therefore, through meditation would be in touch with these past masters and be better placed to emulate them.



Sunrise at Mount Lu

Buddhists built their temples on mountains because the dwelling place of the cosmic spirit gave monasteries a deeper and richer holiness. Mount Lu, where the sage K'uang Su had his hermitage and received the Dao from an immortal, was used by the Buddhists. The Buddhist community at Mount Lu regarded climbing as a spiritual ascent leading through meditation to Nirvana. One such expedition in 400 AD under the leadership of Master Hui-yuan is described in the *Introduction of Poetry on Wandering at the Stone Gate by the Laymen of Mount Lu.* For Buddhists and Daoists alike mountains were sacred places.

<u>*Zong Bing (also spelled Tsung Ping, 375-443)*</u>

Zong Bing was a distinguished scholar and painter of the early 5th century. He illustrated the Daoist ideal in action: spending his life wandering amid the beautiful hills of the south.

> *"If we travel through wild nature and climb to the top of the peak, we can view the great span of the marvellous landscape, the expansion of Cosmic space which is clear and pure, and the miracles of the sun and moon which illuminate the darkness. How could we fail to find in them the nobility and dignity of the sages and the powerful sacred spirits … this is a matter of contemplating infinity and thus being open to the thought of the divine karmic Way, of perceiving quietness and thus being enlightened about the interactions of bright spirits."*

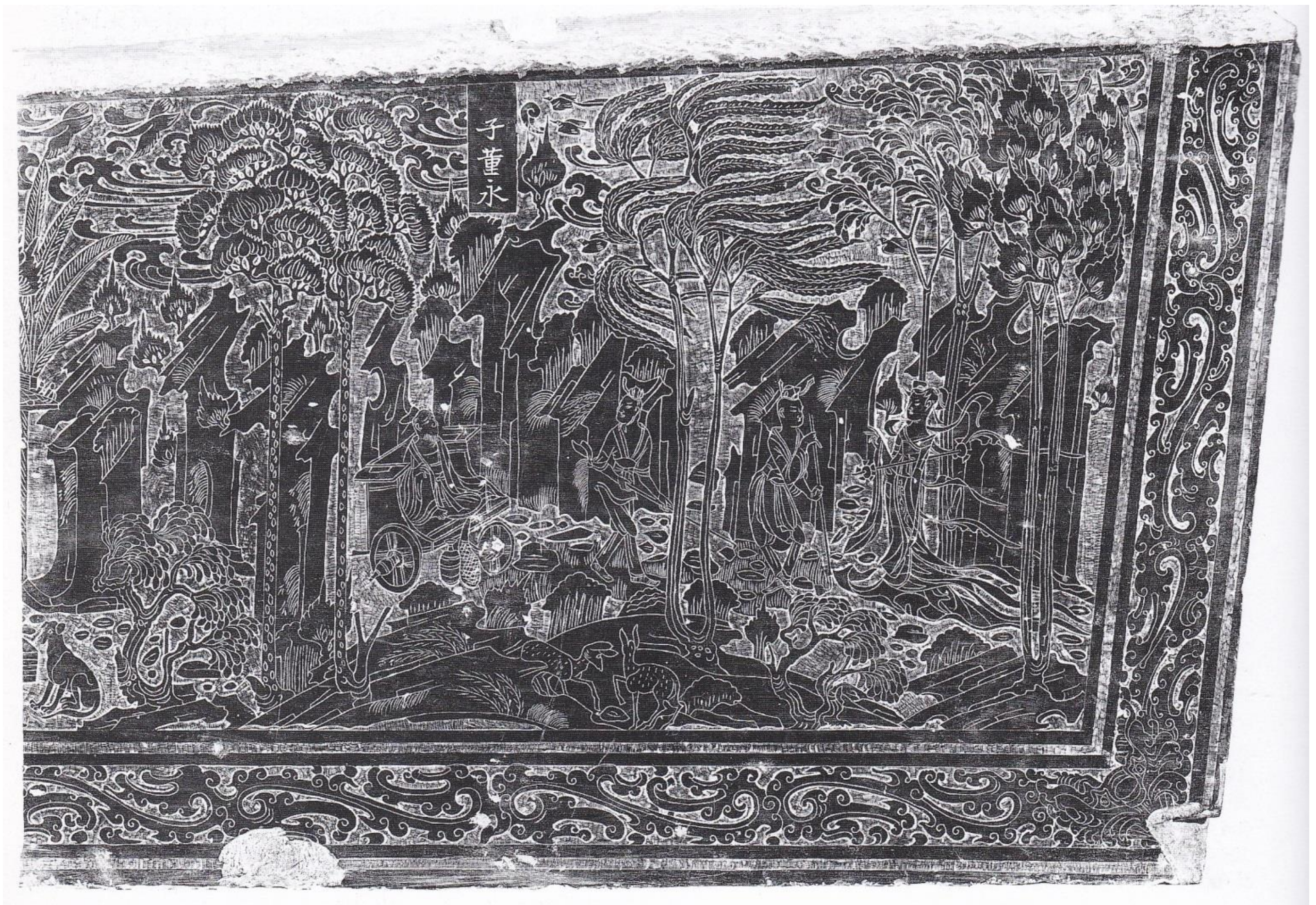
Zong Bing originated the idea of landscape painting or, more accurately, his wife did. When he was too old to wander any more, she recreated the landscapes he loved on the walls of his home. Zong's short essay *Hua shanshui xu* (*Preface on Landscape Painting*), the earliest surviving work on this genre, essentially describes landscape paintings as surrogates for pilgrimages. He expected a landscape painting to produce the same effect as would be experienced by visiting a great mountain, as he explains in the concluding part of the essay:

> *"I make my place secluded, regulate my vital force, clean the wine cup and strum my lute [to prepare the mind]. I shall open the painting and face it quietly. Then, while sitting, I can reach the four remote corners of the world. There, with peaks of various shapes towering high and with the cloud-covered forest mysteriously stretching afar, the sages and virtuous men of far antiquity come back to live in my imagination and I sense their divine thoughts. Then what have I to do? I will just let my soul be exalted. When one's soul is exalted, there is nothing more left to do."*

Landscape painting was regarded in China from its inception as high art, and would remain so for centuries afterwards. Zong Bing believed landscape paintings should capture the sacredness of the mountain, exalting the spirit of the viewer *"through his eye and reaching to his heart"*. His contemporary Gu Kaizhi wrote about the components of landscapes in his *On Painting the Cloud Terrace*; the legendary site of the Daoist practitioner and magician Chang Tao-ling.

> Clouds were to adorn the mountain as an indication of the presence of spirits or deities. *"Pure vapour also encircles the mountains, dividing them in the middle by a band of cloud which clearly separates them into two parts"*. This reflected the belief that clouds were emitted by the mountain and were the visible manifestation of *qi* (and this explains the design of incense censors); *"the mountains contain metals and minerals in layers as well as holes and crevices; they produce clouds and spread out rains which moisten all under heaven"*
>
> Rocks should writhe and coil like dragons so that, *"as one gazes on this scene, which rises so majestically, one is inspired by awe … where the awe-inspiring summit soars loftily, I would give it an air of dizzy danger."*
>
> A ravine or abyss should be created. *"By making the ravine so narrow and enclosing between the two high walls, an atmosphere of the dreadful and sublime is created, which is fitting for the dwelling-place of the gods."*
>
> A path should be shown; by tracing it the viewer experiences the scene as if they were there[2].

These elements were to appear in Chinese landscapes from the time the art blossomed in the Song dynasty. There had been no landscape scenes in the Han, and only fragments during the Period of Division; the most notable perhaps being the scenes on the stone sarcophagus now in the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City.



Story of the Filial Shun: Dong Yong's Piety, Northern Wei Dynasty sarcophagus (section)
520-530 (funeral inscription dated 522)

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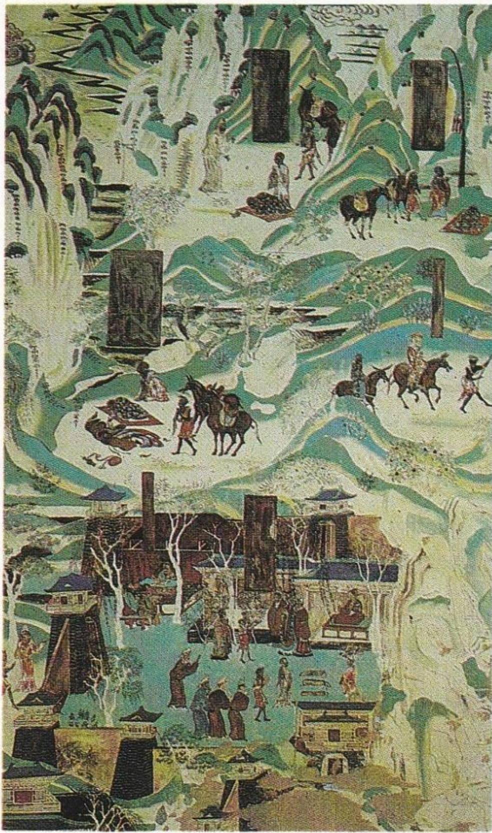
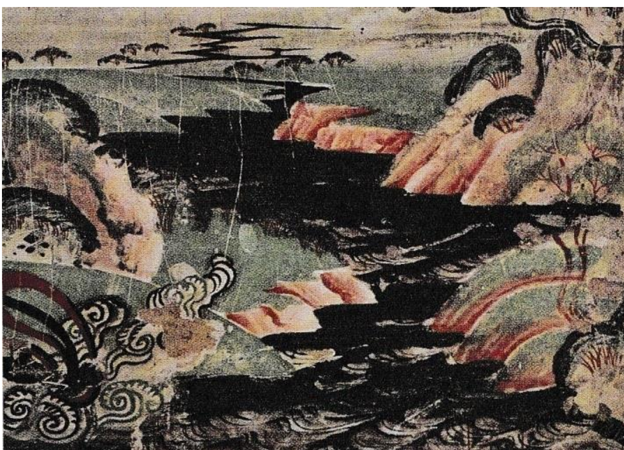
[2] In Gu Kaizhi's *Admonitions*, the mountain scene includes a path winding through the hills above the towering cliffs. Centuries later in Western art, paths (as well as other devices) were often used to create depth and "to lead the eye". In Chinese landscapes, paths might be said "to lead the soul."

However, under the Tang landscape painting began to advance as artists mastered problems of space and depth.



Pilgrims and travellers in a landscape (detail)
Cave 217 Dunhuang, Tang dynasty

Landscape painted on a Biwa lute, 8th century



River landscape (detail) Cave 172 Dunhuang

The Magao Caves at Dunhuang have a host of wonderful wall paintings. The landscape in Cave 217 (upper left) shows the usual method of depicting recession: figures simply placed above one another with no diminution of scale. The artist who painted the river landscape, however, zig-zags the river and reduces its breadth to give a convincing feel for depth. Similar recession is seen in wall paintings at Dunhuang which show Queen Vaidehi meditating, and there are at least three of those.

A set of Biwa lutes, now in the Shosoin Repository in Japan, bear the most interesting surviving landscapes of the 8th century. The best landscape of the Tang Dynasty yet published is on one of these. The lute, known as Biwa C, has a landscape showing a white elephant turning to look at the little musical group borne on its back: a bearded drummer, a singer/dancer and two flautists.

Behind this group is a view of a valley between vertical cliffs retreating to a far horizon. Behind red clouds the sun sets. While that is rare, the most remarkable aspect of the scene is the birds which fly up the valley in a string diminishing in size carrying the eye to the far clump of mountains. The trees also get smaller and less detailed in the distance.

The background is painted with lead red and over-painted with white. The drawing is in ink. The shading is to enhance form and throw certain areas into relief and has nothing to do with the direction of the sun's rays! A wide range of colours are used: the green foliage and highlights on the cliffs are striking. Trees and plants are rendered with as much skill as any surviving painting of the period.

The existence of such compositions with their devices to create depth painted on the plectrum-guard of lutes might suggest similar works were produced on screens and scrolls, but none remain.

Landscape on Biwa C, 8th century

Very few landscapes from the Tang dynasty have survived, even though written records mention many. Two styles are evident. The first is exemplified by ***Li Sixun (651-c 718)*** and his son ***Li Zhaodao (died c 735)***. Li Sixun was known as "General Li" from the post he held in a Guards regiment. He was a relative of the Imperial family and came into court favour about 705. His son followed his father into painting and also held the same military rank (and was dubbed "The Little General"). Their paintings are characterised by a highly detailed style, full of accurately drawn figures and flora, rendered in brilliant colour. The minerals malachite and azurite were popular with the Lis, producing a style referred to as *"green and blue"*.

A famous example, *Emperor Xuanzong's journey to Shu* is attributed to Li Zhaodao. That journey was a disastrous flight. The happy nature of the painting has prompted authorities to suggest it shows an imperial picnic. Many such excursions were painted, going back to wall-paintings of the Han. Executed on silk, the work has three narrative scenes (reading from right to left); the cavalcade of horsemen come through the defile to rest on the plateau in the centre, then they remount and move off up the mountain to the left. There is, strangely for the Tang period, no real sense of solidity or mass in the mountains, rocks or trees – the latter look like those on the Nelson-Atkins sarcophagus. The glowing overall pattern is almost Persian.

Li Zhaodao, *Emperor Xuanzong* (*Minghuang)'s journey to Shu,* 8th Century

<u>*Wang Wei (699 or 701- 761)*</u>

Wang Wei was a great genius, known especially for his poetry, and regarded as the prototype of the scholar-official who paints only in his spare time. Under the Tang the idea developed that because a man was a member of the intellectual elite his art must be superior to mere professionals. Wang Wei is the father of the second landscape style: monochrome painting in the *pomo* or "broken-ink" manner. After the outlines of mountains, hills and rocks have been completed, the form and effects of erosion are indicated by abrupt brush-strokes and washes of ink. Perhaps the vogue for avoiding colour was a reaction to the splendours and paradises which were so popular in the court art of this dynasty.

Wang received a prestigious degree in the Imperial civil-service examinations in 721. He was very happily married and was deeply affected by the death of his wife at a young age in 730. Wang Wei turned to Buddhism, and abstained from meat and fine clothes. He never re-married. He held many senior posts, but his career ended in turbulence. Suspected as a collaborator after the An Lushan Rebellion he was detained by the rebel administration and forced to wall-painting for two years. Released, he retired to the sizeable country estate of Wangchuan at Lantian. Wei was famous in his lifetime for paintings of his estate (one of which would provoke a notable work in the 18th century [Part 6]), and the hills and woods along the banks of the nearby river. Only copies of Wang Wei's paintings remain, and some of those are disputed. He was famous for his snow landscapes, particularly rivers in snow (a subject of which Wang Wei never tired). Two paintings exist, both apparently later copies, which give impressions of his style. They are notably skilful in portraying moods. *Snowy Landscape* is calm and silent, but *Snowy River* is cold and threatening with men rushing for the cover of the two cottages.

Wang Wei style, *Snowy Landscape*, Northern Song copy (probably)

Wang Wei style, *Snowy River*, Song copy (former in the Manchu Household Collection, now lost)

His technique was simple but the mood, suggestive of deep winter, profoundly poetic. His paintings were described as "poems without words". Wang Wei was a gifted poet (as well as a musician). Later in life he was required to serve in a lowly position in Shandong. There he wrote in the style of an exile and expressed in simple language his close relationship to nature.

My heart in middle age found the Way
And I came to dwell at the foot of this mountain.
When the spirit moves, I wander alone
Amid beauty that is all for me …
I will walk till the water checks my path,
Then sit and watch the rising clouds –
And some day meet an old wood-cutter
And talk and laugh and never return.
"My Retreat at Mount Chung-nan"

He became famous for his mastery of the brief poem with some hidden truth. An example comes from the *Wang Stream Collection*.

The moaning of wind in autumn rain,
Swift water trickling over stones.
Leaping waves strike one another –
A white egret startles up, comes down again.
"Rapids by the Luan Trees"

The Tang dynasty is the golden age of Chinese poetry. Empress Wu (660-712) made poetry part of the curriculum for degrees and civil service examinations, and this requirement continued to the end of the Imperial age in the early 20th century. The compilation *Three Hundred Tang Poems* - 311 better-known works by 77 poets described in the preface as; *"this is but a family reader for children, but it will hold good until our hair is white"* - was first published in the 18th century. It ensures Tang poetry remains familiar to educated Chinese to this day. The large size of the Tang empire and the consequences for officials are reflected in the themes of the poetry; the parting of friends, longing for home, the dangers of travel and difficulty in keeping in touch.

Li Bo (701-62), often described as China's best-loved poet, was a close contemporary of Wang Wei. He came from Sichuan and his family may have been Turkish. He became court poet and there cultivated his reputation for eccentricity and wild drinking. He fell from favour at court and spent most of his life in the Yangtze Valley. His most famous poem, and the best-known in the Chinese language, refers to absence from home

So bright a gleam on the foot of my bed -
Could there have been a frost already?
Lifting myself to look, I found that it was moonlight.
Sinking back again, I thought suddenly of home.
"In the Quiet Night"

Bo Juyi (also spelled Po Chu-i, 772-846) had a long career as an official, but despite being busy he found time to be a prolific poet. His poems, written in a simple style and dealing with popular sentiments, earned him great fame. His appeal is illustrated by a poem referring to the trade in tropical birds, an analogy of the fate of outspoken intellectuals:

Sent as a present from Annam –
A red cockatoo.
Coloured like the peach-tree blossom,
Speaking with the speech of men.
And they did to it what is always done
To the learned and the eloquent.
They took a cage with stout bars
And shut it up inside
"The Red Cockatoo"

Bo wrote the celebrated poem *Song of Unending Sorrow* commemorating the death of Yang Guifei, Emperor Xuanzong's mistress, who was executed during the An Lushan Rebellion. The end of the poem recalls the vows they exchanged, and the nature of the sorrow evoked by their separation – and serves to mark the end of the Tang dynasty;

"On the seventh day of the Seventh-month, in the Palace of Long Life,
We told each other secretly in the quiet midnight world
That we wished to fly to heaven, two birds with the wings of one,
And to grow together on the earth, two branches of one tree"
… Earth endures, Heaven endures; some time both shall end,
While this unending sorrow goes on and on for ever.

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