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Buddhist Literati and Literary Monks: Social and Religious Elements in the Critical Reception of Zhang Jizhi’s Calligraphy

Amy McNair

LITERATI CALLIGRAPHY CRITICISM was dominated, first in the Six Dynasties and Tang periods, by Daoistic nature similes used to capture the artist’s creativity (e.g., “like a rock falling from a high peak, bounding but about to crumble”), then in the Song dynasty was complicated by the rise of a competing Confucian paradigm of morality (“seeing the man in his writing”). The Song-dynasty contests between the Daoist and Confucian camps over the critical reputations of such great calligraphers as Wang Xizhi (303–361) and Yan Zhenqing (709–785) are well known. Rarely have we seen calligraphy criticism from a Buddhist perspective, though, either in China or the West. A study of the critical reception of the work of the Southern Song calligrapher Zhang Jizhi (1186–1266) reveals tensions between Confucian and Buddhist interpretations—even differing Buddhist interpretations—of this artist’s achievement in the Yuan and Ming dynasties. His critics included Confucian instructors, literary Buddhist monks, and lay-Buddhist literati, and their diverse reactions to this Buddhist artist’s calligraphy illuminate an intriguing case of socially and religiously based conflicts in perception.

Zhang Jizhi was a devout Buddhist householder and a friend of disciples of the Chan master Wuzhun Shifan (1177–1249) at Tiantong Monastery in the Tiantai Mountains, south of modern-day Ningbo. He was also a scholar-official whose family had filled high positions in government for several generations. In modern scholarship, Zhang Jizhi is considered the last great calligrapher of the Southern Song. He has long been appreciated in Japan, where one sign of his popularity in Zen circles is his well-known inscription reading fangzhang, “abbot’s quarters,” now in the Tofuku-ji, Kyoto. Copies of this inscription hang at other Zen establishments, such as Daitoku-ji. By contrast, the critical reception of his work in China was contested, apparently in accord with each critic’s own particular social, philosophical, and religious concerns.

Zhang Jizhi’s extant calligraphy may be divided into three categories. One consists of large characters, in a horizontal format, written in the so-called Song kai, or Song-dynasty regular script, an informal regular script that incorporates elements of running script (xingshu). Zhang wrote these characters with dark, thick, rough brushstrokes that incorporate the use of “flying white” (feihai), a dry brush technique that spares out the white ground in strokes. The composition of these characters tends toward squareness, with the occasional eccentric stroke.
Examples are the fangzhang inscription and transcriptions of poems by the Tang-dynasty poet Du Fu, now in the Liaoning Provincial Museum (fig. 3.1) and the Chishaku-in and Enkaku-ji, in Kyoto.6

Zhang's medium-sized regular script forms another category. It is found in formal documents such as his sutra transcriptions (fig. 3.2) and in the Epitaph for Li Kan, now in the Fujiy Yurinkan, Kyoto. The regular script Zhang Jizhi used in writing sutras is more delicate and fluid than that of the Du Fu poem scrolls, but it has the same unusual and distinctive style. Most remarkable is the extraordinary variety of thick and thin strokes, which creates a wonderful visual drama as the thickly drawn, dark characters give way to finely drawn, light ones, creating a nearly three-dimensional effect. In addition, Zhang often emphasized the initial strokes of his characters, so that many characters are darker and heavier on the left-hand side. Examples in fig. 3.2 are the characters du (in the third column, the sixth character from the top) and ju (fourth column, ninth character), where the left-hand semantic element is written in thick black strokes, with the phonetic element to the right written in a much finer line.

A third type of writing is seen in personal documents written in a running-cursive hand. In a personal letter written to the Chan monk Daxie (fig. 3.3), again we see the dramatic alteration between thick and fine strokes, but with less weight on the left side of the characters. Instead, character compositions angle upward on the right side, so that right-hand elements appear to float slightly above elements on the left. The delicate ligatures between strokes, the smooth swelling of individual strokes, and the great variety in shapes of dots, along with the rake to the upper right, are all hallmarks of the style of the Northern Song calligrapher Mi Fu (1052–1107). Zhang Jizhi’s echo of Mi Fu was not at all unusual, but typical of the pervading influence of Mi Fu’s style in the Southern Song.8

Surprisingly, brushwork so deft did not win Zhang Jizhi universal admiration. In a colophon to one of Zhang’s transcriptions of the Lotus Sutra, the Ming-dynasty connoisseur An Shifeng wrote, “Men in the past reviled Zhang Jizhi’s calligraphy as vulgar writing. But when I examine the expressions of his brush, [I sense] he did not intend to be unorthodox, but only to make an image of his feelings.”9

Who were these “men in the past” who reviled Zhang Jizhi’s style? One was Zheng Shao

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**Figure 3.2** Zhang Jizhi, Three Poems by Du Fu, detail. Southern Song dynasty, 1230. Ink on paper. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Prince Museum, Prince Museum, Prince.
(fl. ca. 1324–1328), a Confucian instructor in Fujian, who wrote a text recording his views on the history and technique of calligraphy. This text is arranged in question-and-answer form, and in the section where he critiques the calligraphers of the past we read:

**Question:** Wu Yue, Zhang Xiaoxiang, or Fan Chengda—do they have method?
**Answer:** If they have method, then there is no method in all the world. That being the case, did Zhang Jizhi and his followers finish this fall from grace?

Here the contemporary commentator, Liu Youding, adds:

*The question is:* From Zhang Jizhi onward, was the Way of Calligraphy entirely in ruins?
*Answer:* Alas! Like cracks in a smooth floor!¹⁰

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1. The text is expanded on the page mentioned above. In a modern context, it's important to note the importance of these works in the history of Chinese art and literature.
2. The text on the page is cited from a famous Chinese poem by Du Fu.
3. The image of the page is mentioned to illustrate the text.
4. The paragraph discusses the development of Chinese calligraphy and its influence on later generations.
5. The mention of Wu Yue, Zhang Xiaoxiang, and Fan Chengda highlights the importance of these artists in the context of Chinese calligraphy.
6. Liu Youding's commentary adds depth to the discussion, emphasizing the decline of the art form after Zhang Jizhi.
7. The reference to cracks in a smooth floor is a metaphorical expression, indicating the decline of the art form.
8. The figure (3.2) shows an example of a Diamond Sutra from the Southern Song dynasty, illustrating the art form in question.
9. The text is further expanded on the page mentioned above.
According to Zheng Shao, the styles of these men crazed the level and uniform veneer of the Way of Calligraphy. Perhaps he even meant to suggest that their manner of writing actually resembled “cracks in a smooth floor.”

What was so irregular about the styles of Wu Yue, Zhang Xiaoxiang, and Fan Chengda? Wu Yue (fl. ca. 1115–1156) was a prominent government official of the early Southern Song and a celebrated calligrapher at the court of Emperor Gaozong (r. 1127–1162). As Marilyn Wong-Gleysteen has pointed out, his everyday manner of writing resembled the writing of the Northern Song calligraphers Mi Fu and Cai Xiang (1012–1067). However, Wu Yue also invented a new kind of writing called “gossamer thread script” (yousi shu). This unorthodox cursive script he produced with a very thin, unmodulated, continuous line, which indeed has the visual effect of floating cobwebs. This type of writing was much too precious for many critics, being at once manneristic, unclassical in method, and lacking in potential for expressive gesture. Not many works by Wu Yue remain, mostly letters and colophons, but his two extant inscriptions are pagoda epitaphs for the Buddhist monks Meditation Master Huizhao (1153) and Master Jingyan (1156).

The second individual criticized here, Zhang Xiaoxiang (1133–1170), was Zhang Jizhi’s illustrious uncle, who gained imperial recognition as a poet and calligrapher before his untimely death at thirty-eight sui. Like his nephew, he cultivated connections with Chan monks. One of his best-known works of calligraphy is an epitaph of 1158 for Meditation Master Hongzhi of the Tiantong Monastery (fig. 3.4). This work deliberately echoes the style of Chu Suiliang (596–658), as seen in his Preface to the Buddhist Canon, which was engraved on a stele at the Large Wild Goose Pagoda in Chang’an in 653 (fig. 3.5). Chu Suiliang’s Preface is one of the most famous Buddhist works in the history of Chinese calligraphy and has served as a model for many generations of calligraphers. Another piece of writing by Zhang Xiaoxiang (fig. 3.6), a colophon to a scroll of poems by the famous Northern Song poet, calligrapher, and Chan devotee Huang Tingjian (1045–1105), shows how Zhang Xiaoxiang constructed his style from the four-square character structures and heavy strokes of the eighth-century calligrapher Yan Zhenqing and the dynamic, highly modulated brushwork of Mi Fu. This was a common blend of styles in the Southern Song, where the weightiness of Yan’s style was quickened by the whimsy of Mi’s. Among those who employed it were Emperor Ningzong (r. 1195–1224) and Emperor Lizong (r. 1225–1264).

The other person condemned along with the Zhangs was the poet-official Fan Chengda (1126–1203), who was a calligrapher for a number of imperial officials. He wrote for the Jìngdū Monastery (1121–1203) and the Tiantong Monastery, finding inspiration in the 1181 (fig. 3.7), which exhibits coarse brushwork and extended gestures of Mi Fu and Chen, as seen in such works as his Hongyao, Meditation in the Wu River. The calligraphy’s edges and boldness display an unclassical, even unwieldy, style of writing of Mi Fu and Huai. The letter 'g' is a part of the text.
Figure 3.4 (above) Zhang Xiaoxiang, Epitaph for Meditation Master Hongzhi, detail. Southern Song dynasty, 1158. Ink rubbing. Reproduced from Huang Peiyu, Zhang Xiaoxiang yanjiu (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1993), pl. 1.


Zhang Jizhi’s (1126–1293), who is best remembered as a calligrapher for an engraving of a scroll of poems he wrote for Meditation Master Fozhao (1121–1203) while visiting him at the Ayuwang Monastery south of modern-day Ningbo in 1181 (fig. 3.7). In this work, he follows the coarse brushstrokes and awkwardly exaggerated gestures of Mi Fu’s large running script, as seen in such well-known works by Mi Fu as his Hongxian Poem Scroll and Sailing on the Wu River. While attractive in its rough edges and bold gestures, Fan’s writing is quite unclassical, even though it is related to the writing of Mi Fu. Mi Fu was an ardent student of the style of Wang Xizhi, the basis of

Fan Chengda.
the classical tradition, but Fan did not follow Mi’s classical manner, as seen in his small running script; instead he imitated the more expressionistic mode of Mi’s large running-script poem scrolls.

In short, several factors about these calligraphers could have offended the Confucian sensibilities of Zheng Shao. A religious factor was their involvement with Buddhists. A political factor was their having served under the discredited Southern Song. An artistic factor was that Fan Chengda and Zhang Xiaoxiang imitated Mi Fu and Yan Zhengqing, respectively, meaning that they did not find their styles on direct study of the classical style of Wang Xizhi. This tradition emphasizes a smooth, modulated, graceful line and character compositions that fan out to the right. Indeed, it is commonly noted that most calligraphers of the late Southern Song did not return to a classical source for their inspiration, but based themselves on masters of the Tang and Northern Song dynasties. Using such comparatively recent models went out of fashion in the early fourteenth century, when the influential artist and official Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) led a revival of the classical Wang style in calligraphy (fig. 3.8). If Zheng Shao subscribed to the visual principles of smooth brushwork and dynamic compositional balance of this classical revival, then his condemnation of Zhang Jizhi and the others on stylistic grounds for participating in the decadent aesthetic horizon of the Southern Song seems an honest opinion. If to him “having method” meant possessing the stylistic attributes of the classical tradition, then, indeed the comparatively modern styles of Wu Yue, Zhang Xiaoxiang, and Fan Chengda have no method. I wonder, however, if Zheng Shao was not using arguments about style as a code for a Confucian standard of criticism.

The standard was first expressed by Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) and his circle of Confucian reformers in the eleventh century. They held that only the handwriting of men of superior Confucian character is acceptable as a model. Looking at Zheng Shao’s text as a whole, we discover that the Song-dynasty calligraphers he most admired were Cai Xiang, who was Ouyang Xiu’s close friend and political ally; Su Shi (1037–1101) and Huang Tingjian, who were followers of Cai and Ouyang; and the Confucian philosophers Cheng Hao (1032–1085) and Zhu Xi (1130–1200).19 The other calligraphers he reviled were those notorious “traitors” of the Northern Song, the brothers Cai Bian (1058–1117) and Cai Jing (1046–1126).20 This assessment clearly represents a Confucian standard of judgment based on character, since most connoisseurs would agree that Cai Jing wrote a better hand than either Cheng Hao or Zhu Xi.

Figure 3.7 Fan Chengda, Memorial Poem for Meditation Master Fozhao, detail. Southern Song dynasty, 181. Ink rubbing. Collection of Imperial Household Agency, Tokyo. Reproduced from Chinese Calligraphy, pl. 59.
Yuan Jue (1266–1327), another prominent fourteenth-century Confucian scholar-official and critic, may have been the source for Zheng Shao’s charge that “the ruin of calligraphy began with Zhang [Jizhi].”21 In 1314, Yuan Jue published a gazetteer of Ningbo, Zhang Jizhi’s hometown, in which he wrote, “When he was young, Zhang Jizhi studied the calligraphy of his uncle Xiaoxiang, but late in life [his style] became increasingly crazy and mad, which is why his writing is no longer popular.”22 Yuan Jue’s statement prompts two questions: Why was the condemnation of Zhang’s style so severe? Why did Yuan use the terms “crazy” (dian) and “mad” (kuang)? We can easily imagine how the angular and ragged writing of Zhang’s large regular script would have been an offense against the early-fourteenth-century neo-classicism exemplified by Zhao Mengfu’s work and have been seen as just one more instance of calculatedly unorthodox brushwork in the Southern Song. However, Zheng Shao’s hero Zhu Xi also engaged in this kind of bravura calligraphic performance occasionally, as may be seen in his large-character transcription of one of the ten commentaries to the Book of Changes.23 Why was Zhang Jizhi criticized for this kind of writing and Zhu Xi not?

Yuan Jue may have called Zhang Jizhi’s style “crazy” and “mad” simply to record his opinion that Zhang’s style was so eccentric and individual that it could not be used as a standard
model. But we should note that the terms he used to condemn Zhang Jizhi’s style served as the nicknames of the two Tang-dynasty progenitors of “mad cursive” script.²⁴ Zhang Xu (675–759) was called “Crazy” Zhang, and Huaisu (ca. 725–ca. 800) was known as the “Mad Monk.” “Mad cursive” was named after the “Mad Monk,” and many of the other famous practitioners of “mad cursive” were also monks of the mid- and late-Tang dynasty, such as Gaoxian (fl. ca. 847–859), Bianguang (d. ca. 930–933), Yaqi (fl. ca. 898–900), Menggui (fl. ninth c.), Yanxiu (fl. ninth c.), and Guanxiu (832–912).²⁵ As these terms are historically associated with monk-calligraphers, to declare an artist’s work “crazy,” “mad,” and “lacking method” may be a way to marginalize him for participating in a stylistic tradition with Buddhist associations.

The charge of lacking method was also leveled in Yuan times at the painting style of the Chan monk Muqi, who lived in Hangzhou during the late Southern Song period. Muqi and Zhang Jizhi were exact contemporaries and may have been friends; Zhang is known to have associated with the Chan monk Daoan (d. 1271), who was a friend of Muqi (active mid-thirteenth c.).²⁶ The early-fourteenth-century critic Tang Hou condemned Muqi’s style, saying, “In recent times, the monk Muqi produced some casual paintings, which were coarse and ugly and without ancient method.”²⁷ Later in the century, the critic Xia Wenyan repeated this sentiment, saying, “Muqi’s paintings are random jottings, in which he dabs on the ink to create an abbreviated conception. . . . [His works] are coarse and ugly and without ancient method, truly not elegant art objects.”²⁸

Were these critics prejudiced against the art of Buddhist monks as a result of a Confucian perspective on art, or were they offering a connoisseur’s unbiased assessment of quality? Tang Hou was the head of a private Confucian academy who refused service under the Mongols as a Confucian instructor. In his writings, however, he maintained no sympathy for didactic subject matter in art, but expressed strong interest in standards of technical ability and aesthetic expression. The rough brushwork and abbreviation of Zhang Jizhi’s calligraphy or Muqi’s painting may have a strong appeal to Zen adherents in the East or those who appreciate abstract expressionism in the West, but from the standpoint of a fourteenth-century Chinese critic who took the classical tradition as the standard, the art of Buddhist monks would seem crude and untutored. These Buddhist artists may have rejected the classical repertoire of brushstrokes in the interest of self-expression, or they may have engaged in calligraphy or painting as a religious exercise designed to lose consciousness of the self and gain enlightenment, in which case the beauty of the object produced was of little importance compared to the invisible effect of the process on the soul. No matter their motive, however, the aesthetic response to their art by unsympathetic non-Buddhist viewers would be uncomprehending and negative.

The fourteenth-century critics’ claim that Zhang Jizhi lacked affiliation with the classical tradition was dealt with by two seventeenth-century critics in colophons on Zhang Jizhi’s transcription of the Diamond Sutra of 1246. This transcription, now in the John B. Elliott Collection in the Art Museum at Princeton, was dedicated to the generation of posthumous karmic merit for his deceased father (see fig. 3.2).²⁹ In his colophon dated to 1620, the scholar-official and Buddhist layman Bi Xizhi relates how he had this transcription copied and engraved in stone so that ink rubbings could be made of it. This was a pious Buddhist act intended to disseminate multiple copies of the sutra. At the same time, engravings one’s calligraphy collection for public edification was a common scholarly practice in the Ming. Bi Xizhi’s colophon opens with praise for the efficacy of the Diamond Sutra and then goes on to discuss Zhang Jizhi’s style, saw no connection with classical elements, and resembles Chen Fu.”³⁰

Let us do little more than actually study the composition of the slender stroke and the distribution between the left and the right of Suliang’s Private Sutra. Zhang Jizhi’s style is such that the quality of the standard characters, their composition, and the distribution to the right. Zhang Jizhi’s style is such that they are the opposite of the style that I would argue was secondhand. Suliang made a copy of Chen Fu’s manner, creating his own style (see fig. 3.6). Seen as a child, he was dedicated to Buddhism and Mi Fu admired Suliang’s style, but these masters did not have the reality of Southern Song and Yuan.

Why did the critics, his contemporaries, ignore these works? The calligraphers of the Yuan dynasty onward were in search of a purpose in art, something that was nearly automatic in the Song dynasty. The idea of ignoring posthumous merit is a counter to the classical record. When the calligrapher did not point out the connection between Zhang Jizhi and Muqi, it was which surely was the case with Bi Xizhi had the same orthodoxy of the ancient model.

The colophons of the Suliang, a Ming artist and connoisseur who native for Zhang Jizhi’s style, moves the brush...
to discuss Zhang Jizhi’s calligraphic style. In contrast to the fourteenth-century critics who saw no connection between Zhang and the classical tradition, Bi Xizhi easily identified classical elements in Zhang Jizhi’s style: “Connoisseurs say the composition of his characters resembles Chu Suiliang’s, while the movements and turns of the brush are like those of Mi Fu.”

Let us do a brief comparison to see if the transcription itself offers any proof that Zhang actually studied these two masters of the classical tradition. Bi Xizhi has called attention to the composition of Chu Suiliang’s characters, which are noted for their loose structure and slender strokes. The association he makes with Zhang Jizhi’s characters is in the lack of contact between the strokes in a given character. Compare for example the character wen in Chu Suiliang’s Preface to the Buddhist Canon (see fig. 3.5, third column, second character) and in Zhang Jizhi’s Diamond Sutra (see fig. 3.2, second column, fourth character). There is a similar quality of disconnectedness in the strokes, but they also reveal that Zhang did not employ the standard character composition of the classical tradition to which Chu Suiliang belonged, a composition described as “left tight, right loose,” meaning that the character form fans out to the right. Zhang’s characters are either even across the bottom, as in this character wen, or they are the opposite of the classical model, with the character actually larger on the left side. I would argue that this difference shows that the influence of Chu Suiliang (and of Mi Fu) was secondhand. As noted above, Zhang Jizhi’s uncle Zhang Xiaoxiang could write in a Chu Suiliang manner, as in his Epitaph for Meditation Master Hongzhi (see fig. 3.4), and in a Mi Fu manner, common in the Southern Song, as in his colophon to Huang Tingjian’s poems (see fig. 3.6). From what we know of Zhang Jizhi’s early education, it was highly likely that, as a child, he was taught his uncle’s style. So, although Bi Xizhi’s references to Chu Suiliang and Mi Fu are not wrong, they are not exactly right either, since they imply a direct study of these masters that we have no indication took place. This implication obscures a historical reality of Southern Song calligraphy: direct study of the classical masters had by then declined.

Why did Bi Xizhi make these tenuous connections between Zhang Jizhi’s style and those of Chu Suiliang and Mi Fu? Presumably he was attempting to affiliate Zhang Jizhi directly with the high-status classical tradition, removing him from the mass of Southern Song calligraphers who learned from masters who were seen as too contemporary. From the Ming dynasty onward, establishing an artist as part of the orthodox lineage became a fundamental purpose in appreciative colophons. The obsession with lineages may be traced back to Tang-dynasty ideas about succession, within both Confucianism and Chan Buddhism.

This nearly automatic search for earlier masters with which to identify an artist carries the danger of ignoring possible contemporary or low-status influences and thereby falsifying the historical record. Why did Bi Xizhi not mention the style of Zhang Xiaoxiang as an influence? Why not point out similarities to other Southern Song artists? Why not explore the relationship between Zhang’s sutra manner and anonymous sutras from the Song dynasty or earlier, which surely a man as pious and well connected as Bi Xizhi had seen? The reason is that Bi Xizhi had the typical scholarly propensity to ignore contemporary influences in favor of ancient models and to look down on the low-status writing of artisan-class sutra scribes.

The colophon following Bi Xizhi’s on the Elliott Collection sutra was written by the Ming artist and arbiter of taste Dong Qichang (1555–1636), also in 1620. Dong Qichang’s explanation for Zhang Jizhi’s style differs from the typical affiliation model: “Looking at how he moves the brush and the composition of his characters, I see that he follows no earlier man.

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Each [character] is independently created. This is what a Chan person would call 'the outflowing of the innermost self extending out to engulf the universe.'

Dong Qichang escaped the trap of compulsory affiliation by employing Chan terminology to describe Zhang's creativity as purely self-generated. This terminology is typical of Dong Qichang's art criticism, which is filled with Chan references and analogies. It is a celebration of the very idea of "no method" that was hurled as an accusation by the Yuan-dynasty Confucian critics. The notion of a spontaneously generated calligraphic style may have been one with which Zhang Jizhi himself would have agreed, yet it is difficult to find his style entirely original because the debt to his uncle is so clear. With all due respect to Dong Qichang's religious convictions and to the power of human creativity, even in preferring originality to a traditional affiliation scheme, Dong Qichang also ignored any possible influence from Zhang's immediate milieu, and in so doing, also unwittingly perpetuated the invisibility of sutra scribes and contemporary models in the critical and historical record. Ultimately, despite the differences in their opinions, Dong Qichang and Bi Xizhi were after the same traditional goal: to ascribe Zhang Jizhi's creativity to a high-status source. For Bi Xizhi, that source was the classical tradition; for Dong Qichang, it was the unbridled Chan self.

A very different type of critical response to a work by Zhang Jizhi was expressed by Buddhist monks who wrote colophons for a transcription of the Diamond Sutra that Zhang made for his deceased wife in 1248. This album, now in the Beijing Palace Museum, has nine colophons ranging in date from 1316 to 1402, the first eight written by monks from monasteries around Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Ningbo. According to these colophons, the keeper of the sutra storage, a monk called Dongsan, had obtained this Diamond Sutra for the sutra repository of the Huideng Monastery in Suzhou, where it was held as a great treasure. The dates in the colophons indicate that the sutra was retrieved from storage for appreciation on important religious occasions, such as the anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment or of his birth. These Buddhist monks were mostly unexceptional as calligraphers, and, not surprisingly, their writings reveal a different set of concerns from those expressed by the scholar-officials, concerns that stem primarily from the content of the text.

For instance, the first colophon, written in 1316 by a Hangzhou monk named Yuanxi, quotes the line from chapter 21 of the Diamond Sutra in which Buddha says to his disciple Subhuti, "If anyone says that the Tathagata sets forth a teaching, he really slanders Buddha and is unable to explain what I teach." The quote in the colophon ends there, but in the sutra, Buddha goes on to say, "As to any truth-declaring system, truth is undecidable; so 'an enunciation of truth' is just the name given to it." This is one of the multitudinous instances in the sutra where Buddha points out that names and appearances are not reality. The point of chapter 21 in particular is that "words cannot express truth; that which words express is not truth."

As a further contradiction, however, the writing out of sutras is explicitly encouraged by the sutras themselves, the Diamond Sutra included. In the last chapter of this scripture, Buddha tells Subhuti: "Someone might fill innumerable worlds with the seven treasures and give all away in gifts of alms, but if any good man or any good woman awakens the thought of enlightenment and takes even only four lines from this discourse, reciting, using, receiving, retaining, and spreading them abroad and explaining them for the benefit of others, it will be far more meritorious." Here the tension arises, for what the monk has in his hands, upon which he is to write a colophon, is a piece of paper with words on it. These words tell him that words can never be an aggregation as the meaning.

Several colophons in their handbooks begins with the word slanders Buddha and asked about the meaning of the words if they did not express meaningful.

The scribes and the tradition between those who are called Suzhou name...
that words cannot express truth at the same moment that they encourage their own propagation as the truth.

Several of the monks’ colophons play similarly with notions of the unreality of the object in their hands. The author of the second colophon, a monk Xingduan, writing in 1317, again begins with the quotation “If anyone says that the Tathāgata sets forth a teaching, he really slanders Buddha,” and then goes on to say, “From this one might say that although Subhuti asked about the truth, the World-Honored One did not teach the truth, nor did Zhang Jizhi write out the truth, nor did the monks of the past treasure the truth. None of them did. But if they did not, then how could they have produced this diamond of infinite wonderful meaning?”

The succeeding colophons quote Xingduan’s argument and continue to toy with the contradiction between the message of the sutra and the fact of its physical existence. A monk from Suzhou named Congding (fifth colophon, dated to 1346) wrote:

In the past, a man would gesture with a brush in his hand, practicing a method called “writing the scriptures in the air.” After the man departed, that spot would be naturally solemn and pure, and rain could not moisten it. Zhang Jizhi was actually a famous official of the late-Song dynasty who was also a true believer in Buddhism as the vehicle of salvation. In these thirty-two chapters of his Diamond Sutra transcription, every character, every stroke is grave and serious, strong and beautiful. This is not, however, a skill devoted to calming the mind. Why is it like this? This is very far from the method of “writing the scriptures in the air.” Yet in this sutra is a four-character gatha: “free from the idea of an ego entity, free from the idea of a personality, free from the idea of a being, free from the idea of a separated individuality.” It is a pity no brush tip has pointed this out. He who holds this sutra should himself write out this “eye.” But if we cast off doubt and see through it, then what the World-Honored One has taught and what Zhang Jizhi has written both constitute remnants of the Dharma.

The eighth colophon was written in 1375 by the celebrated poet Laiifu, a monk of the Lingyan Monastery in Hangzhou. He too takes up this issue concerning the writing out of sutras, that is, how words may be used to express what cannot be expressed in words and how a physically real object can teach that reality is an illusion:

The sutras all praise the writing down of the merits of the great vehicle, even though they are not something that words and thoughts can illustrate. Still it is the case that people want to circulate the treasury of the Dharma, to benefit the world and expand it limitlessly. . . . What is the explanation for this? Though the Tathāgata’s marvelous Dharma is everywhere in all places, forever divorced from mere names and appearances and all of creation, it is only preserved in the mind from reading it. To get a written record of it, you may borrow paper, ink, words, and letters to illustrate it, and then you will have this thing to contemplate.

However, we should understand that rice plants, hemp stalks, bamboo, and reeds are nothing if not huge brushes; rivers, lakes, springs, and ponds are nothing if
not vast [reservoirs of] ink. The constellations suspended in the heavens and the landscapes of the earth are nothing but the marvelous sutras. The ordinary conduct of our lives, our usual behavior, our manner and deportment, are nothing but the writing out [of the sutras]. This is what we refer to as writing by not writing, which is called true writing; and teaching by not teaching, which is called true teaching. What have they to do with the brush and the tongue?

The layman Zhang Jizhi wrote out this scroll of the Diamond Sutra for his late wife, as a way to increase her fortune in the next world. It has circulated now for more than a hundred years. Though the world has changed, the scroll is as new. How could it not be the result of the power of the original vow [to seek enlightenment], but merely possess the phenomenal appearance of devas, nagas, ghosts, and demons? Sutra-keeper Dongshan has taken this out of storage in order to show it to me. He asked me to write a colophon following the text. Therefore, I have summarized the merits and virtues of writing out sutras. So it is that this thing we read, chant, keep, and hold will open our diamond eye and confer on us [the understanding that] all appearances are false appearances. As the Tathagata is revealed, we know that Layman Zhang Jizhi was able with the tip of his brush to release the great glory of Buddha and to write of his works. This is why Sutra-keeper Dongshan has treasured and circulated it.42

Although the monks preserved this sutra by a famous calligrapher, retrieved it for viewing on important occasions, and wrote colophons on it, they were unwilling to participate in the scholars’ game of aesthetic appreciation. Their responses largely relate to the content of the sutra, while the beauty of the calligraphy seems only to heighten the tension created by words teaching that words are illusion. In the end, the monks seem to have succeeded in the pious struggle against appreciating this sutra transcription as a source of aesthetic gratification. That their purposes for art were seen as radically different from Confucian purposes is witnessed by the author of the last colophon on the Beijing album, a local layman named Xie Ju, writing in 1402:

When the Huideng Monastery monk Dongshan was the keeper of the sutra storage, he obtained and kept [this sutra] as a treasure. It has been years since Dongshan passed away. His followers have also been able to treasure what their master treasured, and I was able to view it with them. I sigh that this sutra the Buddhists treasure is also treasured by Confucianists as calligraphy by a sage worthy. Certainly it should be treasured. Jizhi was famous in the Song dynasty for his calligraphy, and we Confucianists treasure his ink traces. Dongshan also treasured it, and his followers love it and hand it down. Thus a thing that is Buddhist yet admired by we Confucianists may be revered indeed.43

In sum, many attitudes toward Buddhism and art are found in the reception of Zhang Jizhi’s calligraphy and sutra transcriptions, as seen in this selection of responses from the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Confucian critics of the Yuan dynasty rejected Zhang's style for “craziness” and “lack of method.” Such terms might have been used simply to note a lack of adherence to the classical tradition, but as they were associated with earlier Buddhist

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Notes
calligraphers, they may have been used to tie Zhang Jizhi to marginalized Buddhist styles in calligraphy and painting. Zhang Jizhi may have been disparaged simply because the late Southern Song was seen as a decadent period. Buddhist monks, writing on one of Zhang Jizhi’s Diamond Sutra transcriptions during this same period, were occupied with finding a religious justification for the place of a work of art in their faith. Their lay friend, Xie Ju, seemed to counter their disparagement of its worth by noting that it was valued equally, though differently, by Confucianists. In the seventeenth century, two lay Buddhist scholars—officials sought to rehabilitate Zhang Jizhi’s calligraphy by claiming acceptable sources for his style. In his colophon on a Diamond Sutra transcription, Bi Xizhi affiliated Zhang Jizhi with what contemporary connoisseurs considered the most elegant and elite legacy in calligraphy: the classical tradition of Wang Xizhi. In a concurrent colophon, Dong Qichang located Zhang Jizhi’s creative source within the Chan concept of an original genius that merges with the universe, thereby making of the critical life of Zhang Jizhi’s Diamond Sutra a perfect Chan circle of Chan artist, Chan text, and Chan reader.

Notes


11. “Calligraphy and Painting,” 156.


The Poet in Late Imperial China

Beata Grajcar

In the early modern period, the seeming discrepancy between the monastic figures who were the ultimate embodiment of cultural and political power, and the world of the common folk, was reflected in the art and culture of the time. As Min Zhu points out, the chuangtang lu or the biographical records of Confucian scholars, despite their focus on the histories of the many theocratic figures, also contained stories of large and small literary achievements and scandals in finding any place for artists in the Chinese Buddhist literary sphere. As Min points out, there were at least a few individuals who were privately sponsored to study at Mount Wutai.