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# PASSING THE SHRINE OF THE GOD CALMING THE WAVES AND THE NOTION OF EMPTINESS IN HUANG TINGJIAN'S (1045–1105) CALLIGRAPHY

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## *Abstract*

This paper explores ways in which research into the content and form of a calligraphic work can be combined in a meaningful manner. In Western scholarship on Chinese calligraphy, detailed translations that are embedded into a wider context are rare. The paper intends to address this issue by engaging both the disciplines of literature and calligraphy in examining a famous calligraphic work by the Northern Song (960–1127 AD) calligrapher Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105). In examining the study of the text *and* the art historical characteristics, and how these relate to each other in one of Huang's most famous works, key characteristics of Northern Song aesthetics inherent in literature and visual art are explored, paying particular attention to the notion of emptiness (Chin. *kongbai* 空白). Through attention to shared complementary bipolarities such as solid and empty, light and dark, this paper draws attention to ways in which a major work can transcend such characteristics.

## 1. Introduction

The study of texts (by scholars of literature) and the study of calligraphy (by art historians) have to date, for the most part, been pursued in isolation. In China in particular, as Robert Harrist has noted, connoisseurship traditions and aesthetic appreciation are still influential factors in the way calligraphy is being studied, and issues raised by the textual content of calligraphy and the experience of reading still largely await systematic study.<sup>1</sup>

In Western scholarship on Chinese calligraphy, detailed translations – particularly ones embedded into a wider context – are also rare. This is an issue

1 See HARRIST, 1999: 8. Harrist (*ibid.*) further notes that since 1999, there are some new Chinese studies in this direction, yet recent publications illustrate that comprehensive studies are still rare (see for example OUYANG / FONG, 2008, which does not deal with individual works in detail).

which the current paper intends to address by attempting to engage both the disciplines of literature and calligraphy in looking at a famous calligraphic work by the celebrated calligrapher and poet Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105, *zi* Luzhi 魯直).<sup>2</sup> In examining these disciplines, i.e. the study of the text *and* the art historical characteristics, and how they relate to each other in one of Huang's most famous works, this paper intends to explore the way in which some key characteristics of Northern Song aesthetics are inherent in literature and visual art – notably aspects pertaining to the notion of emptiness, or in Chinese *kongbai* 空白 (literally ‘empty/white’).<sup>3</sup> These include features such as the visual qualities of the calligraphy itself (e.g. effects of emptiness and fullness), as well as Huang's awareness of the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* (the doctrine of emptiness, Chin. *kongzong* 空宗), to name but a few.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Conceptual Polarities and Chinese Aesthetics: An Introduction

In my attempt to explore some key qualities of Huang Tingjian's calligraphic work, I will use the notion of conceptual polarities in Chinese thought, as devised by Andrew H. Plaks, as a guide to explore Huang Tingjian's work. Plaks has outlined a concept of dualism in Chinese thought as opposed to Western dialectical thinking, which will serve as a basis in order to reveal possible links between disciplines such as art history and literature, and their individual characteristics. As Plaks points out:

[...] it is crucial that one is not referring to an absolute categorisation of all phases into two distinct classes of phenomena, or even to a relative distribution along a single continuum ranging between the two hypothetical poles of yin and yang. Instead, what we have is a whole *series* of axes [...] along which the myriad phenomena of existence may be ranged according to the degree of intensity [...] of various qualities. These axes include such polar pairs of sensory perception as hot and cold, light and dark, solid and empty [...] in fact, the

2 For Huang Tingjian's background, see the comprehensive biography included in BIEG, 1975.

3 The term *kongbai* will be used here, as it is commonly accepted in modern Chinese as a general term to describe various kinds of ‘emptiness’; see for example GAO, 1989: 82–91. Other modern critics such as Jiang Xun use the term *kongjian* 空間 to cover ‘emptiness’ in literature, philosophy, and various kinds of art; see JIANG, 1997: 96–114.

4 On *kongzong*, see chapter 3.4 below.

many sets of conceptual polarities, which serve as frames of reference for the perception of reality, are *overlapping* schemes not reducible to a final two-term analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Plaks further notes that what he terms the Chinese logical method for dealing with the problem of duality may be summarised by the following key concepts:<sup>6</sup> (*Complementary*) *bipolarity* refers to the apprehension of experience that is realized in terms of the relative presence or absence of opposites, rather than absolute states. The notion of *ceaseless alternation* refers to the hypothetical poles determining the bipolar form in the first place, and also the reason why there can never be a question of literal balance between them, but rather a sense of the *pairing* of all possible qualities and concepts. As the continuous alternation is inevitable, the ascendance of one term necessarily implies its own subsequent diminution (*presence within absence*). Due to a potentially infinite number of axes of alternation in the world of experience, the appearance on the surface [of things] may manifest itself as 'random chaos', but eventually leads to a convincing illusion of plenitude, i.e. the perception of reality (*infinite overlapping*).

Contrary to Western thinking, in Plaks's view of conceptual polarities creation does not appear as an external force, but consists of a natural process 'by itself'. This is a concept which also lies at the heart of the Daoist notion of naturalness or *ziran* 自然, and a comparison with some key concepts in major Daoist texts suggests interesting parallels. Compare two famous quotations from the *Daode jing* 道德經 illustrating this point:

功成，事遂，百姓皆謂：「我自然。」<sup>7</sup>

When it is accomplished and all the work done, the people will say "This is the natural way [it has always been]".

And:

人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。<sup>8</sup>

Man models himself on earth, earth on Heaven, Heaven on the dao, and the dao on naturalness.

5 PLAKS, 1976: 44–45.

6 The following is based on PLAKS, 1976: 47; Plaks developed these concepts in the analysis of narrative literature, in particular the novel.

7 CHEN, 1996: 130; on the *Daode jing*, see LOEWE, 1993: 269–292.

8 CHEN, 1996: 163.

As evident from the second quotation, *dao* 道 (“the Way”) and naturalness are inextricably linked. The subject of naturalness and its link to the inexhaustible *dao* is also one of the main themes in another famous Daoist classic, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子:

孰知不言之辯，不道之道？若有能知，此之謂天府。注焉而不滿，酌焉而不竭，而不知其所由來，此之謂葆光。<sup>9</sup>

Who knows how to argue without words, and to avoid speaking of the *dao*? The one who is able to understand this principle has the ‘treasure house of naturalness’. He may pour from it without it being filled, and [drink] from it without it without it being exhausted, not knowing where its source lies; this is what is called ‘the store of light’ [i.e. the *dao*].

The ‘treasure house of naturalness’ allows the enlightened Daoist to pour from it without end, as the *dao* itself – here described as ‘the store of light’ – is inexhaustible. While a thorough inquiry into the notion of emptiness in Daoist thinking would be too vast to undertake here, another quotation from the *Zhuangzi* gives an insight into how emptiness is contained within Daoist writings, and how it is linked to the *dao* itself:

聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齊也。<sup>10</sup>

Listening with one’s ears, one [can only understand sounds without meaning], listening with one’s heart, one [can only understand impermanent phenomena]; it is the *qi* (spirit) which is empty and holds all things. Only the *dao* resides in the realm of emptiness, and this is why emptiness is called ‘the purifying of the mind’.

Within these lines, naturalness thus appears linked with the notion of *dao* and, by analogy, ‘emptiness’. As will become evident, the inexhaustibility of the *dao* described here – which resides in the ‘realm of emptiness’ – also bears certain parallels with a passage from the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, where the seemingly sick Bodhisattva Vimalakīrti receives thousands of guests in a tiny room, a feature only possible in the realm of emptiness.<sup>11</sup> While such concepts are present in many more passages both in the *Daode jing* and the *Zhuangzi*, the scope of the present paper does not allow for a more detailed analysis of this point. Instead, possible connections between the passages encountered here will be

9 CHEN, 1983: 74–75; on *Zhuangzi*, see also LOEWE, 1993: 56–66.

10 CHEN, 1983: 117.

11 On Vimalakīrti, see further on in this paper. See also further on in this paper for the role of *dao* (here equated with the Buddha nature in Buddhist terminology) and naturalness in Song poetry as a means that allows man to transcend the limitations of the human condition.

further explored in conjunction with the writings and calligraphy by Huang Tingjian.

Reading these excerpts from famous Daoist works, one is also reminded of Andrew Plaks's concepts of non-dualism in Chinese thought mentioned above, and how Daoist concepts cited here may relate to these; for example, Plaks's notion of *presence within absence* vis-à-vis the *dao* residing in the realm of emptiness may provide interesting insights into how Daoist writings manage in their own way to, in Plaks's words, "lead up to a convincing illusion of plenitude".

Of course it is important to bear in mind that Plaks's suggestion is not to be interpreted as a 'master key to the entire civilisation of China', but rather that concepts such as *complementary bipolarity* are, among other possible patterns, an abiding aesthetic form that lends consistency and continuity to the system of Chinese literature.<sup>12</sup> How this particular aesthetic form may apply to Huang Tingjian's text and calligraphy, and what the individual elements are that make up the illusion of plenitude, i.e. the perception of reality, will be examined in the following.

### 3. Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves

#### 3.1 *Huang Tingjian and Song Calligraphy: Introductory Remarks*

Before dealing with Huang Tingjian's calligraphy and text, it is important to provide a brief introduction to the background of the artist and his work.

Huang Tingjian's biographical background has been discussed in detail in other works, and will not be dealt with here in depth.<sup>13</sup> It is however important to note that Huang's poetry and calligraphy, as well as his views on the arts, most of which are contained in colophones, were unorthodox for the times in which he lived, and had a profound influence on the art of calligraphy and poetry for centuries to follow. In his poetry, this manifested itself in new and sophisticated methods of creative imitation that would influence future schools such as the

12 PLAKS, 1976: 53.

13 In addition to Lutz Bieg's comprehensive work, compare also ZHANG, 1978.

Jiangxi school of poetry (*Jiangxi shipai* 江西詩派), a group of poets imitating Huang's style that was established in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup>

As one of the four great masters of the Northern Song,<sup>15</sup> Huang Tingjian also paved the way for a 'new creativity' in calligraphy, while at the same time emphasising that such a development was only possible through the careful study of great ancient models. Calligraphy in the Northern Song would become an important element of the legacy of the ancients, and thus also part of the 'love for antiquity' (*haogu* 好古), and it was only through scholars like Su Shi and Huang Tingjian, who were equally well-versed in a number of fields, that the gap between the fields of letters and calligraphy came to be closed.<sup>16</sup> Together with his mentor Su Shi, Huang managed to research previously relevant calligraphy, and to crystallise the main trends from earlier periods. In the Song Dynasty, the artist as an individual became increasingly the subject of discussion, and the element of bringing forth new ideas (*chuangxin* 創新) played a crucial role, which is also evident in the work discussed here.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.2 *The Scroll and Its Contents*

Huang Tingjian's calligraphic scroll, which is the subject of this study, is a transcription of a poem by the noted Tang poet Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842, *zi* Mengde 夢得) entitled *Jing Fubo shen ci shijuan* 經伏波神祠詩卷 (*Poetry Scroll on Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves*), measuring 33.6 x 820.6 cm, including a colophon by Huang himself (see ill. 1).<sup>18</sup> Huang wrote it

14 On the Jiangxi school, see FU, 1978, and more recently, LIU, 2002: 755–766; an interesting approach to Huang's poetry and its methods is contained in RICKETT et al., 1978: 97–119.

15 The other masters are Huang's mentor and friend Su Shi 蘇軾 (1036–1101, *zi* Zizhan 子瞻), Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107, *zi* Yuanzhang 元章), and Cai Xiang 蔡襄 (1012–1067, *zi* Junmo 君謨).

16 EGAN, 1994: 265.

17 The scholar Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072, *zi* Yongshu 永叔) was the driving force behind this trend; see EGAN, 1989: 373. For Ouyang Xiu's biography, see FRANKE, 1976: 900–968.

18 The scroll is today in the collection of the Eisei-Bunko Foundation 永青文庫 in Tokyo, Japan; for a reproduction of the calligraphy, see TEI, 1958, vol. 23; see also HUANG SHANGGU SHU FUBO SHEN CI SHI 黃山谷書伏波神祠詩, 1982. Original poem in QUAN TANG SHI 全唐詩, 1960, 11: 4089.

in AD 1101 during his short period of retirement in Taiping, Anhui province, at the request by his younger brother.<sup>19</sup>

Although the text, the title of which refers to the famous Han-dynasty general Ma Yuan 馬援 (14 BC–49 AD, *zi* Wenyuan 文淵), was not composed by Huang Tingjian himself, he appears to have selected it deliberately in order to reflect specific events that occupied his thoughts during the latter part of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126). General Ma was honoured with the title “Commander Calming the Waves” (*fu bo jiangjun* 伏波將軍) after successfully putting down a local uprising in 35 AD.<sup>20</sup> There exists a shrine in Jingzhou 荊州, Hubei province, to General Ma Yuan, the ‘God Calming the Waves’, which was still active as a site of the cult for this local deity at least down to the late Qing period.<sup>21</sup> The local population in the Han dynasty used it often to pray for good fortune in avoiding disasters at sea, and the Tang poet Liu Yuxi subsequently wrote a eulogy.<sup>22</sup>

In 1101, Huang Tingjian was residing in Jingzhou and fell seriously ill, the sickness lasting for about a month, as the contents of the colophon reveal. During his stay, there was also a flood, which provided one of the main reasons for Huang to transcribe Liu Yuxi's poem.<sup>23</sup> The text reads as follows:

蒙蒙篁竹下

- 1 Beneath the luxuriant bamboo grove,  
有路上壺頭
- 2 there is a road leading to Hutou [mountain].  
漢壘麴歸闕
- 3 Roe deer and flying squirrel fight each other in the [Han Dynasty] fortresses;  
蠻溪霧雨愁
- 4 the rivers of the Man tribe amidst rain and fog render one melancholic.  
懷人敬遺像
- 5 Remembering [General Ma], I pay respect to his statue left behind,  
闕世指東流
- 6 I look at this world and point to the river that flows east.

19 As Fu Shen notes, it is one of the few dated works in this monumental style, and therefore highly important for the reconstruction of Huang Tingjian's chronology (see FU, 1976: 62).

20 For a complete account regarding General Ma, see FAN, 1973, 3: 24.827ff.; cf. GILES, 1968: 572–573.

21 Giles notes that, in 1890, tablets were still granted to this shrine (GILES, 1968: 573).

22 See CAI, 1984: 133; no previous translations of this poem are known.

23 CAI, 1984: 133.



Illustration 1: Huang Tingjian. *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves*. Dated 1101. Handscroll, ink on paper (33.6 x 820.6 cm). Hosokawa Collection / Eisei Bunko Museum, Tokyo, Japan.

- 自負霸王略  
 7 [General Ma] was proud of his knowledge of strategy which would make someone a  
 hegemon,  
 安知恩澤候  
 8 but how could he have known that he would receive imperial favour and be granted the title  
 of marquis.  
 鄉園辭石柱  
 9 At his home garden, he bade farewell to the stone posts,  
 筋力盡炎洲  
 10 and applied all his energies in the torrid regions.  
 一以功名累  
 11 Once someone is compromised by merit and fame,  
 翻思馬少游  
 12 He will (also) think of Ma Shaoyou [i.e. General Ma Yuan's younger cousin].

In addition to many poems written by Huang Tingjian himself, his choice of Liu Yuxi's poem adds another layer, in that it adds the range of historical events on which he was prepared to draw, in this case the battles against the wild Hunan tribes during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 AD). The poem does not recount the story pertaining to General Ma Yuan exactly, but alludes to it by means of metaphors and place descriptions. The opening line with the luxuriant bamboo grove sets the scene for a seemingly quiet and peaceful tale. The following line continues what at first seems like merely a description of landscape, as the reader is led out of the tranquillity of the bamboo grove along a road leading to Hutou mountain (line 2). This area provided the setting for what would prove to be General Ma Yuan's last fierce battle against the wild tribes of Hunan in 49 AD.<sup>24</sup> In line 3, the poet indirectly refers to the fighting long ago in describing deer and squirrels struggling with each other in the Han fortresses. By the time Liu Yuxi wrote these lines, this may well have been true – only the military walls (*lei* 壘, line 3) provided a clue to the location's violent past.

The ensuing lines describe the melancholy which came about through this battle, which is in turn mirrored in the fog and rain (line 4). The poet himself reminisces about the great general and pays his respects to his statue (line 5), while in line 6, the river flowing eastward acts as a metaphor for the quick passing of time. Lines 7 and 8 illustrate Ma Yuan's noble and selfless character,

24 See the original account on the battle near Hutou mountain in FAN, 1973, 3: 24.843. BIELENSTEIN, 1953: 45ff. provides a short translation of the initial lines to this account. For further general remarks on this battle, see also the commentary by TEI, 1958, 23: 64.

which is reflected in biographical sources.<sup>25</sup> This theme is also taken up in line 9, where Ma Yuan bids farewell to the ‘stone posts’ in his home garden; such posts were also a metaphor for a palace dwelling. Yet despite this seeming comfort, the General applied ‘all his energies in the torrid regions’ (line 10), which draw the reader’s attention to the desolate circumstances which the troops faced, in places such as Annan 安南 (present-day Vietnam).<sup>26</sup> The fact that, in the light of all this sorrow, official rank and glory mean nothing (line 11), appears to be the reason that the poet mentions General Ma Yuan’s younger cousin Ma Shaoyou 馬少游 (dates unknown) in the last line. Like Ma Yuan, Ma Shaoyou was a man of virtue, but led a tranquil life, which stood in stark contrast to his cousin’s ambitious character that led to many military campaigns, ranks and titles.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately however, Ma Yuan died in battle, still a general at the advanced age of sixty-three; it appears that in his position, he had little choice other than to keep campaigning until the end. The fact that his younger cousin is only mentioned in the very last line accentuates how different Ma Yuan’s and Ma Shaoyou’s lives were, each in accord with the choices they made. While it puts the notion of fame in perspective, this technique of contrasting the last line in all its simplicity with the entire preceding contents appears to further increase the melancholic mood of the poem.

The transcription of Liu Yuxi’s poem is followed by a colophon in Huang’s own hand, the length of which is nearly double that of the preceding lines. Huang starts by mentioning a person called Shi Zhu 師洙 (dates unknown, *zi* Jidao 濟道), who was apparently on close terms with Huang’s family in that they would often assist one another (*fen zhou ji* 分舟濟, line 23/ill. 1).<sup>28</sup> Huang

25 Giles notes that, despite earning large sums of money, Ma Yuan distributed his fortunes among family and friends. The title of Marquis was given to him by the Eastern Han Emperor Guang Wudi 光武帝 (r. 25–57 AD), to whom Ma Yuan had given valuable strategical military advice on several occasions, most notably when quelling a local uprising in 35 AD on the Emperor’s behalf (GILES, 1968: 572). On Guang Wudi, see AN / MENG, 2008.

26 TEI, 1958, 23: 64, mentions that Yanzhou refers to the Southern location of Annan.

27 Short note on Ma Shaoyou in TEI, 1958, 23: 64 (where he is wrongly referred to as Ma Yuan’s younger brother); see further below for more information; no dates indicated.

28 Apart from helping each other out, Huang also recounts of travelling to scenic spots with Jidao, such as in the “Record of Travelling Upstream to the Stalagmites” (“Shi xun shang xing ji” 石筍上行記, in LIU et al., 2001: 2325). The name Jidao 濟道 also appears in the *Siku Quanshu*, where Jidao’s title is noted as *hou guanren* 候官人 (Observer of Government Officials) in Fujian province. He passed his *jinshi* 進士 exam in 1067 (the same year as Huang Tingjian), and was appointed the title of *sanlang* 散郎 (Standby Gentleman) in Huangzhou 黃州 (CHANG et al., 1984: 524; and SIKU QUANSHU, 1987, 484: 360).

continues by mentioning that this calligraphic scroll was done at the request of his younger brother Huang Shuxiang, here referred to as Sizhi 嗣直 (line 24, ill. 1; exact dates unknown), who appears to have requested it for Shi Zhu Jidao.<sup>29</sup> Judging from the number of poems dedicated to his brothers, it appears that Huang Tingjian was quite close to all of them. This was also the case for Huang Shuxiang, who was interested in calligraphy and occasionally accompanied Huang to view calligraphy, or watched him making inscriptions. There is evidence that shortly before the creation of the work discussed here, Shuxiang often spent time with Huang Tingjian. Two months before Huang transcribed *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves*, his younger brother Shuxiang accompanied him when Huang Tingjian made an inscription for a temple in Kuizhou. In the same month, Shuxiang and others also accompanied Huang Tingjian to view old cave inscriptions.<sup>30</sup>

Further on in the colophon, Huang mentions that he is no longer in good health:

會予新病癰瘍不可多作勞。

It so happened that I was again ill, with abscesses and ulcers, and could not do much [writing any more] (lines 26–28, ill. 1).

and, in his signature:

山谷老人病起須髮盡白。

*Shangu laoren*, arising from illness with my hair and beard completely white (lines 44 – 46/ill. 1).

29 While being a close friend of the family, it may have appeared impolite for Jidao to ask Huang directly, hence the request via Huang's brother Shuxiang (Prof. Wang Tzi-Ch'eng, Taipei National Central University, personal communication).

30 Cf. also "Ti Guling si bi" 題固陵寺壁 (Inscribing a Wall at Guling Temple; LIU et al., 2001: 1599), and "Sanyou dong ti ming" 三游洞題名 (Inscribing Sanyou Cave; LIU et al., 2001: 2325), for the visit to the caves. Regarding the two brothers' relationship, see e.g. the set of ten poems dedicated to his brother Shuxiang and entitled "Zeng Sizhi di song shi shou" 贈嗣直弟頌十首 (Ten Poems Dedicated to my Brother Sizhi; LIU et al., 2001: 596–598). In the prologue, Huang points out the amicable atmosphere between him and his brother while discussing the essence of the ancients; Huang notes that while many people may have brothers, only few of them are able to share a happiness similar to an immortal. In another text, a colophon on a calligraphy by Su Shi, Huang notes that his brother Shuxiang was present when viewing Su's characters. See "Ba Dongpo zi hou" 跋東坡字後 (Colophon Following Dongpo's Words; LIU et al., 2001: 771–772).

This is reminiscent of his *Scroll Dedicated to My Nephew Zhang Datong* (*Zeng sheng Zhang Datong juan* 贈甥張大同卷), that was written the previous year, and in which he also tells of stomach and chest pains; notice the similarity of the script, for example in the characters *lai* 來 and *qi* 乞 in both scrolls (line 25, ill. 1; line 5, ill. 2). Huang also continues in both scrolls to write about his bad health, right after he mentions that someone asked him for a piece of calligraphy. Despite the passing of Huang's immediate illness, by the time the present work was written, his health still does not appear to be good.



Illustration 2: Huang Tingjian. *Scroll for Zhang Datong*. Dated 1100. Initial section of handscroll, ink on paper (full size: 34.1 x 552.9 cm; colophons: 34.8 x 303.3 cm). Princeton Art Museum. Gift of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951. Photo by Bruce M. White.

The running script style of the *Scroll Dedicated to My Nephew Zhang Datong* (ill. 2) and of the present work appear however to be very similar in their calligraphic style, and the present work seems to be imbued with the same strength and vigour. This is also reflected in Fu Shen's thesis focusing on the *Scroll Dedicated to My Nephew Zhang Datong*, where he has demonstrated the similarities of the characters in these two works with an extensive analytic comparison of technical details.<sup>31</sup> Huang himself appeared pleased with his achievement in *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves*; after the note regarding his health, he remarks with great self-confidence that:

若持到淮南，見予故舊可示之，何如元祐中黃魯直書也。

If I returned to Huainan to see my old friends and could show it to them, it would be far superior to [my running script style] in the middle of the Yuanyou era. (ill. 1, lines 33–38)

31 Fu, 1976: 142–149.

The Yuanyou era (i.e. 1086–1094) to which Huang is referring was about ten years in the past by this time. During that period, his friend Wang Gong 王鞏 (1048– after 1102, *zi* Dingguo 定國) had criticized Huang's running script.<sup>32</sup> By including this statement in his colophon, Huang Tingjian acknowledged that Wang Gong had been right about the shortcomings of his running script back in the Yuanyou era, while at the same time Huang also affirms his satisfaction with his own progress.<sup>33</sup> Feeling at ease with his style by the time he wrote the present work, Huang also mentioned that now there was 'brush' in his characters, similar to the 'eyes' found in a Chan adept's verses. As Günther Debon pointed out, the concept of "eyes in the verses" derives from Chan Buddhism and is a metaphor for that which lies beyond words. Huang Tingjian himself repeatedly emphasised that "in the characters there has to be 'brush' as in the sentences of Chan there have to be eyes" (字中有筆, 如禪家句中有眼).<sup>34</sup>

### 3.3 Presence and Absence in Huang's Calligraphy Style

In the following section, I will start by noting several calligraphic features and how they relate to the notion of emptiness, before proceeding to other issues. As an in-depth stylistic analysis of Huang's style in *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves*, and how it compares to the *Scroll Dedicated to My Nephew Zhang Datong*, has been undertaken by Fu Shen, I will limit myself here to pointing out certain crucial elements to illustrate the role of emptiness and substance in Huang's calligraphy on a technical level, and refer the reader to Fu Shen's thesis for further details and examples concerning stylistic issues.

Many of the characters in this scroll are especially large, sometimes in combination with fairly small ones (e.g. 路 and 上 in line 4, 辭 and 石 in line 14).<sup>35</sup> As Fu Shen has noted, compared to the *Scroll for Zhang Datong*, this later work reveals a more pronounced 'sparse and dense' distribution of brush energy and tone of ink, and a tighter internal structure. Due to an increased contrast between thick and thin strokes, the overall appearance of characters appears taller

32 See CHANG et al., 1980: 212–213, for biographical background.

33 Huang's acknowledgement of drawbacks in his earlier running script is also included in his own "Self-Criticism of My [Calligraphy] During the Yuanyou-Era", where he agrees with Wang Gong's criticism regarding his earlier running script calligraphy ("Ziping Yuanyou jian zi" 自評元祐間字; LIU et al., 2001: 677).

34 LIU et al., 2001: 677; see also DEBON, 1978: 84.

35 Line numbers in this chapter all refer to illustration 1.

and more slender.<sup>36</sup> The size of the characters is uneven, as is the number of characters per line. There are however never more than five characters per line, most of which slant slightly to the left, imbuing the work with a monumental feeling. Despite the apparent irregularity, Cai Chongming draws attention to the overall coherence, stating that the composition is of a firm and steady nature beyond comparison. He continues by pointing out what can be considered as an important element regarding the composition's coherence and its relationship to emptiness, namely the fact that most of the characters in each line are almost joined into one entity.<sup>37</sup> See for example the opening line of the poem (蒙蒙篔竹, line 3) describing the luxuriant bamboo grove, or line 15 (筋力盡炎). Such elements are an essential part of the strong overall structure of Huang's calligraphy. As Cai Chongming notes, the composition, or its balance between ink and emptiness, appears harmonious, without any misplaced strokes. The level of achievement reflected therein is corroborated by Fu Shen's statement that the quality of achievement in this work ranks among the finest of Huang Tingjian's original works. Fu ranks the scroll discussed here together with two other works of the same script style that he also refers to as being of exceptionally high quality. These include Huang's *Colophon to Su Shi's Poems Written at Huangzhou on the Cold Food Festival* (*Ba Dongpo hanshi shi tie juan* 跋東坡寒食詩帖卷) and the *Poem of the Pine Wind Pavilion* (*Song feng ge shi* 松風閣詩).<sup>38</sup>

How does the interplay between strokes and emptiness described above manifest itself in this work? A closer look at a few technical aspects is intended to shed some more light on this question, and will provide an insight into one of the elements of complementary bipolarity which Plaks refers to as making up the "illusion of plenitude", or the perception of reality – in this case, the reality of the calligraphy's aesthetic qualities in ink on paper.<sup>39</sup>

One aspect of the use of empty space is found in the constant alternation of the brush strokes, which is, for example, visible in the way Huang Tingjian sometimes interrupts strokes (壺 in line 4, 余 in line 35),<sup>40</sup> or just charges the brush with less ink (東 in line 10 and 書 in line 25). A somewhat different example is the water radical in characters such as 漢 (line 5), 溪 (line 7) and 濟

36 FU, 1976: 152.

37 CAI, 1984: 134.

38 CAI, 1984: 134, and FU, 1976: 139 (calligraphy not illustrated here).

39 Other elements making up the perception of reality in a work such as this one are, e.g., its tonal qualities, and the contents in the form of references to historical and political events.

40 Interrupted horizontals such as encountered in the character *hu* 壺 are referred to as 'crane's neck' (*hejingheng* 鶴頸橫, so called in a colophon to the *Scroll for Zhang Datong*).

(lines 19 and 23). Throughout the entire scroll, the third stroke has not been drawn out once, and was instead executed in the shape of a dot (*dian* 點).<sup>41</sup> This results in characters having an almost 'implosive' quality due to the contraction of certain strokes. Further examples of characters with this 'implosive' quality are certain unusually small characters such as 竹 (line 3), 上 (line 4) and 示 (line 36). In the case of 竹 for example, one realises that when contemplated on its own, there seems to be an unusually large amount of empty space between the left and right part of the character, yet it is given coherence by the composition as a whole. One more example illustrating Huang's method of penning up energy in his characters can be mentioned, namely what Fu Shen refers to as 'wavering diagonals with restrained tips'.<sup>42</sup> In this case, instead of steadily lifting and releasing the pressure and thus forming a finished stroke, Huang stops the energy abruptly. This is manifested in characters such as 來 (line 25) and 谷 (line 44), thus providing a further example of how Huang managed to capture energy in empty space.

Understanding the notion of 'seizing and releasing' (*qinzong* 禽縱) is crucial to the understanding of Huang Tingjian's style. Some examples of 'seizing' (*qin* 禽, related to the hidden brush tip) in *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves*, i.e. the calligrapher's inward holding of energy, have been described above. The outward release of energy (*zong* 縱, related to the exposed brush tip), on the other hand, is visible for example in the "release strokes with elongated diagonals",<sup>43</sup> which is a feature illustrated in characters such as 人 (line 8), 少 (line 18), and 沙 (line 41). The release feature is also visible in Huang's elongated vertical strokes (*chang shu* 長豎), such as in the characters 師 (line 19), 婦 (line 21), and 都 (line 32). These examples of vertical and diagonal strokes also illustrate an often encountered feature in Huang's calligraphy, namely so-called split-hair tips (*san hao chu feng* 散毫出鋒). The term refers to the fact that the brush hair is not merged together enough at the end of a stroke to give it a finished and crisp shape, thus the stroke ends reveal a certain amount of paper beneath (resulting in the 'flying white', or *feibai* 飛白, effect).<sup>44</sup> In the Song dynasty, such features were the result of deliberate artistic choices on the part of the artist, and instead of 'defects' (which they would have been regarded

41 On Huang's treatment of dots in his calligraphy and the resulting three-dimensional effect, see also FU, 1976: 145, who provides many more examples of Huang's treatment of dots in this work.

42 *Yi bo san zhe cang feng na* 一波三折藏鋒捺 (FU, 1976: 144).

43 *Pie na* 撇捺 (FU, 1976: 142).

44 FU, 1976: 147.

as according to Tang-dynasty standards), they are here accepted as an integral part of a Song artist's style. Also, the present work confirms that, despite Huang's preference for the 'hidden tip' brush method, he was conscious of the need to balance this technique with exposed tip movements, thus obtaining a well-balanced overall image.

In addition to the spontaneous change in characters' sizes, Fu Shen has also mentioned 'shifts in the axis of characters in a column' as an element which contributed to getting brush strokes, characters, and columns to relate to each other in a spatially dynamic way.<sup>45</sup> In the present work, this is evident in several lines, such as the axes in lines 4 and 7, where the centre parts appear bent slightly to the right, whereas the middle part of the axis in line 41 for example bends slightly to the left. The combination of all these factors lead to what Fu Shen calls an internal structure governed by a principle of asymmetrical balance, expressed here and in other works by Huang through characteristics such as the avoidance of parallels, elongated diagonals, verticals and horizontals.<sup>46</sup>

In the present example, it also appears important to draw attention to the role of the 'hidden brush tip' (*cang feng* 藏鋒) in relation to the asymmetrical balance typical of Huang's works. On a technical level, this refers to the fact that the stored tip should not be over-manifested at the surface, since it is the root in which is stored the calligrapher's force. See for example the characters 神 (line 2), 竹 (line 3), 余 (line 20), 示 (line 36), and 髮 (line 45), which illustrate the solidity of Huang's bone structure.

As is also evident in this work, the 'centre brush' (*zhongfeng* 中鋒) is of elementary importance to calligraphy, as it is the tip of the brush that produces the greatest linear effect. The bone structure of a calligraphy is mirrored in the quality of a line, which in turn manifests itself mainly through centre brush work. This is evident in the fact that brush strokes with smooth, round, three-dimensional forms, have been crucial in Chinese calligraphy criticism since early times.<sup>47</sup> By creating a strong basis for each character through a solid bone structure, the whole work is in turn imbued with a solid frame. The ink forming the 'flesh' (*rou* 肉) is linked to this structure by the all-pervading 'sinew' (*jin* 筋), which connects the strokes, even if they are physically separate. In Plaks's words, there is presence in absence.

45 FU, 1976: 106.

46 FU, 1976: 106.

47 FONG, 1992: 260.

Despite all its idiosyncrasies, Huang's work here appears to have a strong bone structure, which may in part also account for the energy conveyed to the viewer.<sup>48</sup> In characters such as 竹 and 示 mentioned above, the tension between the empty space and the strokes is especially visible.

One of Huang Tingjian's favourite phrases to describe calligraphy, 'swift and free of concentration' (*chenzhuo tongkuai* 沈著痛快), also appears well reflected in the present work.<sup>49</sup> Huang himself had described it as a channel for his own writing after changing his style in 1098 when he stayed in Rongzhou 戎州 (today Xuzhou 叙州 / Yibin 宜賓, Sichuan province), which would prove to be his most productive trip in perfecting his style. During that trip, Huang carefully observed the rhythmic movements of boatmen pulling oars and hawsers. He noticed that the oars were placed into the water with great care, whereas when they re-emerged, they did so with utmost speed, which is seen as an analogy to describe handling the brush 'swift and free of concentration'.<sup>50</sup> By the time he wrote *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves*, he had overcome the technical shortcomings of his earlier script.

Cai Chongming also mentions several of these characteristics, which make up Huang's highly individual style.<sup>51</sup> In addition, it is important to draw attention to certain other consequences of these features. Constant alternations in brush work such as those described above are, on the one hand, a visual manifestation of emptiness, such as not-showing certain elements of characters or contracting them, but it appears that such features also manage to enhance what Huang Tingjian calls 'brush force', or 'eyes in the verses'. The combination of technical features such as short but dense lines, characters with 'implosive' characteristics, and contracting or interrupted brush lines, appear to be crucial elements in order to take advantage of the physical qualities of emptiness. In Huang Tingjian's work, this is combined with what Fu Shen identified as four distinctive features of Huang's brush method in examining certain works attributed to Huang Tingjian:<sup>52</sup> long upward hooks (鬮, line 6, and 見, line 34), the running radical (遺, line 9, and 道, line 20), wavy diagonal strokes (人, lines 8 and 44, 丈, line 1, and 少, line 18), and elongated, wavy vertical strokes (鄉, line 13, and 都, line 32). All of these formed part of Huang's highly individual style.

48 KUO, 1990: 141, explains how the hidden tip appears to build up tension between the ends of a stroke, which may be sensed by the viewer.

49 DEBON, 1978: 53, 82.

50 See DEBON, 1978: 54.

51 CAI, 1984: 134.

52 FU, 1976: 110.

Within this style and its visual aesthetics, one can also make out all of the key elements mentioned by Plaks: there is a relative presence or absence of opposites in the handling of the brush strokes ('complementary bipolarity'), which in turn consists of a pairing of various states determining the bipolar form through ceaseless alternation that manifests itself in elements such as large and small characters, the asymmetrical balance within the composition, etc. For example, Huang carefully balances emptiness and fullness (i.e., the empty paper and the shape of the strokes), which in Plaks's words may be described as the 'presence within absence'. As far as the visual aesthetics of Huang's style are concerned, all of these elements, or the 'axes of alternation in the world of experience', then make up, through infinite overlapping, what Plaks refers to as the perception of reality.

Jiang Tiangeng 蔣天耕 has demonstrated that the calligrapher's knowledge of how to create movement in calligraphic lines is of great importance in order to create good works of calligraphy. As Jiang argues, a bent brush stroke (as opposed to a straight one) may be regarded as appearing animated by two colliding empty spaces, which is why he also refers to the art of calligraphy as the 'art of separating empty space'.<sup>53</sup> Because calligraphy by its very nature is a fairly unrestricted art form, it leaves the artist a considerable amount of creative space in his task of creating areas of emptiness.

Huang's stylistic features illustrated in these examples confirm Jiang Tiangeng's basic idea of how empty space may be animated. Notably Huang Tingjian's mastery of balancing the elements of 'seizing and releasing' underlines this point. As demonstrated, there is a balance between thick and thin elements, large and small characters, slanting and counter-slanting characters and lines, etc. In addition to Huang's technical mastery of style, however, one must add that these are not mere formal features, but rather the result of what Fu Shen terms "the convergence of several complex factors which can never be repeated",<sup>54</sup> and which may be described as having been created through what Plaks calls the 'infinite overlapping' of elements. Fu also draws attention to the fact that *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves* is one of Huang Tingjian's most famous and monumental works, as it illustrates his full spiritual and intellectual powers. By this time, calligraphy had become the perfect means

53 JIANG, 1992, 2: 1–20.

54 FU, 1976: 146.

for Huang to express himself, and his style would not change any further during his lifetime.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.4 *Presence and Absence in Context: The Contents*

The visual features of Huang's calligraphy in the present scroll have now largely been accounted for, which leaves certain other questions open, such as how the calligraphy relates to the text, and how Huang's own background relates to the contents. These features, too, are important elements making up the work of art as a whole. Before attempting to obtain an insight into these matters, however, I would first like to briefly explore Huang Tingjian's attitude towards the Tang poet Liu Yuxi. As the poem transcribed here was not created by Huang himself, it is important to not only consider how its contents relate to Huang, but whether there may have been any particular reason for Huang to choose the work of this particular Tang Dynasty poet.

There are no more than a dozen references to Liu Yuxi in Huang Tingjian's collected works. Yet when Huang does comment on Liu Yuxi's works, the remarks are positive throughout, for example in two colophons on the *Bamboo Branch Songs*,<sup>56</sup> or in his notes on *Five [Poems on Jinling]* by Liu Yuxi.<sup>57</sup> On another famous poem by Liu, *Willow Branches*, Huang inscribed a colophon onto a paper fan, stating that Liu Yuxi was outstanding in the *yuefu* 樂府 (music bureau) genre.<sup>58</sup>

Liu Yuxi was very much a purist in his compositions, which is very similar to Huang's attitude. Furthermore, both of them were influenced by Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770, *zi* Zimei 子美), who was a patron saint for Song literati such as

55 Fu, 1976: 252.

56 “Ba Liu Mengde zhuzhige” 跋劉夢得竹枝歌 and “Ba zhuzhige” 跋竹枝歌 (LIU et al., 2001: 657, 1633). For a short biography on Liu Yuxi, see LIN, 1998: 1361; for a comprehensive introduction to Liu Yuxi's life and poetry, see also LIU, 2002: 562–564.

57 As contained in Huang's “Ba Liu Mengde wuti” 跋劉夢得五題 (LIU et al., 2001: 2296). Jinling was the capital of the Southern Dynasties (319–589) and an aristocratic centre, on which Liu Yuxi has written other famous poems (see MINFORD and LAU, 2000: 862).

58 “Ba liuzhici shu zhi shan” 跋柳枝詞書紙扇; LIU et al., 2001: 1633. For a translation of *Willow Branches*, see FRANKEL, 1976: 97–98. *Yuefu*, literally ‘bureau of music’, refers to a body of poems whose style originated under the Wu-Emperor of the Han dynasty (r. 140–87 BC) (IDEMA / HAFT, 1996: 117–118).

Huang.<sup>59</sup> This is reflected in the famous first poem which Huang sent to Su Shi, where the commentary quotes Huang Tingjian's father-in-law Sun Jue 孫覺 (1028–1090, *hao Shenlao* 莘老),<sup>60</sup> saying that

[...] 老杜詩無兩字無來歷, 劉夢得論詩亦言無來歷字前輩.

In Old Du's [i.e. Du Fu's] poetry, there are no two characters, which can not be accounted for through a literary origin; when Liu Mengde [i.e. Liu Yuxi] discussed poetry, he also claimed that [in Du Fu's poetry], there was not one character unaccounted for in history.<sup>61</sup>

The notion of expressing similar meaning in different words was to become a hallmark of Huang's poetic style. Interestingly enough, two verses adapted also from a Liu Yuxi poem and included in Huang's own were used by the Southern Song critic Ge Lifang 葛立方 (d. 1164, *zi Changzhi* 常之) to illustrate exactly this method of 'changing the bone' (*huan gu* 換骨), i.e. using and refining the meaning of the ancients.<sup>62</sup> The scope of this paper does not leave room to pursue Huang's poetic theories in depth, these being the topic of Adele Rickett's detailed study.<sup>63</sup>

The facts described above give the impression that Huang Tingjian was well-acquainted, even influenced to a certain degree, by Liu Yuxi's writings. Some of them he clearly praised in his extant writings. As has been noted before, Huang Tingjian himself was profoundly well-educated and well-read, which makes it feasible to assume that he may also have been familiar with Liu Yuxi's views regarding Chan Buddhism and poetry.<sup>64</sup> As discussed earlier in this paper, the link to Chan Buddhism was a very common feature in Northern Song poetry criticism. Liu Yuxi was one of the Tang poets deeply interested in Chan; as he notes in the preface to a poem:

59 Regarding Huang's admiration of Du Fu and his meticulous approach to writing, see RICKETT, 1978: 103ff.

60 On Sun Jue, see LI, 1978: 344.10925.

61 See the poem in YANG, 1960: 1; and BIEG, 1975: 213, who makes this point in his analysis of Huang Tingjian's *Two Ancient-Style Poems Dedicated to Su Zizhan*.

62 Biography of Ge Lifang in CHANG et al., 1980: 3265–3266.

63 GE, 1935–1937. The citation mentioned refers to the last two lines in Huang's "Yu zhong deng Yueyang lou wang Junshan er shou" 雨中登岳陽樓望君山二首 (Two Poems on Ascending Yueyang Tower in the Rain, Gazing at Jun Mountain; LIU et al., 2001: 174). For a detailed account of the term *huan gu*, see RICKETT, 1978: 97–119.

64 On Chan Buddhism and poetry in the Northern Song, see LYNN, 1987: 384–393. The fact that Huang was even familiar with almost unknown Tang poets and quoted them in his own poetry underlines this assumption (cf. BIEG, 1975: 191).

能離欲，則方寸地虛，虛而萬象入，入必有所池，乃形乎詞。[...] 因定而得境，故倏然以情，由慧而遣辭，故粹然以麗。信禪林之葩萼，戒河之珠璣耳。

[...] Only when one is able to quit desires will his mind become empty (Sanskrit: *sunyata*), and when it is empty, the myriad forms of phenomenal reality will enter it. When they enter it, there is sure to be something that will break out, and it is this which consequently will take form in verbal expression. [...] Through a composed mind [*samadhi*], one achieves a mental realm [*visaya*], which consequently reaches a purity through a soaring freedom and which, in accordance with wisdom [*prajna*], charges words with meaning. Therefore such a one attains beauty through the essence of art. Believe in the flowers that bloom in the forest of Chan, and shun the pearl and jade that might be fished up out the river.<sup>65</sup>

As Lynn notes, Liu Yuxi's great admiration for Chan poetry ascribes its marvelousness to an enlightened state of mind, where perception and verbal articulation attain a perfect and natural spontaneity.<sup>66</sup> As has been demonstrated by Lin Xianghua 林湘華, this kind of naturalness in conjunction with concepts of Chan Buddhism, also appears as an important concept in Huang Tingjian's poetry, where it is coupled with the art of managing to attain the 'flavour beyond the flavour'.<sup>67</sup> The origin of this concept has been attributed to the Tang poet and critic Sikong Tu 司空圖 (837–908, *zi* Biaosheng 表聖), who argued that poetry reflected the poet's grasp of the *dao*. In this context, Bernard Faure mentions Huang's mentor Su Shi, who is said to have taken over Sikong's theory.<sup>68</sup> Faure also mentions Su Shi as having provided a justification for poetry which lies in the fact that it is an expression of that which in man transcends the limitations of the human condition, i.e. the irrepressible spontaneity that bears witness to the wonderful workings of nature (the *dao*, or, in Buddhist terminology, The Buddha nature) within man. It is this naturalness, which is the underlying principle of both Chan and poetry, and which becomes the hallmark for the true and poetically gifted practitioner.<sup>69</sup> In this sense, one may argue that Huang's own poetic genius and its unique flavour is mirrored in his highly idiosyncratic calligraphic style which, as pointed out earlier, was a convergence of many complex

65 “Qiu ri guo Hongju fashi siyuan bian song gui Jiangling” 秋日過鴻舉法師寺院便送歸江陵, QUAN TANG SHI, 1960, 11: 4015–4016; translation from LYNN, 1987: 384.

66 LYNN, 1987: 384.

67 As Lin notes, simplicity and unpretentiousness were integral parts of this concept (LIN, 2002: 258).

68 On Sikong Tu, see WANG, 2006; on Su Shi and Chan Buddhism, see FAURE, 1993: 207ff.

69 FAURE, 1993: 206.

factors that could not possibly be repeated or copied by later generations. This is a feature which Lin Xianghua also confirms regarding Huang's poetry.<sup>70</sup>

Returning to the contents of Liu Yuxi's poem transcribed by Huang, the ephemeral nature of things clearly appears to be a central theme. Huang Tingjian may have taken this into account when choosing the text, as he was already in his later years and, as described above, also in relatively bad health in 1101. In addition to his physical condition, however, it appears reasonable to assume that Huang chose the poem because of its historical connotations, as it was not only a link to the distant Han dynasty, but via its poet also to the Tang dynasty. The poem's style, i.e. verses with four lines and seven characters to each line, also forms a reference to Huang's most admired poet, as it uses original but changed lines from a Du Fu poem, and adheres to the same verse pattern.<sup>71</sup>

An important clue as to what Huang thought about General Ma Yuan's character is contained in the first of a set of poems written by Huang not long after he transcribed Liu Yuxi's *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves*. These lines could also provide a clearer picture of Huang Tingjian's own attitude during his last years. The reference to General Ma Yuan is contained in a set of ten poems entitled *Rising from My Sickbed at Jing River Pavilion: Impromptu*, written at the beginning of autumn, 1101.<sup>72</sup> It was thus written only shortly after the death of Su Shi, Huang's friend and mentor of many years, who passed away at the end of summer.

In these poems, Huang deals with several issues, such as his views regarding matters of state at the imperial court, as well as friends who have either been banished or had already died.<sup>73</sup> The previously untranslated first poem reads as follows:

- 翰墨場中老伏波，  
 1 In the realm of literary pursuits, [there is the general] calming the waves;  
 菩提坊裡病維摩。  
 2 In the [realm] of enlightenment, sick [Vimalakīrti subsides].  
 近人積水無鷗鷺，  
 3 Approaching people's [dwellings, there is] accumulated water, yet no seagulls and egrets;

70 LIN, 2002: 258.

71 See CHEN, 1980: 206; Chen also gives an example in his commentary of Huang's creative imitation of ancient poetic lines (referred to as "turning iron into gold", or *dian tie cheng jin* 點鐵成金).

72 "Bing qi Jingjiang ting jishi shi shou" 病起荆江亭即事十首; LIU et al., 2001: 225–228; YANG, 1960: 153–155.

73 CHEN, 1980: 206.

時有歸牛浮鼻過。

- 4 From time to time, a water buffalo returns crossing the field, the water reaching its nostrils.

The contents of the first two lines varies in as far as the first line mentions a real historical figure (General Ma Yuan), while the second one mentions Vimalakīrti, who may have had a historical prototype, yet is himself clearly not a historical figure.<sup>74</sup> Before however attempting to clarify why Huang Tingjian mentions a Buddhist figure here, I would like to further examine Huang's mention of the Han general Ma Yuan in the first line. By first exploring this line in more detail, it is hoped that not only Huang's attitude towards Ma Yuan, but also the rest of the poem will become clearer.

In his commentary to the first line, the contemporary scholar Chen Yongzheng 陳永正 explains that until his last years, Ma Yuan fought on behalf of his Emperor; despite his advanced age, and the general's willpower remained steady throughout.<sup>75</sup> When transcribing *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves*, Huang Tingjian himself was already at an advanced age. Close friends, such as Su Shi, were either dying or were banished to remote places. Under such circumstances, it appears only natural that Huang would ruminate on the persistent nature of a figure such as General Ma Yuan. Even though Ma Yuan had died hundreds of years ago, he survived in the "realm of literary pursuits" (line 1) as a noble and upright character, which appears to be the reason why Huang mentions him here.

We are however also reminded of the last line of *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves* transcribed by Huang, where General Ma Yuan's cousin Ma Shaoyou is mentioned. At the beginning of this paper, I mentioned the 'counter-weight' this line forms in relation to the rest of the poem, i.e. putting in perspective the merits of fame and merit vis-à-vis the torments of war. Interestingly, it has not been pointed out in any commentary so far discovered that general Ma Yuan himself was well aware of his cousin Ma Shaoyou's views regarding the nature of life on the battle field. The *History of the Later Han* mentions that after General Ma Yuan had quelled the uprising for which he was honoured with the title "Commander of calming the waves", he was ennobled as marquis and enfeoffed with land.<sup>76</sup> Upon this occasion, Ma Yuan arranged a banquet for his troops, at which he told a gathering of government officials that his cousin Ma Shaoyou often sighed at the fact that Ma Yuan was an ardent

74 NAGAO, 1993: 155.

75 CHEN, 1980: 206.

76 See FAN, 1973, 3: 24.838.

character and of strong will. Ma Shaoyou's view was that during the course of one's life, it should suffice to have the basic things such as clothes and food, cultivating one's fields, holding a minor official post, and taking care of one's ancestors graves. Thus being of humble nature but respected in one's home place would be enough for a fulfilled life – pursuing too many things only meant eventual personal hardship. Having told this to the officials, Ma Yuan carried on saying that once he found himself in the midst of a battle field, surrounded by the fog of battle and pestilential vapour, he remembered Ma Shaoyou's words, yet wondered how would he be able to implement them. The general continued that despite having been bestowed with honours such as imperial seals with purple silk ribbons, he felt happy and ashamed at the same time.<sup>77</sup>

From this account, it appears that despite knowing better, General Ma Yuan had no way of escaping his fate, and so he eventually died in battle. By analogy, it seems reasonable to assume that Huang Tingjian may have been pondering similar questions, particularly with regard to the fact that his own friends were dying, and he himself was in bad health. Huang Tingjian never complained about his fate, despite the fact that continuous banishment and illness took their toll. In the second and following lines of the poem, paralleling the first one, Huang offers a more positive view:

In the [realm] of enlightenment, sick [Vimalakīrti subsides].

This line provides a glimpse into Huang's knowledge of Buddhist matters, and is of great importance regarding the notion of emptiness. The influence of Buddhist doctrines, and particularly of Chan Buddhism, on Huang Tingjian's calligraphy and thought, have also been illustrated by Tian Guanglie 田光烈 who argued that in order to thoroughly understand Huang's calligraphy, one must also be aware of this aspect.<sup>78</sup>

Huang Tingjian's line alludes to a central part of the so-called *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* (Chin. *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經, i.e. the Sutra Expounded by Vimalakīrti), which dates from before the 2nd century AD.<sup>79</sup> Unique characteristics of this sutra include its consisting principally of the eloquent discussions and wise remarks of Vimalakīrti, which won the approval of Buddha, and have been written down in a skilful dramatic technique. The sutra also explains and clari-

77 FAN, 1973, 3: 24.838.

78 TIAN, 1993: 318ff.

79 For a complete translation into English, see LU, 1972.

fies in depth the (Buddhist) notion of 'emptiness' (Sanskrit: *sunyata*), i.e. it can be argued that the entire sutra is therefore permeated by *sunyata*.

In order to better understand the second line in Huang's poem and its relation to emptiness, the account of Vimalakīrti to which Huang is alluding should briefly be summarised. Vimalakīrti, a legendary figure, was of profound knowledge and had a sharp-witted personality, which are traits that in themselves are seen as the embodiment of *sunyata* or emptiness.<sup>80</sup> The Bodhisattva Manjusri's (Chin. Wenshu 文殊) characterisation of him sums it up well:

Vimalakīrti is a person hard to deal with, subtle in reasoning and eloquent in speech, master of paradox and of rigorous logic.<sup>81</sup>

The illness from which Vimalakīrti suffered was not physical, but he was sick "because sentient beings are sick", thus it is described as the illness of a Bodhisattva, the illness of a compassionate being.<sup>82</sup> The Buddha Sākyamuni, who was staying in the same suburb (called Vasali) as was Vimalakīrti, eventually got the Bodhisattva Manjusri to visit Vimalakīrti and enquire after his health on his behalf.<sup>83</sup> When Manjusri visited, both of them knew that Vimalakīrti was not really ill, yet the significance of inquiring after illness and the real nature of illness were discussed. Many more issues were talked about, among them the baselessness of life.

In chapter eight of the sutra, nonduality is elucidated. This concept the Bodhisattva Manjusri explained perfectly, pointing out that nonduality lies in the exclusion of all words, not expressing anything, and not designating anything. Yet Vimalakīrti remained perfectly silent; for when the ultimate truth is experienced, it can only be represented by silence, as it surpasses all verbal expression.<sup>84</sup> This concept in itself is an entirely different one from Plaks's concept of bipolar pairs mentioned above, as it eliminates the very notion of polarities in the first place. As the ultimate (Buddhist) truth can only be expressed by silence,

80 For a detailed account on Vimalakīrti, see the translation of the sutra's second chapter in LU, 1972: 15–19.

81 NAGAO, 1993: 156.

82 NAGAO, 1993: 155–156.

83 Translation of the original section in LU, 1972: 49ff.

84 Possibly because Chinese translators knew their *Zhuangzi*, this is remarkably similar to a line from the Daoist work of *Zhuangzi*: "Emptiness, stillness, limpidity, silence, and inaction are the root of all things [...]" (夫虛靜恬淡寂寞無為者，萬物之本也。 [...]); see CHEN, 1983: 337).

it is beyond verbal reasoning, i.e., it cannot be reduced to verbal logic involving bipolar concepts, a characteristic which at the same time also illustrates the limits of spoken and written language.<sup>85</sup>

As Nagao Gajin points out, the keynote of this sutra is to be found in *sunyata*, which is linked to notions such as inconceivability, inexpressibility, non-duality and complete equality.<sup>86</sup> As Vimalakīrti's sickroom is of small size (only about ten square meters), the idea of emptiness was already suggested when he emptied his room to receive his guests. The number of chairs he provided and the thousands of people he received are miracles only possible in the realm of *sunyata*. This is because *sunyata* is radical nothingness, or emptiness, the realm of which denies all worldly things. On the other hand, it is exactly this nothingness that provides the true foundation for the existence of anything whatever. It is only through Vimalakīrti's silence, which is equated to *sunyata* or emptiness, that his sharp-witted talk and thus the exposition of the *dharma* (i.e. the ultimate truth as taught by Buddha) becomes possible. Because the realisation of *sunyata* means realisation of this nothingness, it stands simultaneously for the realisation of everythingness, thus it is negation and affirmation at the same time.<sup>87</sup>

As mentioned above, the doctrine of emptiness had become the mainstream form of the Buddhist faith in the capital under the Northern Song Emperor Zhenzong (1076–1100)<sup>88</sup>. Huang's knowledge of Buddhism, and his inclusion of Vimalakīrti in the poem discussed here, illustrates his awareness and his intention to include the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* in his own work. Yet how does it relate to the rest of the poem *Rising from my Sickbed at Jing River Pavilion*?

While in the first half of this poem, Huang referred respectively to an important historical figure and a Buddhist figure, and thus established a complex historical and religious reference, the second part of the poem consists of an apparently simple description of the scenery around the Jing River Pavilion. In

85 Regarding this point, I am grateful for a detailed explanation by Martin Lehnert (personal communication, July 2009).

86 NAGAO, 1993: 157.

87 NAGAO, 1993: 157.

88 The term *sunyata* (Chinese *kongzong* 空宗) denotes the Buddhist notion of emptiness, i.e. the fundamental Buddhist conception of ultimate reality. As Albert Welter notes, the teaching of *sunyata* had gained popularity already under the Northern Song emperor Zhenzong 真宗 (r. 998–1022), and replaced *vinaya* teaching (which promoted strict adherence to the precepts of Buddhist communities) as the mainstream Buddhist faith in the capital (see WELTER, 1999: 26). On *sunyata*, see also GAJIN, 1993: 155; besides 'emptiness', *sunyata* is here also described as "the fundamental Buddhist conception of ultimate reality", or "the lack of any substantial being" (TAKEUCHI, 1993: 409).

line 3, Huang describes how upon approaching peoples' dwellings, all one sees is how water has accumulated everywhere, covering the landscape. No people are mentioned, and neither are there any birds such as seagulls and egrets, which is due to the fact that the water would retreat soon after the heavy rains.<sup>89</sup> Only a water buffalo occasionally appears in the fields, with the water reaching its nostrils (line 4). The second half of the poem consists of a vivid description of the natural setting. Even though its contents and words appear simple in relation to the preceding lines, it is exactly this quality which has led scholars such as the Song commentator Ren Yuan 任淵 (d. 1144) to express their admiration for Huang's humble, yet beautiful tone in these lines.<sup>90</sup>

Beyond individual notes concerning the contents of each line, the commentaries to this poem do not appear to explore in depth the overall meaning expressed by the first poem *per se*. One might, however, argue that the emptiness of Vimalakīrti's sickroom, and with it the concept of *sunyata* or emptiness, is metaphorically reflected in the emptiness of the landscape. Just as the Tang poet Liu Yuxi puts the notion of fame and merit in perspective by mentioning general Ma Yuan's younger cousin in the last line of his poem, so Huang Tingjian appears to contrast Ma Yuan's fame with the simplicity and beauty of life as described here. As pointed out above, in Buddhist philosophy, the revelation of the ultimate truth surpasses all verbal expression, and can therefore only be represented by silence. Huang Tingjian seems to apply a similar concept here, in that he does not elaborate after mentioning Ma Yuan and Vimalakīrti, but instead starkly contrasts these figures with a simple yet beautiful description of landscape.

A parallel for such a technique is found in the comprehensive work on Su Shi by Ronald Egan, where Egan points out Su's fondness for upsetting the normal understanding of size and spatial relation, pointing out that this technique is also evident in poetic metaphors that are less obviously 'spatial'. As an example for invalidation of spatial and temporal relations, Egan also quotes the episode of Vimalakīrti emptying his small sickroom in order to receive thousands of guests, while he confirms that Daoist sources such as the *Zhuangzi* provided an older and indigenously Chinese influence regarding the relativity of time and space.<sup>91</sup>

89 CHEN, 1980: 206.

90 YANG, 1960: 153; for further positive comments see CHEN, 1980: 206–207.

91 EGAN, 1993: 195–197.

### 3.5 Conclusion: The Perception of Reality in Huang Tingjian's Work

The content of the first poem in *Rising from My Sickbed at Jing River Pavilion: Impromptu*, demonstrates the complex degree to which Huang Tingjian's knowledge of various matters, such as historical and religious events, had accumulated by his later years, along with the skill to integrate this knowledge in poetry and calligraphy. Reaching the zenith of one's knowledge towards old age may appear normal, yet, as we have seen, Huang's artistic abilities also had not diminished.<sup>92</sup> The poem discussed here may elucidate Huang's attitude at that stage of his life, and how he managed to convey these feelings through his art.

It is also noteworthy that, despite Huang's many illnesses, the quality of his calligraphy, as encountered in *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves*, which he wrote only shortly before the poem discussed here, remains untrammelled and consistent. As Fu Shen notes, despite his illness in this period, Huang was unusually prolific, particularly in the writing of large-character works.<sup>93</sup> As pointed out earlier, not one poem exists where Huang laments his fate, which is a characteristic that can be attributed to a fundamentally positive view of life, even under the harshest of conditions.<sup>94</sup>

As Huang Tingjian had little regard for high positions and honours, composing poetry and practising calligraphy were enough to keep him fulfilled.<sup>95</sup> Such an attitude is very similar to that of Ma Shaoyou's, who thought equally of his cousin's, General Ma Yuan's, military achievements. Yet what Huang did have in common with the general, was that he excelled in his metier until the very end of his life.

Regarding the presence, or absence, of bipolar pairs in Huang Tingjian's work such as outlined by Andrew Plaks, it appears that certain elements making up the overall work, or "the scroll", may be seen as forming part of this concept,

92 Chen Yongzheng points out several commentaries praising Huang Tingjian's literary talent here (CHEN, 1980: 206–207). Besides the poem I have discussed here, other poems included in this set have generated what Jonathan Chaves calls "an extraordinary amount of commentary" (see CHAVES, 1982: 204).

93 FU, 1976: 61.

94 Fu Shen notes that despite the surprising number of references about his health in Huang Tingjian's writings, these comments were merely intended as reports, and not complaints. Huang had a strong equilibrium, and such reports were merely intended for the reader to be aware of all the circumstances (FU, 1976: 28).

95 FU, 1976: 20.

while others – often content-related, such as allusions to Chan Buddhism – defy categorization in this sense.

Polar pairs of sensory perception, such as light and dark and solid and empty, are most clearly reflected in the aesthetic qualities of Huang's calligraphy. The vivid nature of his brush strokes, involving varying degrees of balance between the emptiness of the white paper and the fullness of the ink, manages to create an overall balance in the viewer's eye. As demonstrated, key elements here consist of Huang's constant alternation of brush strokes, the penning up of the calligrapher's energy within contracted elements (the concealed brush tip being of prime importance here), and Huang's imposition of a principle of asymmetrical balance onto the composition's internal structure. The latter is achieved for example through shifts in the axes of characters in columns, getting brush strokes, individual characters and columns to relate to one another in a spatially dynamic manner that has been described by scholars as producing a harmonious overall balance.

Such constant alternations in brush work produced, on the one hand, a manifestation of physical emptiness – a deliberate artistic choice by Huang – while, on the other hand, Huang himself had pointed out the importance of a different kind of emptiness, such as in conjunction with Chan Buddhism when he mentioned “eyes in the verses” as a metaphor for that which lies beyond words or visual perception. The Song-dynasty scholar and publisher Ren Yuan, who was also the publisher of Huang Tingjian's *Inner Collection* (*Neiji* 内集), also proposed that the “eyes in the verses”, as used by Huang, allude to a meaning beyond words, i.e. a meaning that cannot be grasped in terms of Plaks's concept of dualism.<sup>96</sup> Just like Huang, the Tang poet Liu Yuxi was also deeply interested in Chan, and poetic works written by both men reflect a ‘flavour beyond the flavour’, involving a naturalness underlying both Chan and poetry, features that scholars such as Lin Xianghua and Bernhard Faure have attested to in their writings. To Huang Tingjian, naturalness of style both in poetry and calligraphy were crucial for good calligraphy. Paired with what his mentor Su Shi called ‘non-thought’, Huang saw ‘writing without intent’ as the very basis that made the expression of naturalness on paper possible in the first place.<sup>97</sup>

Whereas several of the physical qualities of Huang Tingjian's style in the scroll may be described as conceptual pairs (i.e. solid / empty, large / small, dark

96 Cf. Ren Yuan's comment in YANG, 1960: 171.

97 See JIN, 1992: 61.

/ light, etc.) which form a series of axes with different degrees of intensity that add up to a perception of reality, its contents – although of course part of this very physicality – reach into realms that largely appear to defy such categorizations. For example, Huang's choice of the text appears to reflect the importance he ascribed to the ephemeral nature of things, such as the passing of time and the pursuit of fame. Having selected Liu Yuxi's poem, whose style also forms a reference to his most admired poet Du Fu, Huang associated himself not only to two great masters from the Tang, but, through its content, also to an important historical figure of the Han dynasty.

As the ephemeral nature of things in *Passing the Shrine of the God Calming the Waves* is expressed through metaphors and allusions, one may argue that the central theme is expressed through 'not-saying', i.e. through another kind of emptiness manifested through the leaving out of words, a feature which is given expression to an even greater extent in Huang's first poem *Rising from Sickbed at Jing River Pavilion: Impromptu*. Drawing our attention to the concept of emptiness both in the content (i.e. *sunyata* or *kongzong*) and the style of poetry (here, contrasting fame and merit with a simple, rural life devoid of people), Huang provides an insight into his own ideas and why he may have decided to transcribe Liu Yuxi's poem in his calligraphy for Shi Zhu Jidao. Exactly how far such Buddhist concepts may have influenced his style of calligraphy is difficult to assess, yet based on the evidence found in his poetic and calligraphic works, it appears that Huang Tingjian's awareness of both Buddhist and Daoist concepts of emptiness played an important part in this process.

As Vimalakīrti's perfect silence illustrated, when the notion of nonduality had been explained by the Bodhisattva Manjusri, the experience of ultimate truth can only be represented by silence, as it surpasses all verbal expression and therefore also lies outside the realm of the concept of dualism as pointed out by Plaks. At the same time however, approximations to the truth – and to an understanding of the notion of emptiness – can, for example, manifest themselves as a poetic construct written in a unique calligraphic style that combines both the notion of bipolar concepts, and nonduality, through the involvement of both through the subtle use of emptiness in its various aesthetic forms, and its abstract manifestations.

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