The Poetic Ideas Scroll
Attributed to Mi Youren and Sima Huai*

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Abstract:
From the time it came to the attention of scholars and connoisseurs in the late Ming dynasty, the Poetic Ideas scroll attributed to Mi Youren (1074–1151) and Sima Huai (fl. twelfth century) has long been considered an important example of Song dynasty literati painting. The scroll’s two paintings, each of which is preceded by single poetic lines by Du Fu, offer a rare window into the inventive manner in which Song scholar-official painters combined texts with images. The scroll has also been noted for the many puzzles it presents, beginning with the identity of Sima Huai and the authorship of the two paintings, neither of which is signed. The essay reviews the historiography of Poetic Ideas, examines all documentary evidence, and offers new research in an effort to solve some of the many previously unresolved questions. Particular emphasis is put on the identity of the person who chose the Du Fu lines, known only by his style name, Duanshu. Arguing that the most likely candidate for Duanshu is Li Zhiyi (1048–1118 or later), a celebrated literary figure and disciple of Su Shi, the author proposes a date for the making of the scroll during the late Northern Song, as opposed to the early Southern Song, and a context for understanding why these particular Du Fu lines were chosen for illustration.

Keywords: Mi Youren, Sima Huai, Li Zhiyi, Song literati painting, poem-painting

The focus of this study is an intriguing but problematic scroll titled Poetic Ideas (Shiyi tu 詩意圖), attributed to two painters of early twelfth-century date: Mi Youren 米友仁 (1074–1151) and Sima Huai 司馬槐 (fl. twelfth century). The former is well known. Little Mi (Xiao Mi 小米), as he was commonly called, was the eldest son of the famous calligrapher, connoisseur, and critic Mi Fu 米芾 (1052–1107), and, with a number of paintings extant, is one of the best represented painters of the Song dynasty. Moreover, especially in the eyes of later admirers, his paintings share a uniform subject and style: cloudy landscapes (yunsan 興山) rendered largely with blunt strokes, repetitive dots, and wet ink tones. In contrast, Sima Huai is essentially an unknown figure—so unknown, in fact, that even his given name, Huai, is not unequivocally established.

Poetic Ideas is composed of two separate paintings, neither of which is signed or imprinted with an artist’s seal. Both are landscapes, though of different types: the first (unrolling from right to left) presents a scene of distant mountains by a river with dwellings and figures (color plate 8)—I refer to this as “the riverside landscape.” The latter is a “small scene” (xiaojing 小景) of more focused perspective, presenting a pair of twisted trees backed by a large cliff and a quickly moving stream that empties from a ravine (color plate 9)—I refer to this as “the entwined trees landscape.” The images complement one another in length and manner, and they are united by a distinctive aspect of their format: single-line poetic inscriptions at the beginning of the paintings and a trailering quatrains at the ends. The single lines are from poems by the great Tang poet Du Fu 杜甫 (figs. 1, 7). The two quatrains appear to have been composed specifically for the making of the scroll (figs. 6, 12). It is apparent that the calligraphy was by a single hand, though again there is neither signature nor seal to identify whose. Although in the style of Mi Fu, it does not appear to be that of Mi Youren, whose calligraphy is well known.1

1 Not including the Poetic Ideas scroll, I count the following paintings as either genuine works by Mi Youren or significant copies: Cloudy Mountains (Yunsan tu 興山圖) of 1130 (Cleveland Museum of Art), Distant Peaks, Clearing Clouds (Yuan xiu qing yun 景秀清雲) of 1134 (Osaka Municipal Museum of Art), Cloudy Mountains (Yunsan tu 興山圖) (Metropolitan Museum of Art), Rare Views of Xiao-Xiang (Xiaoxiang qipan 潇湘奇譜) (Beijing Palace Museum), White Clouds along the Xiao and Xiang Rivers (Xiaoxiang hai yuan tu 漢湘合源圖) (Shanghai Museum), and Delight in Cloudy Mountains (Yunsan deyi tu 興山得意圖) (National Palace Museum, Taipei). See Peter Charles Sturman, “Mi Youren and the Inherited Literati Tradition: Dimensions of Ink-Play” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1989).

Since the late Ming dynasty, when *Poetic Ideas* became known to a number of scholars and connoisseurs, the scroll has been a puzzle. Foremost was the issue of authorship—that neither painting resembles what was known of Mi Youren’s work, and the other painter was a mystery. There are very early inscriptions of Song dynasty date mounted with the two paintings, but while informative in many ways, these also raised questions. Nonetheless, all agreed that the scroll merited attention. The apparently collaborative nature of the scroll, with one of the participants among the most famous in the pantheon of scholar-official painters, its unusual format and style, its evocation of the greatly admired Du Fu, and the high quality of the two paintings, all combined to make *Poetic Ideas* a celebrated scroll.

In modern times, the scroll has continued to be something of a mystery. For many years it was known only through a poor quality reproduction in Xie Zhiliu’s edited volume *Famous Paintings of the Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, and Yuan (Tang Wudai Song Yuan mingqi)* of 1957.3 Probably for this reason, *Poetic Ideas* failed to attract much scholarly attention until the 1980s. Susan Bush included a brief discussion of the scroll in a short article of 1988 published in Chinese: “Landscape as Subject Matter: Pathways Opened by Song Painters and a Discussion of the Relationship between Poetry and Painting.”4 At the time, Dr. Bush was unaware of the painting’s whereabouts. In the mid-1980s, I too was investing time and effort on *Poetic Ideas*, but with a somewhat different focus and motivation. Mi Youren was the subject of my dissertation. For reasons that will presently become clear, I was unconvinced that *Poetic Ideas* as we now know it included anything by Mi Youren, and consequently my attention had a more limited focus. Thanks to the generosity of the private collector who owns the scroll, I had the good fortune of viewing it in the late 1980s. In 2007 *Poetic Ideas* was briefly on view in the Douglas Dillon Galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Having finally appeared in public, this important example of Song dynasty literati painting is finally attracting the attention it richly deserves.5

My view of *Poetic Ideas* has evolved over time, the result of revisiting the scroll to place it in the larger context of Song dynasty literati painting—I have benefited from two more opportunities to examine it closely. Conclusive answers to many of the scroll’s questions remain elusive, but the process of reevaluating carefully the material and textual record provides the benefit of establishing an informed platform from which ideas and theories can be tested. With that goal in mind, I offer here the results of my reassessment, beginning with a reevaluation of the historiographical record to point out inconsistencies that affect the common perception of the scroll. I end with other considerations based on an analysis of the text-image relationships and possible motivations behind the making of *Poetic Ideas*.

Inscriptions, Identities, Confusions

Failing to find signatures or seals that would name the authors of the two paintings, viewers of *Poetic Ideas* have instead relied upon early inscriptions. Three people are specified; all are identified by their courtesy or style name (zi 子) and the surnames of only two are mentioned. Mi Yuanhu (米元輝 Mi Youren) and Sima Daohang (司馬端衡) are identified as the painters, and the two Du Fu lines that catalyzed the paintings were chosen by someone with the style name Daoshu (端叔). Altogether, there are eight inscriptions attached to the scroll, the first six of which are of twelfth-century date. The last two were written by Wang Zhideng (王稚登 1535–1612) and Dong Qichang (董其昌 1555–1636), and they provide a window onto how *Poetic Ideas* was received in the late sixteenth century, but our initial interest is in the Song inscriptions, which need to be examined carefully in order to give an accurate sense of how the scroll was perceived.

The first is an undated poem signed with the style name Cizhong 次仲 (fig. 13). Under Cizhong’s signature is the seal Sima zhi hou 司馬之侯, or “Descendant of the Sima clan” (fig. 14):

> Ten thousand acres of river, water fuses with sky; In its midst, peaks and hills rise richly green. Shadows in clear heavens dip into the white of the toad [i.e., the moon]; Vast and mighty, pure waves glitter like cold jade.

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5 A detail of the second of the scroll’s paintings graces the cover of the latest reprinting of Susan Bush’s *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037–1101) to Tang Gi-shih-zung (1555–1636)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012). At this time, Dr. Bush is planning to publish her own study of *Poetic Ideas* in *The Archives of Asian Art.*
late years of the Northern Song and possibly well into the Shaoshing reign of Emperor Gaozong. At once informative and misleading, these colophons are worth citing in full: Sima Junshi [Sima Guang] and Mi Yuanzhang [Mi Fu] were men of virtuous actions and literary talent—at the first rank of our dynasty. I regret that I was born too late for this older generation. Today I look at the ink wonders of the two lords and chase after them in my thoughts the whole day long with deep emotions. The two lords are not [professional] painting masters—how is it possible that they excel to this degree? Can it be that the chieh of the phoenix and the colt of the thoroughbred are naturally endowed with transcendent ability and thus stand out from the rest? Set down by Chichou [Crazy Old Man] Tian Ruo, twenty-sixth day of the ninth month of the ninth month, Shaoshing 19 [9 November 1149].

Sima Cizhong’s poem mentions Du Fu (by his sobriquet: Shaoling 少陵) and Duanheng, whose painting is seamlessly linked to the Tang poet by Sima Cizhong’s use of the trope “soundless poem.” Xie 写, “to write,” often used in later parlance to suggest that an artist worked rather sketchily, here simply emphasizes the literary nature of Duanheng’s offering. Because the later became a commonplace in ekphrasis, it is easy to overlook the fact that Sima Cizhong’s choice of words establishes a distinct link with Su Shi, whose critical remarks on painting’s relationship to poetry and calligraphy laid the groundwork for literati painting theory. The link is significant. As I discuss below, Sima Cizhong was a descendant of Sima Guang, the prominent opponent of the New Laws promoted by Wang Anshi. Su was the face of the antireformists, sometimes called the Yuanyou Party 元祐黨, who followed Sima Guang. In the late Northern Song, cultural values could easily be joined to political allegiances, and in this respect, Sima Cizhong’s characterization of Duanheng’s painting—as well as the style of his calligraphy, which evokes Su Shi’s manner—reflects a partisanship already established by family ties. It is noteworthy that Sima Cizhong mentions Duanheng in his poem, and with a tone that suggests a close relationship, unlike the other colophon writers makes no mention of Mi Youren. It is also notable that his poem’s descriptive imagery matches the scroll’s riverside landscape far better than the entwined trees landscape. I presume this is why a number of later viewers of Poetic Ideas, including both Wang Zhideng and Dong Qichang, assumed that Mi Youren’s contribution to the scroll was the latter.

The five other Song dynasty inscriptions were written by Tian Ruo 田如愚 (jinshi 1124), Wang Min 王岷 (fl. twelfth century), Wang Shixin 王師信 (1097–1169), Fu Yuanheng 富元卿 (jinshi 1124), and Song Jingyang 宋景陽 (fl. twelfth century) (figs. 15–17). All appear to have been younger contemporaries of Mi Youren, active in the very

6 I presented a paper on the subject of calligraphic style as an indicator of political and personal allegiance, "Lingering Winds: Calligraphy after Su Shi and His Circle" at the International Conference on Tang and Song Calligraphy, Mingdao University, Zhehguany, Taiwan (2010).
Shaoxing’s poetic lines surpass the common sort and are a cut above the dusty airs. They are something later followers could not reach. The ink marvels of the two lords are unrestrained, far from the masses, and something common folk will not be able to discern. This [scroll], too, can be called “the three perfections.” Viewed by Yanou [Foolish Old Man] Fu Yuanheng of Luoyang at the studio in Fuchun prefecture:

尾有詩題趙孟頫跋，非後人可及。二公墨妙溪落不群。非碌碌者所能，亦可謂三絕也。洛陽唐寫真元冊稱於書卷都齊。8

To the right, Mi Yuanhui and Sima Duanheng followed their ideas and ordered their brushes, silently achieving a spiritual communion. But Yuanhui was able to establish his own style: [Signed] Song Jingyang.

The order of the paintings appears to have been all of the documentation on the scroll when Wang Zhizhen and others turned their attention to Poetic Ideas in the late Ming. The order of the paintings has changed back and forth with remountings, but records of the inscriptions are consistent.9 The exception is Fu Yuanheng’s colophon, which, according to one of the earliest records of the scroll, is missing its very beginning:

“...of Mi Yuanhui and Ma Duanheng are like those of the sons and brothers of the Wang and Xie clans [of the fourth century], possessed of a particular spirit” (米元翰與端衡二畫如王謝子弟，別有一種風流) 10 The paper upon which Fu’s inscription was written is closely cropped to the right, suggesting that this sentence, likely two columns of calligraphy, was indeed a part of the original inscription (fig. 16). Its removal is, of course, lamentable, but it helped cover a mistake: Fu had left out the character Si

8  Two eighteenth-century records of the scroll specify a different order of the paintings from today, with the entitled trees first and the riverside landscape second. See Wu Sheng 王善, Daguan lu 大觀錄 (Taipei: Zhongyuan Tushuguan, 1970), juan 13: 82b–83b; Gao Shiqi, Jiuguo xianglu jiubian 九國遠遊記補編, juan 1: 22a–23a. The present order, however, appears to be indicative of how the scroll was mounted earlier, as some of the older seals are placed over the paper join between the entitled trees composition and the first inscription. Although unidentified, the seal woman chi xin 女伴心印, in particular, gives the appearance of being early, possibly of Southern Song date. Gao Shiqi claims that both paintings possess this seal, but it is only seen today following the painting of the entitled trees.

9 Wang Keyu, Shanhu wang, juan 28: 22a. The Wang and Xie clans, represented in particular by the famous calligraphers Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361) and Xie An 戴安 (320–385), were synonymous with high culture in the minds of later generations.

People nowadays see hazy, misty mountains and attribute [the painting] to Xiangyang, father and son [Mi Fu and Mi Youren]. This is why there are inscriptions that attribute the paintings to Mi Yuanhui and Ma Duanheng, and one even ascribes them to Sima Junshi [Sima Guang] and Old Zhang [Mi Fu]. This is really like spinning dreams to inebriates [i.e. pure nonsense]—what a joke! Moreover, the calligraphy all seems to be the product of one hand imitating three or four styles.

今人見懵董山便歸之襄陽父子, 以故有題作米元暉馬端衡者, 乃至以為司馬書實及老章, 此尤損人前讒妄, 大可笑也。且書法似出一手, 而模作三四體。11

Wang Shizhen was of the opinion that only the first inscription, Sima Cizhong’s poem, was genuine and that the other five were spurious, written by someone of recent times who had randomly attributed the river landscape to Mi Youren and the trees composition to a “Ma Duanheng” (following Fu Yuanheng’s error). Committed to ignoring these five inscriptions, Wang was impervious to the clear attachment of the Sima surname to Duanheng in the final inscription by Song Jingyang. As far as he was concerned, both paintings were by the otherwise unknown Zhang Duanheng, whose name Wang had

10 Wang Shizhen, “Zhang Duanheng shanshuh,” Yinzhong yuesh, juan 16b: 17a–17b. Fu Yuanheng’s omission of the “Si” in Sima’s name must underlie Wang Shizhen’s reference to Ma Duanheng. Wang’s comment that a colophon writer assigned the paintings to Sima Guang and Mi Fu must point to Tian Ruan’s inscription, though Wang misreads Tian’s intention.
encountered in his perusal of an earlier text.11 Wang Shizhen urged the owner of Poetic Ideas, identified only as Qinzhi (in), to quickly get rid of these "snake’s feet," or unwarranted additions.

The owner of Poetic Ideas at this time appears to have been Peng Qinzhi 彭鈮之 (fl. late sixteenth century), a close acquaintance of Wang Shizhen and a figure with ties to other important cultural figures in the region that encompassed the cities of Suzhou and Huating toward the end of the sixteenth century.12 This circle included Wang Zhideng, whose inscription on the scroll is far more tempered than Wang Shizhen’s proposal: the former accepted the premise that the two painters were involved—Mi Youren and Duanheng (he tactfully avoids identifying the latter’s surname)—and moreover concluded that Mi Youren was responsible for the entwined trees landscape, which he called a rare work somewhat similar to the style of Guo Xi.13

It appears that at this point no one was really certain of Duanheng’s identity. That changed when the scroll came to the attention of Dong Qichang, who saw it in Guangling (Yangzhou, Jiangsu). In a comment included in his collected writings but not on the scroll itself, Dong identifies the painter of the riverside landscape, which he calls exceedingly fine and in the style of the Five Dynasties Period master Li Cheng 李成 (919–967), as Sima Duanheng—a person whose indifference to fame resulted in his absence from the chronicles of painting. In clear contrast to Wang Shizhen, Dong mentions "many Song and Yuan inscriptions" on the scroll and follows this with a clear rebuke of Wang’s earlier assessment. Dong writes that he discovered Wang’s error of declaring the painter as Zhang Duanheng while perusing the writings of the Southern Song poet Lu You 陸游 (1125–1210). Whether out of genuine sympathy or condescension, Dong then gratuitously added,

11 There is a short description of Zhang Duanheng in Xia Wenyuan 夏文言, Tahui banjuan 彰祥 白卷, Siku quanshu edition, juan 4: 7b. It is clear from what Wang Shizhen recounts in his inscription that Xia’s text was the source of his information.

12 Both Wang Shizhen and Wang Zhideng mention Peng by his given name only in their inscriptions. Peng appears in a few places in Wang Shizhen’s collected works, Youlu zhaiu (see note 2): “P Peng Qinzhi tainzou 原形石之亜玄 (juan 17: 11a); “Qingpu Tu hou quzi ji” 青浦後丘子記 (juan 57: 14a–18b); “Peng Qinzhi 彭鈮之 (juan 183: 5a–5b). Wang Zhideng wrote a short travel piece for Peng Qinzhi on West Streams (Xiuhu Xiashan), outside of Hangzhou, that is included in numerous anthologies. It was originally recorded in a gazetteer of Buddhist establishments in the area: Wu Bentai 吳本泰, Xiuzhou zhi 遵州志. A painting of 1576 by Mo Shilong 莫士隆 (1537–1587) titled Pure Thoughts at Autumn Waters (Qiuai qing si 秋悅清思) includes an inscription by Mo in which he mentions Peng Qinzhi. The painting was sold at the Huanhai Auctiion (Beijing) in June 2006. Mo Shilong was a central cultural figure in late-Ming Jiangnan and an important link to Dong Qichang.

13 Wang Zhideng’s inscription is recorded in Wu Sheng, Daguan lu 大觀錄 (see note 8), juan 13: 4fb.

“Inscribing paintings is absolutely no simple matter!” ( 譁畫最非易事)14

Dong Qichang’s discovery in Lu You’s collected works of an inscription for a painting by someone called Sima Duanheng, whom Dong recognized as one and the same as the Duanheng of Poetic Ideas, was quite a coup: not only did it settle the identification of the painter and help validate the five early inscriptions that Wang Shizhen had summarily dismissed; it also uncovered what has proved to be practically the only thing found in the textual record that directly comments on the painter. Recognizing the importance of the newfound inscription, Dong chose to transcribe it as he offering on Poetic Ideas. Originally written for a painting of Chan Buddhist subject matter titled Transmission of the Lamp 佛燈傳, the inscription (fig. 17) reads as follows:

The aspirations and the talent of Sima Sixty-five zhang far surpassed those of ordinary people. When he was a young man, his family and party politics excluded him from official service. Looking for a place to lodge the emotions welling up in his breast, he expressed his ideas in painting. His brushwork is lofty and marvelous, possessing the leftover airs of Gu [Kaizhi] and Lu [Tanwei]. In the past, as our families have long been intimate, I had the chance to hear him discuss painting. He spoke energetically the whole day long, like Sun Wu discussing the art of warfare or Masters Linji and Zhaohou discussing Chan Buddhism—so marvelous! Now I constantly regret that at the time I did not jot down some of what he had to say for later connoisseurs. Today I have the honor of viewing [Sima Huaǐ’s] Transmission of the Lamp. It is just like that time when I received his expositions and teachings. I bow my head and ceaselessly sigh. [Signed] Dingwei day of the tenth [lunar] month, dianfeng year of the Kaixi reign [27 December 1207].

司馬六十五丈，挹負才士絶人遠甚。方少壯時以家貧不獲進用，於時欲有以寓其胸中浩浩，遂於此遊畫。落筆高妙，有超師遺風，吾嘗以通家之舊親聞其論畫，哀也終日，如不能言者，臨濟諸法詳盡，何其妙也。每恨是時不能記一二，以遺後之好事者。今獲傳燈圖，恍如接言論風指時，精髪太息不能自已。聞稽丁卯歲十月丁未，山陰陵某話。15

14 Dong Qichang, “Hua zi” 會子 (entry 93), Rongtai haiyi 容齋海逸 (Taipei: Zhongyang Tushuguan, 1968), juan 6: 32a–32b. Dong also pointed out that Sima Duanheng’s name is nowhere to be found in painting catalogs.

It should be noted that no early document has yet been cited here that identifies Sima Duanheng’s given name as Hui. This information appears later, in the eighteenth-century compilation Chronicles of Calligraphy and Painting from the Peiwen Studio (Peiwenzhai shuahu pu 佩文齋书画谱), where a brief passage is cited from the collected works of Lou Yao 烏窻 (1137–1213): “Sima Hui, style name Duanheng, attained the official position of consultant and achieved fame as a painter early in the Shaoxing reign” (司馬槐, 字端衡, 官參議, 以畫得名於紹興初).’ Curiously, I have not been able to confirm the existence of this passage in Lou’s literary works. However, his writings do include a related inscription that helps shed light on Sima Duanheng. Lou inscribed a painting of a Buddhist master made jointly by Lian Bu 賦付 (b. ca. 1092) and someone named Sima Ni 司馬妮 (fl. twelfth century). Lian’s contribution was the landscape elements; Sima painted the monk. Lou revealed that Sima Ni’s style name was Duanheng 顒行, that he served as a consultant, and that both he and Lian were well-known scholar-painters early in the Shaoxing reign. He also remarked that in addition to figures, Sima Duanheng painted landscapes. One notes striking similarities between these two Sima-surnamed Southern Song painters active early in the Shaoxing reign, from their given names (both single characters with the tree radical, 木 木) to their style names (both implying straightforward, honest behavior), their official positions, and their tendency to paint figures and landscapes. Could they have been one and the same person, the name variations reflecting a change in names, textual corruptions, or a combination of the two?

The meaning of the term “sixty-five zhang” (one zhang equals ten chi or a traditional Chinese foot), used to modify Sima Hui’s name in the first line, is unclear. Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (ca. 344–406) and Lu Tanwei 盧太微 (fl. late fifth century) are well-known masters of the classical figure painting tradition. Sun Wu 孫吳, better known as Sun Zi 孫子, is the author of the classic Art of War. Linji refers to the Chan master Linji Xunyan 龍憲玄 (d. 866), founder of the Linji school (Jap. Rinza), one of the dominant sects in the Song dynasty. Zhaozhou is the long-lived Zhaozhou Congsheng 趙州從僧 (778–897), another Chan master of the late Tang.


17 Either the editor of Peiwenzhai shuahu pu was using a different version of Lou Yao’s Gongbi ji 窩雲集 than what is commonly available today or this passage was mistakenly attributed to Lou’s book because of the reference to Sima Ni. I do not see any reason to fabricate Sima Duanheng’s identity and consequently trust that there is an early source that reveals his given name to have been Hui. Throughout the remainder of the essay I follow convention and refer to Sima Duanheng as Sima Hui.

18 Lou Yao 烏窩, “Ba Zhao chi suocang dashi” 白窩氏松顒大士, Gongbi ji 窩雲集 (Shanghai: Siku quanshu edition, juan 78: 9a–9b). The grave of Sima Ni is noted in the Zhejiang gazetteer as being on Mount Tang 蜀山 (Shaoxing, Zhejiang). See Zhejiang tongyi 浙江通志 (Shanghai: Siku quanshu edition, juan 238: 4a).

It seems more likely to me that Sima Huai and Sima Ni were brothers, two of a number of descendants of Sima Guang who struggled through the political proscriptions of the late Northern Song (alluded to by Lu in his inscription) and attained modest success as painters and minor officials in the early years of the Southern Song. I will return to the Sima clan presently—to a large degree, Poetic Ideas reflects that illustrious family’s heritage. It is a singular object, the sole pictorial trace of their collective identity to have survived. First, however, let us continue with the historiography of the scroll in order to address some of its remaining puzzles.

Dong Qichang’s discovery of Lo Yu 陸尤’s inscription helped settle the issue of Duanheng’s family ties, but questions about Poetic Ideas remained unsettled. Wang Zhideng and Dong both attributed the riverside landscape to Sima Huai and the twisted trees to Mi Youren. Neither stated his reasons why, but presumably the content of Sima Cizhong’s poem and their knowledge of Mi’s landscape style were important factors. But the painting of entwined trees is unlike anything else attributed to Mi. Some commented on this directly. Wu Sheng 吳升, early eighteenth-century author of A Record of Great Views (Dagujuan 大觀記), pointed out that although Mi readily switched styles, there is not one stroke in the two compositions similar to anything else he had made. Wu heartlessly noted that if not for the earlier writers, who speak of both painters, one might think that both paintings came from the hand of Sima Hui.19

Writing about twenty years earlier, Wu’s contemporary Gu Fu 軍馥 (fl. 1662–1692) was more direct. In Grand Views Seen in My Lifetime (Pingzheng zhuangguan 平生壯觀), Gu argued that the scroll must originally have included yet another painting by Mi, though it had long since gone its own way.20 His comment also seems to imply that both of the extant Poetic Ideas paintings were by Sima Huai. Wu Sheng had noted the application of rubbed dry ink for accents in both, an observation that could support the hypothesis of a

19 “But both paintings only have poems; they lack signatures and seals. Moreover, Duanheng’s paintings are completely gone and unavailable for viewing [and comparative purposes]. As for Ynauhit’s [Mi Youren], though he excelled at changing styles, when one compares these with his other works, not a single brushstroke resembles what is seen here. Is it possible that [both] paintings came from Duanheng’s hand? But the inscribers all speak of a collaborative work; they do not leave room for speculation.” 但兩幅箋配有詩，無款識，而兩幅畫絵未見，元麗工筆調和，觀之則易，意見一致則無，畫書絵複始間，然琢琢書畫並有合式，是又無容疑跡耳。Wu Sheng, Dagujuan 大觀記 (see note 18), juan 13: 42b.

20 “This scroll together with Ynauhit’s [Mi Youren’s] brushwork originally composed a single scroll, and this is why the inscribers all speak of both artists. Today, however, Mi’s painting is no longer present.” 此卷有元年筆各一幅，故書畫漫展；而書畫中惟有。Gu Fu, Pingzheng zhuangguan (see note 2), juan 8: 15.
single painter. In summary, by the eighteenth century Sima Huai’s identity and image as a painter had been resurrected, while Mi Youren’s contribution to Poetic Ideas remained a matter of contention—could both of the paintings have been the work of the otherwise little-understood Sima Huai?

In addressing this question, it is important to recognize a factor that plays powerfully into viewers’ perceptions of Poetic Ideas: the dates of some of the scroll’s inscriptions. Tian Ruao’s colophon is dated the ninth lunar month, 1148, and that of Wang Shixin is dated a year later. Wang Min’s inscription, sandwiched between the two on the scroll, was undoubtedly written in the same narrow window of time. The time frame of Sima Cizhong’s poem, physically the first of the inscriptions, cannot be pinned down, but the final two, belonging to Fu Yuaisheng and Song Jingyang, are likely to have followed closely after those of Tian, Wang Shixin, and Wang Min, circa 1150. This tight temporal packing of the inscriptions makes it natural to assume that the paintings date from the same period.

Feeding this hypothesis is the strong association of Mi Youren with the Southern Song court and the fact that from the Ming dynasty on all of his known paintings were from after the loss of the north to the Jurchens. What little we know of Sima Huai, who gained a modest footing in officialdom after the move south, further encourages the association of the scroll with the early years of the Southern Song. The inscriptions allude to both artists’ illustrious ancestors (Mi Fu and Sima Guang). The scroll consequently presents itself as a Southern Song homage to an earlier era, with Mi Youren and Sima Huai playing the roles of “phoenix chick” and “thoroughbred colt,” to use Tian Ruao’s terms. For later viewers familiar with Mi Youren, such as Gu Fu and Wu Sheng, it was difficult to connect either of the two paintings on the scroll with the fairly consistent image of the cloudy mountains theme that was presented time and again in his paintings of the early Southern Song. Hence their suspicion that Mi’s painting had been removed.

Upon closer inspection, the suggestion that Mi could have added anything to the scroll during the middle or late 1140s loses ground. First, Mi is known to have painted only rarely in his late years, and then only for the most distinguished of recipients: Emperor Gaozong. For a period of about a decade, the troubled 1130s when the court was struggling to reestablish itself in Hangzhou, Mi was extremely active, aggressively seeking positions in the capital and using his father’s celebrity to promote his own abilities. Painting played a major role in this self-promotion, so much so that Mi later regretted that so many of his works had found their way into the hands of collectors. By the spring of 1141, probably as a result of his growing role as an advisor in the rebuilding of the imperial collections of painting and calligraphy, Mi suddenly enjoyed a rapid rise through the bureaucracy, culminating with the position of vice minister in the Ministry of War in 1144. The most telling comment on his late-life success is Deng Chun’s 扶ruk remark in Records of Painting, Continued (Huaji 繼畫) that Mi Youren enjoyed the personal favor of Emperor Gaozong:

Then [Mi] met with imperial favor and was promoted to vice director of the Board of Works and auxiliary academician to Fuwen Hall, daily serving as the emperor’s companion. Before this, scholars had often been able to acquire his paintings, but once honored he became extremely self-important, and even old friends and relatives were no longer able to acquire his work. Everyone teased him, chanting,

21 Wu describes the brush effects as pengdi diantai 落筆點背, “reed brush, dots of moss.” Wu Sheng, Daguanshu (see note 8), juan 13: 42b.

22 This is based on what can be surmised of the dates of activity of Fu Yuaisheng and Song Jingyang and the fact that their inscriptions seem to refer to Mi and Sima as still present. Mi Youren died in 1151.

23 There are various early references to Mi Youren’s painting, but the earliest documented painting, recorded in a number of late Ming and early Qing catalogs, was a gift to Jiang Zhongyao 蒋汝受 dated the eighth lunar month, 1130. See, for example, Bian Songyu 袁松谷, Shigutang shubao huiliao 大史書畫集 (Taipei, Zhonghong Shuju, 1950), juan 13: 22. Mi’s earliest extant painting is Cloudy Mountains of the same year in the Cleveland Museum of Art. For more on Mi Youren’s early career and biography see Sturman, “Mi Youren and the Inherited Literati Tradition,” 160–186. For Mi’s association with Gaozong and the Southern Song court, see Shi Man 时曼 (Peter Sturman), “Kejin xiaodao de Mi Youren—jun qiu de Huashan de shiyou de huaxue shijie de jian jie,” Gaogong shuìshuǐ jìlué 政宗山水集列, 9.4 (1992), 89–126.

24 Mi Youren added the following inscription to a painting brought forward by an eager young solicitor, probably in the 1140s: “Wherever I have gone I have been beset by people seeking paintings. I have no idea how many countless billions are now in the hands of collectors. This one Youchi got from some place and now wants an inscription. [Signed] Yuishui” 所至之处, 為人催作手卷, 當知數十萬盡在諸家筆下, 此軸為我之所居, 又令書流, 手卷. See Bian Songyu, Shigutang shubao huiliao (see note 23), juan 13: 21.

25 After a roughly three-year period (1138–1141) spent on sabbatical at his sister’s home at Dayao Village (near Suzhou, Jiangsu), Mi Youren accepted the position of tea and salt supervisor of the Liang-Zhe West Circuit, with headquarters in Suzhou. A year later, Mi assumed the duties of vice director of the Directorate for the Palace Buildings and barely half-a-year later moved to the State Farms Bureau in the Department of State Affairs, also as a vice director. He continued up the ladder within that bureau until 1144, when he was appointed vice minister of the Ministry of War. See Shi Man, “Kejin xiaodao de Mi Youren,” 97–102.
You know how to make trees without roots, thick as pea soup. But now you paint only for the emperor.
And won’t give your work to idlers like us.

Deng Chun’s comment highlights the elevated status Mi Youren enjoyed late in his life, as well as his self-importance, neither of which fits comfortably with the prospect of him joining the relatively insignificant Sima Huai in a collaborative painting close to the time of the scroll’s inscriptions. Also incongruous are the inscriptions themselves. Considering Mi’s age and stature in 1148–1149, is it not somewhat strange that Tian Ruao speaks not of the vice-director of the Board of Works at all but instead his father, Mi Fu, relegating “Little Mi” and Sima Huai to child and grandnephew status? It is possible that Tian did not know Mi Youren personally, but he certainly would have been aware of his position at the court and his role as cultural advisor and attendant to the emperor. Similarly, it seems a little odd that Wang Min’s primary focus in his short inscription is the unidentified Duanshu—the compiler of the Du Fu lines—a man who left no discoverable mark on the late 1140s. In contrast, Mi Youren quietly joins Sima Huai as an outside accomplice. Fu Yuanbeng’s and Song Jingyang’s inscriptions are a bit more focused on the two painters, though Fu’s too mentions them in terms of family lineages. By likening them to the sons and brothers of the Wang and Xie clans, Fu implies that the two painters’ excellence was owed to what would today be called superior genes.

In summary, Poetic Ideas offers a number of puzzles. Mi Youren’s involvement is the largest question mark. The identity of Duanshu is another. And then there is the apparent disjunction between some of the inscribers’ comments and what is known of Mi’s status. Is there a possible explanation? I believe there is, though first a personal admission. When I initially studied Poetic Ideas so many years ago, like Gu Fu and Wu Sheng I had doubts regarding Mi Youren’s contribution. The Southern Song inscriptions mention two painters, and there were two paintings, but I could not reconcile either—especially the landscape—with what I knew of Mi Youren’s late painting style. I consequently assumed that whatever he had painted was long lost and suggested that both paintings might have been by Sima Huai. After new opportunities to view the scroll, and with the benefit of twenty years of experience, I now believe it less likely that the two paintings are from a single hand. Both paintings are skillful, but the entwined trees in the scroll’s second composition demonstrate particular verve that suggests to me a different facility with the brush. I am now more inclined to believe that two hands were involved with the paintings.

The explanation that best answers the various puzzles presented by Poetic Ideas is that the paintings were done a number of years before the inscriptions that follow Sima Cizhong’s poem, possibly before the end of the Northern Song. Guided by the limited knowledge passed down about Mi Youren and Sima Huai, and especially the dearth of material remains, later connoisseurs and scholars naturally saw this scroll as a Southern Song production. Yet Mi was born in 1074 and lived most of his life in the Northern Song. He was already thirty-one years old when his father presented his painting Pure Dawn in the Mountains of Chu (Chushan qingtiao tu) to Emperor Huizong during an imperial audience.28 By this date, the younger Mi must already have been an accomplished painter; it would be another twenty-two years before the Northern Song fell. That period of his life is almost a complete blank; only at the age of fifty-three, when he began to rebuild his life, does Mi emerge from the shadows, earning fame at Gaozong’s court. Because of the later paintings, we think of Mi exclusively as a painter of the cloudy mountains theme, but there is evidence from early records that suggests greater breadth of subject. His contemporary Zhou Hui (11th–12th century), for example, noted that Mi once presented him with a painting of “wintery trees” (hanlin 寒林).29 This is hardly confirmation that Mi painted the entwined trees in Poetic Ideas, but it reminds us that there is much we do not know regarding his activities as an artist, especially in the last decades of the Northern Song.

Assigning Poetic Ideas an early date also helps make sense of the tone and content of the inscriptions. As an ensemble, the unsigned paintings, the poem, and the five Southern Song inscriptions that follow do not provide a particularly coherent record. The lack of details regarding the making of the scroll, the unusual manner in which both Mi Youren

26 Deng Chun 聞春, Hua ji 华记, Siku quanshu edition, juan 3: 11b–12a. This same jesting poem is attributed to Mi Youren’s close friend Zhai Qianian in Tang Hou 張侯, Hua liao 华聊, Meishu congshu (Taipei: Guanwenshu ju, 1963), 14: 421.
27 There is also the possibility that one or both of the compositions was jointly painted, with the entwined trees composition the best candidate for this scenario. This would help explain some of the visual congruities between the two paintings, though there are a number of other possible explanations.
28 The presentation of the painting is described in the grave inscription Cai Zhao 蔡肇 wrote for Mi Fu, “Mi Yuanzhang muzhi ming” 尾九章墓志铭 (Helinski zhengyi shu, 20a–23b). The edition I consulted, of Wang’s date, is in the National Palace Museum Library. Cai’s inscription is commonly included with modern compilations of Mi Fu materials.
29 Zhou Hui 周煇, Qingbo zazhi 清波杂志, Siku quanshu edition, juan 5: 12b.
and Sima Hui is positioned as a family scion, and the single abrupt reference to Dunshu all lead one to suspect that something—inscriptions, poems, or simply oral history—is now missing that was available to the early writers.

Lastly, placing the scroll in the middle of Huizong’s reign provides a likely candidate for the compiler of the Du Fu lines mentioned in Wang Min’s inscription. A number of people possessed the style name Dunshu in the Song dynasty, but one person stands out: Li Zhiyi 李之儀 (ca. 1048–1118 or later), a close follower of Su Shi and a highly regarded literary figure. As detailed in the following section, Li was a friend of the Mi family, and his close association with Su and subsequent political travels early in the twelfth century linked him to the descendants of Sima Guang.

Images and Lineages

Identifying Dunshu may always be a matter of debate, but understanding the role in Poetic Ideas is important. Song literati painting in Su Shi’s circle communicated shared experiences and values among friends. Such values could be transparent, but the shared experiences were often private matters related to official careers and as such were most comfortably alluded to indirectly. Textual accomplishments could play an oversized role in this communication, especially among those who were masters of the literary tradition.9 In this respect, Poetic Ideas may be fruitfully compared with the better-known poem-paintings produced by professional painters serving the Song court.

As Deng Chun tells it, Huizong elevated painting at the imperially sponsored academy by incorporating literary studies into the curriculum and encouraging competitions that tested painters’ ability to illustrate poetic lines. Subtlety of expression—sensitivity to

30 See my work on a painting attributed to Wang Qihan 王钦翰 (亡 tenth century), sometimes
titled Collating Books (Kanshu 乾筆), but more appropriately The Ear Picker (Tianer to 聾器) (Nanjing Museum: Peter C. Sturman, “The Realm of Naturalness: Problems of Self-Imaging by the Northern Sung Literati,” in Arts of the Sung and Yuan, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith K.
Smith, 163–188 (New York: Department of Asian Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996);
蘇軾與王洽，in Kaikaiqiang dianjian: Bei Song de huiyu yu menda yuanhua liunian ji 吳
Youren,” in Quanmin daogong: xi da Zhong-Ri cong Tang-Song-Yuan huaiju zhexin 千年丹青：細
查中國自唐宋元卷軸心 (Beijing, Beijing DaXue Chubanshe, 2010), 337–402 (English), 159–
166 (Chinese). The use of painting for political commentary is the primary theme of Alfredo
Muck, Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent (Cambridge, MA: Harvard-
Yenching Institute, 2000).

31 This topic is well treated in Lee Hui-shu 李慧舒, “Song yuantian huian bai zhi yanju: cong
Huizong qi zhi huayuan fengge zhuangduan zhi guanyan” 宋徽宗詩畫之研究：從徽宗詩畫之
關係課題之發展 (master’s thesis, Taiwan University, 1984), 87–96.
32 Lee, Hui-shu, Empires, Art, and Agency in Song Dynasty China (Seattle: Washington University
Press, 2010).
33 Li Zhiyi’s ci are discussed in Ronald Egan, The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits
in Northern Song Dynasty China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), esp.
chap. 6.
34 Zeng Zhaozhuang 曾棗莊, Li Zhiyi nianpu 李之儀年譜, in Songren nianpu congkan 宋人年譜彙刊, ed.
The Poetic Ideas Scroll Attributed to Mi Youren and Sima Hui  

appropriation of the ideas in the scroll is attributed to Mi Youren, a senior moderate among the antireformists. Fan brought Li to the capital at the start of the Yuanyou reign (1086–1087), when Fan and other antireformists gained power, and there Li developed close relationships with Su Shi and his circle, including Huang Tingjian (1045–1145) and Qin Guan (1049–1100). In fact, Li’s acquaintance with Su had begun some years earlier: correspondence between the two men is documented as early as 1080, after Su was convicted on charges of lèse-majesté and banished to Huangzhou (Hubei), and there are indications that the two men met as early as the mid-1070s. The relationship deepened when Li joined Su’s camp as an administrative aide at Dingzhou (Shandong) in 1093. This marked the end of the antireform party’s sway over court policy as well as the beginning of Su Shi’s long march into the wilderness.

With established allegiances to Su and the antireform party, Li Zhiyi’s fortunes declined through the 1090s and early 1100s. One official posting sent him far from the capital; another was quickly rescinded. Huizong ascended the throne in 1100 and

35 There have been a number of studies regarding Li Zhiyi’s birth and death dates, yielding conflicting conclusions. Some say he lived past eighty; see Wang Cheng 李恒, Dongge shihue 東郭 siècle, Zhongyao tushuguan shanben congkan (Taipei: Zhongyao Tushuguan, 1991); Wang Mingqing 王明清, Huihu huadui 王侯画队, Lida biji xiaozhou jicheng (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Jiuyu Chuabanshe, 1994). Dated writings by Li end abruptly in the third lunar month, 1118, with Li Zhiyi 李之諲, “Xiangying shangren zixiu 项英上人自休, Guzi jishi qianji 环知己前寄, Siku quanshu edition, juan 33: 7a–7b. If Li died around this time, then his year of birth would have to be pushed back to ca. 1038 to accommodate his eighty years. Zeng Zaozhuang, however, provides a persuasive argument for a 1048 birthdate; see Zeng, Li Zhi nianpu (see note 34), 3127–3128. Zeng and others have consequently assumed that Li died after 1127. A 1048 birthdate would be more in line with other Su Shi followers and friends, such as Huang Tingjian (1045), Wang Shen (c. 1048), Qin Guan (1049), Mi Fu (1052), and Zhang Lei (1054). I doubt, however, that Li lived to the very end of the Northern Song. Given the lack of incontrovertible evidence that he lived past 1118, I suspect that statements asserting his eighty years are not precisely accurate, though he may well have lived a few years into the Xuanhe reign. For a recent essay that addresses these issues, see Wang Xiang 李香, “Zai han Li Zhiyi zu Xu Zhenghe ba nian” 再漢李之諲與鄭和百年, Wenhua xuekan 文化学刊, 2012.5, 157–159. There is similar disagreement about the date when Li Zhiyi passed the jishi (presented scholar) examination.


37 Li was assigned the post of controller-general (tongguan 通判) of Yuanzhou in 1097. Located in

modern-day Ningxia, Yuanzhou was a northwest border region during the Song. Two years later, Li was appointed supervisor of the Neixiang Medicine Storehouse, but the post was rescinded due to Li’s history with Su Shi. See Zeng Zaozhuang, Li Zhi nianpu, 3135–3136.

38 Li Zhiyi, “Yu Zhu tujia Weidang qita 记朱拙家魏当其他, in Guzi jishi qianji, juan 21: 5b–6b.


40 Zeng Zaozhuang, Li Zhi nianpu, 3149–3150. Li appears to have originally held the post for a short period during the Daguai reign (1107–1110).

41 See note 35.

42 Li Zhiyi 李之諲, Guzi jishi qianji, juan 21: 7a–9a.
short time. The Yangzi was the primary conduit for transportation and official business. Mi Youren’s official career appears to have begun late in the Zhenghe reign, and in all likelihood was initiated by the same amnesty of 1161 that resulted in Li’s appointment as temple superintendent. Mi Fu is generally considered to have stayed outside the political fray that consumed the antireformists, but in the deeply fractured partisan environment of the late Northern Song, one’s fortunes were affected by friendships, and the ups and downs of his official career resembled those of Su Shi’s circle. One’s children often suffered, as the Sima clan could well attest. Early in the Xuanhe reign, circa 1118–1120, Mi Youren held the position of controller-general (longpan 迩部) of Taipingzhou. Taipingzhou was another designation for Dangtu, where Li passed his final years. If my hypothesis is correct and the unidentified Duanshu of Poetic Ideas is Li Zhiyi, the most likely period for the scroll’s production is circa 1115–1120, when Mi Youren was engaged as an official in the area and building a growing reputation. This marked a turning point in Mi’s life, as he embarked on what would ultimately prove to be a long and fruitful career as an official. Sima Huai does not appear to have been as fortunate, as the only information regarding official duties points to the ad hoc, as well as unspecified, position of consultant and a time frame of some years later, during the Shaoxing reign.

**Riverside Landscape**

43 This is according to Zeng Zaozhuang, who places Li Zhiyi in Jiuling (Nanjing) from 1106 to 1108. Zeng, Li Zhiyi xiaoya, 3142–3145.

44 Mi Fu’s demotion in 1093–1094, when he lost his post as magistrate of Yongqu, coincided with the death of Empress Gao, who had been the primary supporter of the antireformists. Mi later resurrected his official career, in large part thanks to the patronage of Cai Jing 參政 (1046–1126), and attained positions in the Ministry of Rites. He was not immediately affected by the Chongqing proscriptions but was dismissed from the court within a year. See Peter Charles Stumman, Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 100-101, 121-122, 193–194.

45 Wang Ao 王栎, comp., Guo zhi 弓之 四世，Siku quanshu edition, juan 42: 21a. Prior to assuming duties as controller-general of Taipingzhou, Mi Youren served two stints as an assistant in unspecified bureaus. Given Mi’s strong local ties, I suspect that these were in the Runzhou-Nanjing area. After serving in Taipingzhou, Mi was appointed vice governor (duqin 司府) of Daming (southern Hebei), which at that time was known as the northern capital. After that, in the mid 1120s Mi moved to the capital at Bianjing (Kaifeng), where ultimately he was made one of the three managers of the Calligrapher Service. See Stumman, “Mi Youren and the Inherited Literati Tradition,” 170.

46 The gazetteer cited in the preceding note comments on Mi’s growing reputation in conjunction with his positions at Taipingzhou and Daming.

“Mountains clustered, constricting a rocky stream” (山川隘石泉). The line chosen by Duanshu for the painting that opens Poetic Ideas (color plate 1, fig. 1) comes from a very long poem Du Fu wrote in 759 and presented to two friends, Jia Zhi 賈至 (718–772) and Yan Wu 嚴武 (726–765), who were banished to provincial posts following the An Lushan Rebellion. In the fuller context of its quatrain, this part of the poem reads:

Land remote, confused in the fiery miasmas;
Mountains clustered, constricting a rocky stream.
So you choose to pass the days playing chess,
And should use wine to get through the years.

The passage evokes both the strangeness of the distant landscape as well as its dangers. As a commentator noted, the first couplet divides evenly for the two banished friends: Jia, dispatched to Yuezhou (Yueyang, Hubei), toward the deep south, risked the “fiery miasmas” (yufang 炎瘴), with their distinctly unhealthy connotations. Yan, sent to Bazhou (Bazhong, Sichuan), would suffer equally, isolated in the rugged mountains of the distant west. These landscapes of exile, where only an attitude of detachment and insouciance, aided by chess and wine, would do.

The passage to which Duanshu alluded through his choice of line “Mountains clustered, constricting a rocky stream” would have resonated deeply within the community of antireformists and followers. First and foremost, it evoked Su Shi, his three periods of exile, and his ability to rise above the physical challenges of living in the hinterlands. Reference to the heated miasmas of the south in Du Fu’s original poem would have provided particular poignancy, as these were precisely what doomed Su Shi in his last exile to Hainan Island. The relevance of these lines, however, extends forward beyond Su Shi, as the more general message of political disenfranchisement and physical hardship was equally relevant to Li Zhiyi and, from what we can surmise today, every descendant of Sima Guang.

The poem that follows, at the end of the riverside landscape, echoes the theme of exile’s loneliness. At the same time, there is a distinct beckoning to the greater community of like-minded individuals:

Dense, the ten thousand layered mountains;
A lone waterfall pours down in sorrow.
This resolve enters my fine jade zither;
There should be one who understands the sounds.

Like Du Fu’s poem, this is a statement of commiseration and friendship. The landscape
is an unkind reflection of internalized turmoil that seeks an outlet, a sympathetic ear: “one
who understands the sounds.” By alluding to the famous friendship between the qin player
Boya 伯牙 and his ideal listener, Zhong Zi 雞子期, the poem that concludes the Riverside
composition directs our attention directly to suffering, the need to express feelings, and
recognition that only an understanding ear validates that expressive voice—the “resolve”
that enters the jade zither. In a word, the texts accompanying the painting concern human
engagement and the traumatizing threat of social bonds being severed by separation or
exile.

The Riverside landscape is filled with images that build upon the idea of exile. Firstly,
the composition itself suggests the “land remote” of Du Fu’s poem. The viewer traverses
a body of water and encounters a self-contained landscape—no way to enter, no way
to depart. The landscape is isolated, like its inhabitants. The overall composition is
reminiscent of what has been identified by Richard Barnhart as the classic exilic landscape:
Misty River, Layered Peaks (Yanjiang dichang tu 峽江bank Yükseklik) of ca. 1090 by Wang
Shen 王昕 (ca. 1048–1103) (Shanghai Museum).48 Wang’s painting, however, commenting
on matters of the past, romanticized the exile experience with fantastical imagery and color
(as did Su Shi’s famous poem for this painting). In contrast, the Riverside landscape was
addressing a current, ongoing condition: the “wilderness” status of Sima Hui’s, his family,
Li Zhiyi (late sincere notwithstanding), and other second-generation followers of Su Shi.
Consequently, the painting’s tone is more plaintive.

The first thing the viewer encounters in the landscape, just past the Du Fu line at the
upper right, is a string of geese taking flight (fig. 2). This is a standard oppositional trope
that establishes the remotesness of the landscape and the absence of a way home. As the
landscape emerges, sandy shoals and sparse trees lead to two waterside dwellings. Here
two men appear to be engaged with their fishing nets while a third hovers between the huts

(fig. 3–4). Two buildings of a temple complex appear nestled among the hills under the
tall central peak. A single figure approaches from the left, stooped by age or weariness. A
fifth figure, equally bent, moves in the opposite direction by a thatched-roofed pavilion and
nears the “lone and sorrowful” waterfall (color plate 10, fig. 5). The stream empties into
the broader river, where we encounter a sixth and final figure: a fisherman in his small
boat facing the misty void (fig. 6). Borrowing from Daoist lore, he represents detachment
from the world. Yet, could there be a lonelier figure? Coming just before the closing poem
descriptive of a lone waterfall pouring down in sorrow, the fisherman seems to be a long
way from Zhuangzi’s ideal. The landscape’s depth of emotion is palpable. The figures
largely move in hunched solitude, in some cases back to back. Proximity seems to mean
little. Practically every figure in this remote community seems burdened by the weight
of isolation.

Judging from what we can see and read from Poetic Ideas, this should be the image
that inspired Sima Cizhong’s poem that immediately follows the paintings. Sima Cizhong
evidently chose to ignore Mi Youren’s contribution and instead singularly focused on
Duansheng’s “soundless poem” that echoes Du Fu’s “life of bitterness.” The personal
connection is striking: Sima responds to Duansheng’s painting as if it were an intimate
missive between family members. He echoes the painting’s theme of solitude and confirms
the sympathy of one who understands the sounds. Clearly Sima Cizhong and Sima Huai
were close; presumably, they were cousins. Revisiting Wang Shizhen’s error-prone
inscription for Poetic Ideas, in which he misidentified Duansheng as a painter surnamed
Zhang, Wang should at least receive some credit for drawing attention to Sima Cizhong’s family
affiliation. Wang suggested that Sima Cizhong might have been the younger brother of
Sima You 司馬綰 (1091 jinshi), whose style name, Caizhong 才仲, is similar. A
grand nephew of Sima Guang and a noted writer of ci, Sima You was known for his central
role in a romantic ghost story.49 But once again Wang Shizhen was wrong: Sima You did
have a younger brother, but it was Sima Yu 司馬昱, whose style name was Caishu 才叔, not
Sima Cizhong.” Nonetheless, all of this sheds a helpful light on the scope of the greater
Sima family and the importance of clan identity.

Three sets of cousins of Sima Huai’s generation can be deduced from given and style
names: Sima Huai and his brother Sima Ni, Sima You and his brother Sima Yu, and Sima

Cizhong, whose given name remains unknown. There were others. Sima Guang’s son, Sima Kang 司馬康 (1050–1090), had a son named Sima Zhi 司馬直 who died young. Sima Guang’s older brother, Sima Dan 司馬旦 (1006–1087), had three sons, of whom one, Sima Hong 司馬宏, had a son who is recorded in historical documents: Sima Pu 司馬朴. The given names of these third-generation descendants of Sima Guang all appear to be single characters with the tree (木) radical. Undoubtedly there were many, many more. In 1050 Sima Guang authored a text titled “An Explanation of the Style-Names of My Nephews” (Zhu xiong zi zì xu 游兄子字序), which in addition to Sima Dan’s sons includes eleven nephews.51 We do not know how many sons these nephews may have sired, but surely there was a substantial number. This was Sima Hui’s and Sima Cizhong’s generation. Many of them lived through the Chongning proscriptions of the beginning of the twelfth century, and from what little is recorded of them, they seem to have shared a common fate in being denied access to the avenues of success through examinations and offices. In my reading of Sima Cizhong’s poem and this riverside landscape, likely the work of Sima Hui, the singular voice is collective and familial. The individual speaks for the entire clan.

The importance of clan identity becomes more apparent when considered against the backdrop of Song society and specifically the powerful role Sima Guang played in establishing its centrality in both the social and political spheres. As scholars have noted, among new developments in the Song related to the family were a number of measures designed to enhance the prestige and identity of clans, including the establishment of family memorial halls (citang 祭堂), the founding of communal lands to help nurture the larger clan (zantan 贡田), the compiling of family genealogies, the drafting of family instructions, and ritual activities related to ancestral worship. All of these served to strengthen and clarify clan hierarchies and property holdings, as well as internal kinship relations.52 At the very center of this emphasis on the primacy of the clan was Sima Guang, who authored three important works: On Etiquette and Ceremony (Shu yi 館儀), Manners and Customs for Daily Life (Jujia zaiy 常居雜儀), and The Family Model (Jufan 家範). Modern scholar Zhou Yuwen observed that the influence of these texts on Song society was probably limited until the great Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 incorporated Sima’s concepts in his teaching a century later.53 However, there is little question about their influence on Sima’s own clan members. Historian Xiao-bin Ji singles out a long letter of 1085 that Sima wrote to some or all of his nephews. Written only six days after assuming the duties of vice chief councilor, Sima’s letter was meant to warn the younger generation of the dangers of nepotism. He cautioned his nephews to “redouble their modesty and politeness,” to avoid “arrogantly rely[ing] upon [Sima’s] reputation and position to do things that are unlawful and against the public good.”54 Sima’s admonition proved premonitory, though ultimately what doomed his descendants had little if anything to do with individual transgressions. What is striking is this consciousness of clan identity, how responsibilities, not to mention rewards and punishments, fame and dishonor, are shared, and how the individual is subsumed into this greater community of kin.

Entwined Trees

“Chan-chan rushes the water amidst the rocks” (潺潺石间漱). The line appended to the second of the Poetic Ideas compositions (color plate 9, fig. 7) is derived from a couplet that appears at the beginning of a modest poem titled “Rain” (“Yu” 雨), which Du Fu wrote in either 765 or 766 to celebrate a long-awaited steady rain following months of drought.55 The couplet in full reads, “Chan-chan rushes the water amidst the rocks; / Ge, it hurries over the pine [roots]” (潺潺石间漱，汩汩松上鬣). A light ink wash draws the viewer horizontally to a naked embankment and a copse of leftward-leaning bare-branched trees—willows, perhaps (fig. 8). A quick-moving stream enters from behind and pulls our view forward to the main focal point: two dramatically twisting wintry trees with ghostly pale roots grappling the ground in front of a large pitted boulder (color plate 11, fig. 9–10). Continuing to the left we recognize how what began as amorphous background mist behind the five-character Du Fu line has transitioned into a monolithic rock pressing upon the foreground scene (fig. 11). Another branch of the stream flows out from behind the rock and carries the viewer into a murky expanse. The small scene is intensely confined but also strangely disembodied, unattethered to surrounding ground at either end of the scroll and thus isolated: a place unknown, hidden, where two strangely contorted trees engage in a stately dance accompanied by the pure sounds of a rushing stream.

At the painting’s end, bookending the quotation from “Rain,” is the responding

51 Sima Guang 司馬光, “Zhu xiong zi zì xu 游兄子字序,” Chuanjie 與集, Siku quanshu edition, juan 69. 10a–11b. Since Sima Guang is only known to have had one brother, it is unclear exactly what relation he had with these other “nephews.” I suspect they were the sons of Sima Guang’s paternal cousins.

52 Zhou Yuwen 朱文, “Sima Guang de jiajuan neihsan ji qí dui Songdai jiaju jiuoyu de yingshang” 司馬光的家幹維持及其對宋代理家遺留的影響, Shida fudian 肖夫演院, 50:2 (2005), 1–12. Zhou’s essay summarizes the work of a number of scholars who have addressed the changing role of the clan as well as Sima Guang’s influence.

53 Ibid, 8.


quattrain (fig. 12):

Peaks wind and the rocky road curls:  
Much to fill eyes and ears with pleasure.  
If there is a hut in its midst,  
That would be the Pavilion of the Drunken Old Man.

The pavilion is a reference to Ouyang Xiu, one of the doyens of the antireform party as well as a towering literary figure of the eleventh century. One of Ouyang’s most famous prose pieces is “Record of the Pavilion of the Drunken Old Man” (Zuwiwenti jì 作醉亭記). Written in 1045 when Ouyang was demoted to the minor post of prefect of Chuzhou (Anhui), it describes the pleasures of a life removed from the political center. 56 Ouyang used the same onomatopoeic “chan-chan” Du Fu employed to describe gurgling water. Such coincidences alone could inspire an allusion, which could be playful and spur-of-the-moment without much intended weight. However, I suspect that the reference to the exiled Ouyang Xiu was intended to be meaningful. Duanshu’s initial choice of this line from “Rain,” in fact, may also have been made with Ouyang in mind.

We are reminded that the author of the quatrains that follow the paintings is unidentified. We know that Duanshu, whom I am identifying as Li Zhiyi, chose the Du Fu lines, and we surmise that a single calligrapher was responsible for all the verse. If Li were identified as the calligrapher, then we might assume that he authored the two poems, but this is not the case. An extant letter by Li that evidently dates to after the Chongning proscriptions presents a very different hand. 57 Li’s calligraphy is subtle, relaxed, and founded in the orthodox traditions prevalent before the strong current of individualism that arose in the last quarter of the eleventh century. In contrast, the writing in Poetic Ideas presents the brush mannerisms of the following generation: looser and with an air of insouciance reflective of “personality.” 58 Perhaps this is Sima Huai’s calligraphy. Perhaps there was an additional participant, maybe even two. Lacking knowledge of how these collaborations unfolded, I suggest that we treat each poem-painting composition as carefully planned. No matter who authored the two trailing poems, we need to consider them as integral units in the overall presentation.

Returning to the entwined trees composition, which I am primarily associating with Mi Youren, one notices first that the imagery approaches Du Fu’s couplet but does not illustrate that second line precisely—these are not pines. The change is significant. Any knowledgeable reader of “Chan-chan” would have understood that this is but half of a two-line couplet. The reader may not have known the second line, but its presence, like a shadow or echo, would have been sensed and the urge to recall it pressing. The fact that this is Du Fu, often considered China’s greatest poet, further incites curiosity, and not just for the couplet. The decision to paint these baroquely contorted worm-eaten trees rather than the stately pines of the poem immediately stands out. For that matter, the mysterious, somber mood of the scene is somewhat at odds with the overall tone of “Rain,” the first half of which reads:

Scuttling clouds build to massive height;  
Flying rain lustily arrives.  
Chan-chan rushes the water amidst the rocks;  
Gu-gu, it hurries over the pine [roots].  
Searing drought rote the heat of autumn,  
And the hundred clouds already were lost.  
But then the Heavenly Lord’s virtuous bounty descended,  
And the scorched carpet began to show life.  
The earlier rain wounded with its punishing force;  
Today’s rain gladdens, its demeanor gentle.

The line “And the rain gladdens” is, in its unabashedly paradoxical state, a direct reference to the paintings and the whole poem. If the poem is an allusion to Ouyang’s poem, then the parallelism to Ouyang’s lines is compelling enough to make the reference immediately clear. What is ironic is the association of Du Fu’s poem with the painting. The poem itself praises the pavilion, and Li’s lines—while not an explicit allusion—seem to reinforce that sentiment. By placing the paintings next to the poem, the presentation connects space and time in a way that is neither pale nor banal. The paintings are not meant to be read in isolation, and the poem is not meant as an independent work. The combination of poems and paintings is meant to be seen as a whole, as a proposition. Ultimately, the method of presentation is a variant of the aesthetic of the Tang, and it is through this method of presenting poetry and calligraphy that the artists involved in the Poetic Ideas Scroll could make their contributions known.

57 The letter is in the collection of the Palace Museum (Taipei), and is illustrated in Gugong fidai fashi puqian 故宮廢代書畫全集 (Taipei: Gugong Bowuyuan, 1982), 12: 144–145.
58 Beneath the casual air of Li Zhiyi’s letter lie hints of the kind of orthodox training that was prevalent through the first half of the eleventh century. The training was founded on the “received tradition” of Tang calligraphy that ultimately had roots in the Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361) legacy. An exemplar of this kind of writing, much admired early in the Song, was Li Jiazhong 李建中 (945–1013). See Sturman, Mi Fei: Style and the Art of Calligraphy, 188f.
59 Such doubling of onomatopoeic characters (here, chan-chan) almost always occurs in pairs, so two lines in a row each contain doubled characters (gu-gu).
already responds. In contrast, the painting’s imagery takes us to another world. Here, rain and gurgling stream may be just as soothing, but whatever relief they provide can neither mitigate the constrained nature of this wilderness nor assuage the frozen contours of its gnarled denizens.

Those familiar with the painting traditions that developed among Northern Song literati would understand that underlying this transformation of Du Fu’s pines was the emergence of a powerful symbolic icon: the old, useless tree described by Zhaungzi as superior just because of its uselessness. As Burton Watson wrote in his translation, “Its trunk is too gnarled and bumpy… its branches too bent and twisty. … No carpenter would look at it twice.” Yet precisely for these reasons “axes will never shorten its life, nothing can ever harm it. If there’s no use for it, how can it come to grief or pain?” Zhaungzi used particularly colorful language to describe the place where such a tree belongs, suggesting that his companion Huizi “planted it in Not-Even- Anything Village, or the field of Broad-and- Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it.”64 Zhaungzi’s useless tree transplanted to a remote village or illimitable landscape provided a perfect metaphor for the scholar-official out of favor at the court. Freed from the constraints of service and the grime of party politics, “uselessness” was spun positively: retirement and a simple rustic lifestyle brought countless benefits.65 Ouyang Xiu’s drunken old man was an important exemplar, but the more significant predecessor for Li Zhiyi, Sima Huai, and Mi Youren was Su Shi, who famously adopted the image of Zhaungzi’s useless tree as a personal metaphor in one of his paintings while residing in his own “Nowheres- ville”—Hangzhou, the site of his first exile, which lasted from 1080 to 1083 (fig. 18).

Zhaungzi named his gnarled, useless tree chu, which has long been identified with the “stinking chun tree” (chouchun 臭椿).66 In addition to its unpleasant odor and the unusable quality of its wood for carpentry, the chouchun has an extremely long dormancy—its leaves among the last to emerge in spring. This characteristic suits the demuded appearance of Su’s and Mi’s trees. Critiquing these paintings naturalistically, however, misses the mark. These were meant to be metaphorical images. The trees’ lack of leaves implied the failure of a principled man “to accord with the times.” Exaggeration of the knots and twists of the trunks and branches not only drives home the trees’ uselessness, it lends them the quirks of a lone individual—one whose growth has been stunted, deformed, turned this way and that. In every respect, Zhaungzi’s useless tree provided an apt image for the banished antireformists, Su Shi and Li Zhiyi. Transplanted to places of exile, these trees reveal the plight of those on the losing side of a factional struggle. Equally important, with their peculiar appearances and manner they embody that celebration of the individual that is a hallmark of late Northern Song literati culture.

The useless tree is an ironic image, its deployment as personal symbol an exercise in faux self-deprecation. There are other deceptions in the pictorial and textual rhetoric that might not be as obvious today as they would have been in the early twelfth century. The most important is the glorification of “Not-Even-Anything Village” as a place of simple rustic pleasures and spiritual cleansing. Some places of exile surely offered enjoyment, but the reality of banishment more often than not was a difficult existence under demeaning, even life-threatening conditions. Similarly feigned was the routine disparagement of life at the center. Despite the rigidities and unpleasantries of court politics, high office remained the one unquestioned mark of personal achievement and the goal of almost all. These realities help us address the apparent disjunction between painting and text in the entwined trees composition. On the surface, there is no divergence: the Du Fu line describes a fast-moving stream and rocks, both of which are found in the painting. However, once the full context of “Rain” is presented, with its general tenor of soothing relief, it feels quite different from the painting’s stark imagery. The key is found in the seventh and eighth lines. In the right context, the Heavenly Lord bestowing virtuous bounty, here descriptive of the nurturing rain, would have been read as a metaphor for an imperial act of benevolence, such as the granting of an official position. Given Li Zhiyi’s long history of exclusion from the official ranks, this seems incongruous, but it fits well with the change of circumstances that took place in 1116. In fact, it fits remarkably well. Significantly, the
very same position assigned to Li in that year, superintendent of the Yuju Daoist Temple, had been given to Su Shi in late 1100, when he was recalled from exile.63 Li was well aware of this: he wrote a poem commenting on the poignancy of following his deceased friend’s exact path out of banishment to this honorary position.64 This line from Du Fu’s “Rain” should be read as a celebration of imperial munificence—the general amnesty that brought an end to the long drought that had afflicted so many of the antireformists.

But why, then, the starkness of the image? I believe there is a complex layering of meanings at play here, a balancing act between a necessary statement of gratitude and what was ultimately of far more importance to Li Zhiyi, which was the presentation of this historical model of the banished official. He had played this role through his later years, and it had earned him status and credibility among his peers. The painting strips away any fictional niceties and emphasizes the isolation of exile. As such, it pays tribute to Li’s uncompromising nature and the great price he had paid over many years. It also honors Li’s place in a very real lineage, and in particular his relationship with Su Shi. This may be the most important aspect of Mi’s painting, though to see it one must be aware of Li’s deep devotion to his mentor.

Li Zhiyi’s allegiance to Su Shi is readily apparent from his collected works, which are filled with poems and writings dedicated to his friend. The two men became close literary companions early in the Yuanyou reign, when the antireformists held positions of power in the capital, and the relationship deepened when Li followed Su to Dingzhou in 1093. Here they are said to have constantly engaged in the rhyming of one another’s poems as well as the discussion of such earlier literary masters as Tao Yuanming (陶淵明).65 Su effusively praised Li’s poetry, as well as his letters, calligraphy, and various prose works, which he referred to as a literary samādhī (a reference to Buddhism’s idea of an elevated conscious-

63 Fu Zao 傅藻, ed., Donggu jushi xuan 东谷记事选, in Songren nianyu congkan (see note 35), juan 5: 2854.

64 Li Zhiyi 李之仪, “Zai ling You, xi Donggu Huanmin zuo shi shi song Dai Meng, you ‘Youju tanian di jieren’ zhi ju; hou zhi lingyai gai sui ling Youju; yu fu guan yi de zhi. Po jin wang yi; changquan you huan” Donggu jushi xuan 东谷记事选, in Songren nianyu congkan (see note 35), juan 5: 2854.

65 The relationship between Su and Li is detailed in both Kong Fadi, “Su Shi yu Li Zhiyi” and Zeng Zhouhuang, Li Zhiyi xianzu.
That connection to a literary lineage is explicitly raised in a comment that a younger contemporary named Zhou Zizhi 孫之最 (1082–1155) presented to Li Zhiyi:

It has been said that Heaven counts the number of sages born. For one to be born is difficult enough—to encounter one is yet again difficult! The literature of the Tang dynasty underwent three transformations before the appearance of Han Yu [768–824]. [Han] Yu’s disciples, including Zhang Jie [ca. 760–830], Li Ao [774–836], Huangfu Shi [777–833], and Meng Dongye [Meng Jiao 孟郊, 751–814], all glittered and earned wide renown. Those who later studied their works took pleasure in hearing their airs. More than two hundred years after Han Yu’s death, Lord Ouyang [Xiu] was born. Avidly, like one starved for food and drink, he collected the sages of his day. The outstanding talents of the day all gathered at his gate, among them Yin Shihui [Yin Zhu 尹洙, 1001–1047], Shi Mansong [Shi Yanmin 施延年, 992–1040], Su Zimei [Su Shenqin 苏沈钦, 1008–1048], and Mei Shengyu [Mei Yanchen 黄腾臣, 1002–1060]. These men from different worlds truly gazed [across time] at one another. Not even thirty years had elapsed since the Jiyou and Zhiping reigns [1056–1067], and the Hanlin Academicians Lord Su [Shi] presided over this literature/culture (wen). The disciples of Lord Su, such as Huang Luzhi 闻辽, Qin Taigu [Guan], Zhang Wenzhao [Lei], Zhao Wujin [Buzhi], and you, sir, are all men whose outstanding virtue and writing surpass all other contemporaries. Looking back on the followers of Han and Ou [Yang], there is no need for [you and your generation] to act with deference.

Feng Jizhi 存集之志, et al., 1015–1016, refers to the three sets of poems by Li Zhiyi, the outstanding talent of his day. The last two sets, written for the two sets of poems by Li Zhiyi, are not collected in the Siku quanshu edition, juan 58: 1a–1b.

What Zhou Zizhi described was not a lineage in simple terms, but a recurring historical dimension, linear scheme. This is not a matter of who begat whom, or who picked up with his brush where another had left off. Rather, continuing with the biblical metaphor, I see Zhou describing a process of multiple genuses, each initiated by a sage figure (Han Yu, Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi) who presided over a circle of torchbearers. Personal allegiances were highlighted, and with them a reminder of the strength of the values of kinship and filial piety. Less obvious but clearly present was an undercurrent of competition, as one circle was measured against another. The ultimate extension of this dynamic was the father-son relationship, which could be fraught with psychological complexity, but in the group environment, with a single figure such as Han, Ouyang, or Su at the apex, harmony reigned.

One last thing to note from Zhou’s description of the recurring pattern of cultural genesis is the exclusivity of the relationship between mentor and disciples. This was not simply a matter of loyalty but also ownership: the mentor’s specific approach or vision set him and his disciples apart from others. More than any other quality, this is what underlies Mi Youren’s painting for Li Zhiyi. One sees it first in the strength of the references to Su Shi. In addition to the iconic image of the useless twisted tree, strange rocks were also associated with Su: His son, Su Guo 蘇過 (1072–1123), followed him in painting, and added pitted rocks (keshi 石敲) to the family repertoire.53 None of the younger Su’s works have survived, but textual descriptions suggest intersections with Mi Youren’s contribution to Poetic Ideas. The pitted rock face presents against the trees and forces them into a shallow space (fig. 12.15) that serves to highlight as well as constrain. Intertwined, joined at the hip, it is hard not to read these two trees as a metaphorical expression of Li Zhiyi’s alliance with Su Shi. Pictorially isolated, the painting asserts the integrity of their removed space and the exclusivity of their shared values. Right and left, the poetic texts tether the two men’s relationship to a deeper historical lineage, from Du Fu to Ouyang Xiu.

In my opinion, lineage provides the most suitable overarching thematic structure for viewing Poetic Ideas. After Su Shi’s generation, lineage was more than a fact of blood or allegiance; it was a profoundly sensed psychological bond and duty that shaped both the art they produced and those who viewed it. As Tian Ruox’s inscription reveals through its reference to Mi Fu and Sima Guang, some perceived Mi Youren and Sima Hua as the products of the previous generation. An orientation that reflects the achievements of sons and grand nephews to fathers and grand uncles is unexpected, but in the context of the late Northern Song it should not be. Mi Youren and Sima Hua belonged to a generation that reaped great benefits but shouldered even greater burdens, and the art they produced pos-

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15: 1a–2a.

72 Zhou Zizhi, “Xian Li Duanshu” 見李端叔, Taihang zhiming ji 太行梓木集, Siku quanshu edition, juan 58: 1a–1b.

73 This was a subject that Su Guo is said to have excelled in painting—he was summoned to Huizong’s court during the Xuanhe reign and asked to demonstrate his skills. See Wang Mingqin 王明清, Huihua san lu 會華三錄, Siku quanshu edition, juan 2: 3a.
sesses a complexity that is little understood. It is an art that is deliberately self-effacing, repositioning subjectivity away from selfhood to accord with the demands of kinship and community. In this respect, the uncertainties that Poetic Ideals provokes as we reflect on authorship and identity, though presumably not intended, have a certain appropriateness. Individual voices speak collectively, and with a sense of mission.

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Reassessing Printed Buddhist Frontispieces from Xi Xia*

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Abstract:
This study uses printed Buddhist frontispieces to reevaluate Xi Xia visual culture and its connections to neighboring cultures—the Song, the Khitan Liao, and the Jurchen Jin. Many frontispieces, produced in large numbers with Chinese woodblock printing technology, have been excavated at Khara Khoto, Inner Mongolia, and sites in Gansu and Ningxia. Applying a visual approach, the author pays special attention to the uses of modular motifs across cultures. The production of Buddhist texts and frontispieces in early Yuan Hangzhou attests to the legacy of Xi Xia visual culture, which was promoted by Tangut monks active at the Chinese court and in the Jiangnan area. Far from being peripheral, Xi Xia’s visual culture participated in dynamic dialogues with its neighbors and deserves a reassessment.

Keywords: Tangut, Xi Xia, frontispiece, print culture, Buddhism, multiculture

Recent archaeological discoveries have brought to light the diverse material and visual cultures of China’s Middle Period conquest dynasties. In particular, art historians have published sophisticated case studies of the Khitan Liao and the Jurchen Jin material cultures, drawing abundant artifacts from Liao and Jin tombs and Buddhist sites in northern and northeastern China. 1 What deserves to be further studied is the visual culture

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