

Mi Fu's Concepts of Art Authentication and Their Ming-Qing Reception

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ABSTRACT

[Background] Mi Fu, the “Doctor of Calligraphy and Painting” of the Northern Song dynasty, was renowned for both his calligraphy and connoisseurship. His works *Shushi* (History of Calligraphy) and *Huashi* (History of Painting) circulated widely in the Ming and Qing through multiple editions, undergoing simultaneous processes of academic canonization and cultural mythologization.

[Objective] This study clarifies the core structure of Mi Fu's authentication concepts and examines their reception and transformation in the Ming and Qing dynasties through texts, practices, and the remaking of his persona.

[Methods] Employing a sociology of text and cultural semiotics approach, the study traces the reception of Mi Fu's concepts through three interconnected trajectories: the textual canonization from individual experience to cataloguing norm; the personal mythologization from historical figure to cultural symbol; and the differentiation of collectors from aesthetic distinction to social stratification. This tripartite path underscores the dynamic interplay between scholarly discourse, cultural imagination, and social practice in the evolution of Chinese art connoisseurship.

[Results] Mi Fu developed a comprehensive language of authentication that included brushwork, mounting, transmission records, and seals. This framework became the direct catalogue norm and discursive blueprint for Ming-Qing connoisseurship, underscoring its shift "from experience to canon." His discourse not only shaped the value spectrum distinguishing the "true connoisseur" from the "mere dilettante" but also provided a methodological foundation for later catalogues and connoisseurial practices.

[Conclusion] Mi Fu not only laid the foundation for Chinese calligraphy and painting authentication but, through Ming-Qing reinterpretations, also completed the transformation from experience to canon, from text to market, and from historical figure to cultural myth, becoming a central coordinate in the history of Chinese art connoisseurship.

Keywords: Mi Fu; Calligraphy and Painting Authentication; Textual Transmission; Mythologization

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1 Introduction

Xiao Ding of the Tang dynasty once wrote in the Yanling Stele: “By listening to music, one may discern the rise and fall of states; by examining the virtuous, one may know the survival or extinction of an age.” This remark stresses that careful observation allows one to grasp both historical change and human values. Mi Fu (1052–1107), the “Doctor of Calligraphy and Painting” of the Northern Song dynasty, embodied this spirit in the field of art authentication. Celebrated for his calligraphy and the so-called “Mi-family landscape style,” he was also distinguished for his discerning eye, becoming a pivotal figure in the tradition of Chinese connoisseurship.

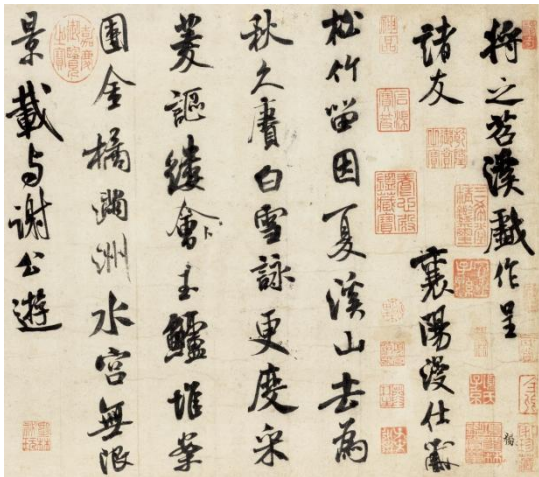


Fig 1: Poems on the Tiaoxi River



Fig 2: The Spring Mountains and Auspicious Pines Scroll

Mi Fu’s extant calligraphic works, such as Poems on the Tiaoxi River (Figure 1 Poems on the Tiaoxi River), Bai Zhongyue Ming Tie, and Shu Su Tie, are regarded as peaks of Song calligraphy. By contrast, his paintings have largely been lost. The Spring Mountains and Auspicious Pines scroll (Figure 2 The Spring Mountains and Auspicious Pines scroll), now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, long attributed to him, is questioned due to a later-added signature, highlighting the challenges of authentication in both Song and later periods.

Yet Mi Fu’s importance lies beyond artistic production. In *Shushi* (History of Calligraphy) and *Huashi* (History of Painting), he developed a framework for authentication that combined brushwork analysis with attention to mounting formats, transmission records, and seals. This holistic approach, innovative in his time, was widely adopted in the Ming and Qing, providing literati with practical models for connoisseurship.

At the same time, Mi Fu’s eccentric persona was repeatedly narrated and visualized. Anecdotes such as “Worshipping the Rock” and the image of the “Calligraphy and Painting Boat” transformed him into a cultural symbol “half-divine, half-mad,” satisfying later literati’s taste for both erudition and eccentricity. Through such retellings, Mi Fu’s image shifted from historical individual to cultural myth.

Thus, the study of Mi Fu is not only about a Northern Song artist but also about understanding how authentication in China evolved from individual experience to systematic discourse, and from scholarly practice to cultural symbolization, especially as his legacy was reinterpreted and institutionalized in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

2 Mi Fu’s Calligraphy, Painting, and Authentication Concepts

2.1 Life and Career

Mi Fu (1052–1107), styled Yuanzhang and known by sobriquets such as Haiyue Waishi, Yushan Min, and Xiangyang Mansi, traced his ancestry to Taiyuan and was later referred to as “Mi Nangong.” His life and career were closely tied to the political and cultural climate of the mid–late Northern Song dynasty. During Emperor Huizong’s reign (1101–1125), Mi Fu was summoned to the capital, Bianliang, due to his fame in calligraphy and painting and was appointed Doctor of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices. In 1104 (Chongning 3), Huizong issued a special edict creating the unprecedented title of “Doctor of Calligraphy and Painting” and granted him an audience at court, signaling extraordinary favor. He was later promoted to Assistant Director of the Ministry of Rites, but his upright character and refusal to flatter powerful figures led to his dismissal. He was reassigned as Commander of Huaiyang, eventually elevated to Grand Master for Court Service and Prefect of Huaiyang. His year of death has long been debated: earlier scholarship suggested before 1108 (Daguan 1), but based on textual and epistolary evidence, modern scholar Xie Wei has established 1107 as the most reliable date.

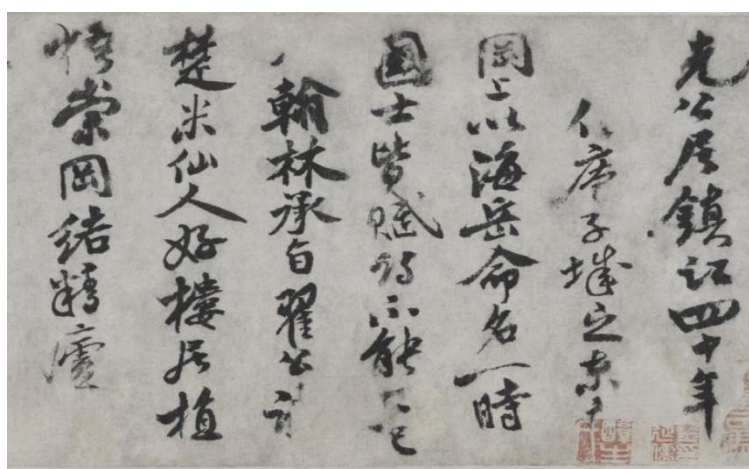


Fig 3: Xiaoxiang Night Rain Scroll

Mi Fu came from a modest family; his father, Mi Qiong, held only limited office. According to his son Mi Youren’s colophon on the Xiaoxiang Night Rain scroll (Figure 3 Xiaoxiang Night Rain scroll), “My late father resided in Zhenjiang for forty years...,” it can be inferred that Mi Fu moved there with his family around the age of fifteen. Zhenjiang, a major city of the Jiangnan region since the Six Dynasties, was both a hub of north–south transportation and a gathering place for scholars, providing a rich cultural atmosphere. Although Mi Fu frequently held official posts and moved often, he repeatedly resigned and returned to reside in Zhenjiang, which became his main place of residence. His life trajectory may thus be outlined as: early settlement in Zhenjiang—varied official service—later years largely spent in Zhenjiang. This trajectory not only reflected the ups and downs of his career and his shifting locales but also provided the cultural and geographic foundation for his artistic practice and connoisseurship.

The geographical advantage of Zhenjiang exposed Mi Fu to diverse artistic resources at the crossroads of north and south. Meanwhile, his service at court coincided with Emperor Huizong’s vigorous promotion of calligraphy and painting, including the creation of the office of “Doctor of Calligraphy and Painting” and the massive imperial collection project of the Xuanhe Academy, which systematically gathered masterpieces from earlier dynasties. It was within this institutional framework that Mi Fu entered official service, gaining recognition for his outstanding calligraphy and sharp connoisseurial judgment. The intersection of career opportunities and cultural policy allowed him to participate directly in the systematization of imperial collecting and authentication. This experience not only refined his ability to distinguish authentic works from forgeries but

also led him to formulate a distinctive approach that emphasized brushwork characteristics and celebrated individual style.

Therefore, Mi Fu's career should not be seen merely as a record of official appointments, but rather as the fertile ground from which his concepts of authentication grew. On one hand, his long residence in Zhenjiang gave him access to both private and literati collections; on the other, Huizong's cultural policies placed him at the institutional center of connoisseurship. The interplay of "movement" in his official career and "stillness" in his Zhenjiang retreats, along with the fusion of personal aesthetic cultivation and official institutional experience, created a unique cultural milieu. This background enabled him both to exercise an independent eye in discerning works of the past and to construct a theoretical framework for authentication that would profoundly influence later generations.

2.2 Writings and the Transmission of Editions

Mi Fu achieved distinction not only in artistic creation and connoisseurship but also through his writings, which became essential sources for later studies of Chinese art history. His works *Shushi* (History of Calligraphy) and *Huashi* (History of Painting), though written largely in an informal essay style and lacking systematic completeness, were regarded as foundational texts of authentication precisely because they came from the hand of the "Doctor of Calligraphy and Painting." On the one hand, these works preserved a wealth of information about calligraphers and painters prior to the Tang and Song dynasties; on the other, they encapsulated Mi Fu's own aesthetic orientation and connoisseurial methods, exerting a profound influence on later theories and practices of art connoisseurship.

After the Yuan dynasty, as the circulation of printed editions expanded, Mi Fu's writings gradually moved from being the private reference of the literati elite to becoming popular reading in the book markets of the Ming and Qing. The flourishing of private printing in these centuries resulted in multiple editions and compilations of *Shushi* and *Huashi*, which facilitated the broad dissemination of his ideas on authentication. The principal extant editions include: the Ming reprint of the Southern Song Chen Daoren's *Supplementary Leaves*, combining *Shushi* and *Huashi* into two *juan*, which led to the later citation in Chao's *Junzhai dushu zhi* referring to "Mi Fu's History of Calligraphy and Painting"; a Ming reprint of the Song edition of *Huashi*, preserving much of its early form; the Ming collection *Tang-Song shuhua yuanlin shiwuzhong*, which incorporated Mi Fu's writings; the Ming reprint of Chen Daoren's *Supplementary Texts*; Wang Shizhen's family edition *Shuhua yuan*; Tang Zhiqi's compilation *Huishi weiyuan*, with *juan 4* including *Shushi* and *Huashi*; Wu Kuan's *Baojin zhai ji*; Fan Tai's Ming edition of *Anonymous Copy in Six Volumes*; Wang Keyu's *Shanhu wang*, which preserved fifty-two entries from *Shushi* and *Huashi*; the *Jindai mishu* edition; the *Peiwenzhai shuhua pu* edition; the *Siku quanshu* edition, which incorporated Mi Fu's works into the state canon.

The wide dissemination of these editions ensured that Mi Fu's historical view of calligraphy and painting was no longer confined to Northern Song court and literati circles but became a common reference for Ming and Qing connoisseurs. Literati could conveniently consult his records of Tang, Song, and Yuan artists and directly access his original, unmediated opinions. More importantly, as these texts entered the academic corpus of the Ming and Qing—particularly through works such as *Shanhu wang*, *Peiwenzhai shuhua pu*, and the *Siku quanshu*—Mi Fu's originally personal and anecdotal judgments gradually acquired the status of scholarly classics. This transformation marked the process by which his authentication concepts were elevated from "private experience" to "public knowledge," profoundly shaping the development of art historical studies in the Ming and Qing. In this sense, the reproduction and transmission of editions was a crucial mechanism for the intergenerational transmission and canonization of Mi Fu's ideas on authentication.

2.3 The Structure and Historical Value of Huashi and Shushi

Although titled as "histories," Mi Fu's Huashi (History of Painting) and Shushi (History of Calligraphy) are not histories in the strict annalistic or biographical sense, but rather informal notes on connoisseurship and cataloguing. This informal essay style, characterized by its anecdotal and selective nature, allowed for flexible application and selective interpretation by Ming-Qing literati, facilitating its widespread adoption and adaptation. Each has its own structure and focus, yet both reflect Mi Fu's dual identity as a practicing connoisseur and a court-appointed "Doctor of Calligraphy and Painting."

Huashi, while named a "history," in fact resembles a painting catalogue written in essay form, organized roughly into categories covering the Jin, Six Dynasties, Tang (including Five Dynasties), and the "current dynasty" (Song). Its most notable feature is the authenticity and caution of its descriptions: roughly 70–80% are based on works Mi Fu personally examined, while about one-third derive from hearsay. For works he had seen, Mi Fu provided detailed evaluations of authenticity and quality, noted stylistic features of brush and ink, mounting formats, transmission history, and collector's seals—often reconstructing the provenance of individual pieces. For works not seen, he usually cited their source, owner, or origin of report, avoiding unfounded speculation, thereby giving the text considerable historical value as reliable documentation. Furthermore, his writing style is lively yet orderly, forming what later came to be called the "Wang school" paradigm of connoisseurial writing: beginning with textual references, moving to stylistic analysis, tracing transmission and seals, and concluding with present location. This narrative logic created a chain of "authentication—cataloguing—interpretation," which became a model for later connoisseurial writing in the Ming and Qing.

By contrast, Shushi has a more systematic, catalogic character. It takes the great calligraphers of the Han and Tang as its framework, arranged in chronological sequence to produce a relatively clear historical narrative. Covering figures from the Jin, Six Dynasties, Tang, Five Dynasties, and early Northern Song, the text provides foundational material for the study of medieval and early Song calligraphy. Not only does it preserve valuable first-hand information about the circulation of works, but it also records Mi Fu's own observations and judgments. Though shaped by his personal tastes, his assessments of authenticity, stylistic features, and historical development are often incisive. His *Baojin zhai ji* likewise contains numerous records of artworks and anecdotes he personally encountered, supplementing Huashi and Shushi and reflecting his daily connoisseurial practice.

Overall, while both Huashi and Shushi adopt an informal essay format, their historical value is undeniable. First, by basing their accounts primarily on direct observation, they avoid speculative exaggeration and preserve irreplaceable data about actual objects. Second, by emphasizing brushwork, provenance, and seals, they pioneered an integrated mode of authentication that would later become a methodological paradigm. For these reasons, the two works remain not only indispensable sources for the history of painting and calligraphy from the Tang and Song onward but also central to understanding Song dynasty approaches to authentication and scholarly culture. Situated at the intersection of personal experience and textual transmission, Huashi and Shushi established both the originality of Mi Fu's thought and the transmissibility of his method, enabling his connoisseurial ideas to exert influence in the Song and, through subsequent editions, to become canonized in the Ming and Qing.

3 Mi Fu's Overall Influence on Connoisseurship in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

As one of the “Four Great Masters of the Song,” Mi Fu continued to exert profound influence on the traditions of connoisseurship and criticism throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties. While he was admired for his calligraphy and the aesthetic legacy of the “Mi-family landscape style,” his greater significance lay in the concepts and methods of authentication he pioneered, which became foundational for literati connoisseurship in later centuries. His impact can be observed on several levels.

First, the concepts and cataloguing methods established in *Shushi* (History of Calligraphy) and *Huashi* (History of Painting) had a direct influence on later developments. Mi Fu’s reliance on firsthand observation (*qinjian*) and his careful, evidence-based judgments provided a paradigm for later art catalogues. Works such as Wang Keyu’s *Shanhu wang*, the Qing imperial *Peiwenzhai shuhua pu*, and the commentaries in the *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* all drew directly or indirectly from Mi Fu’s model. Especially notable was his practice of recording provenance, collectors’ seals, and mounting formats—details that turned his cataloguing into a kind of “historical chain” of authentication rather than a mere list of works.

Equally influential was his principle of taking brushwork as the core of judgment. Rooted in his own experience as a calligrapher, Mi Fu insisted that “the essence of calligraphy lies in the use of the brush,” often evaluating authenticity based on the vitality and spirit embodied in brushwork rather than relying solely on inscriptions or seals. This perspective was systematically codified and canonized by Dong Qichang in his theory of the “Northern and Southern Schools,” which privileged the South School’s non-professional, expressive brush-and-ink tradition. Dong’s emphasis on the spirit and vitality of the brush (the aesthetic dimension of *bimo*) further elevated Mi Fu’s principles, making them central to Ming-Qing connoisseurship. In this way, Mi Fu offered later literati a path of authentication independent from textual authority, making “authentic brushwork” the central criterion of connoisseurship.

In addition, Mi Fu elevated literati taste through aesthetic analogy. His famous remark that “to view a painting is like beholding a beautiful woman” moved the act of authentication beyond the identification of objects to the realm of aesthetic and moral cultivation. This analogy was widely accepted in the Ming and Qing, where collecting was seen as an extension of self-cultivation, aesthetic ideals, and social identity. Texts such as Wen Zhenheng’s *Changwu zhi* further developed this idea, embedding it deeply into the discourse of literati collecting.

Moreover, Mi Fu consistently distinguished between the true connoisseur and the mere dilettante. The former, endowed with discernment and cultivation, judged works with rigor, while the latter pursued novelty or prestige without discrimination. This distinction was frequently cited by Ming and Qing literati to criticize vulgar collectors and reinforce the value of scholarship and judgment. In this way, Mi Fu’s classification functioned not only as a methodological standard but also as an ethical boundary for the literati class, demarcating cultural identity and authority.

From the Ming onward, Mi Fu was also increasingly mythologized as a “marvelous and eccentric” master. His esoteric remarks, such as those associated with the so-called “School of Observing Aura” (*wangqipai*), were repeatedly invoked in connoisseurial discourse. While such mystical expressions were difficult to operationalize in practice, they reflected the dual process of his academic and personal deification. Through them, Ming and Qing literati projected their admiration for the lofty style of Song literati and used Mi Fu’s persona as a legitimizing authority in their own critical discourse.

Furthermore, Mi Fu’s collecting interests extended well beyond calligraphy and painting to include epigraphy, stone inscriptions, and scholar’s studio objects. This breadth of interest, later adopted by Ming and Qing literati, helped expand the scope of connoisseurship, which came to encompass not only paintings and calligraphy but also rubbings, antiquities, and various artifacts. In this way, he contributed to the formation of a comprehensive culture of literati connoisseurship.

Finally, Mi Fu was perceptive in identifying the emergence of workshop productions and forgeries even in his own time, and he proposed methods of detecting them. Such warnings became especially relevant in the Ming and Qing, when the expansion of the art market and demand for collections led to a proliferation of forgeries. Later connoisseurs frequently cited Mi Fu’s words to remind their peers of the importance of discerning the false from the genuine. His early critiques of forgery thus became a key topos in later discourse on the risks of collecting.

Taken together, Mi Fu’s influence on Ming and Qing connoisseurship was both comprehensive and profound. He provided paradigms of cataloguing and authentication, established standards of aesthetic analogy and value distinction, expanded the scope of collecting, and laid the foundations for later discussions of forgery. At the same time, his image was continually mythologized, reinforcing his authority as both a historical and symbolic figure. His influence thus extended beyond the Song, becoming embedded in the social and cultural fabric of Ming and Qing connoisseurship.

In summary, Mi Fu’s impact can be understood on three levels. Methodologically, he established a model of authentication centered on brushwork and codified in catalogues. Aesthetically, he elevated collecting into a symbol of personality and taste. Ethically, through his distinctions between connoisseurs and dilettantes and his critiques of forgery, he set value boundaries for the practice of connoisseurship. For these reasons, Mi Fu was not only the emblematic “Doctor of Calligraphy and Painting” of the Song but also a key source for the scholarly tradition of connoisseurship in the Ming and Qing. His concepts and methods, continually cited, reinterpreted, and internalized over the centuries, became the intellectual cornerstone of later Chinese art criticism and connoisseurship.

4 Dong Qichang’s Reception of Mi Fu: The Convergence of Text, Practice, and Myth

By the mid-Ming, Mi Fu’s place in the history of calligraphy and painting was further reinforced and mythologized through the writings and practices of Dong Qichang (1555–1636). Dong frequently referred to Mi Fu with the expression that he “could scarcely open his mouth without invoking Mi Yuan-zhang.” From his youth, Dong engaged in writing colophons and critiques on works attributed to Mi Fu (or those considered so), thereby constructing his own art-historical and connoisseurial discourse upon Mi Fu’s legacy.

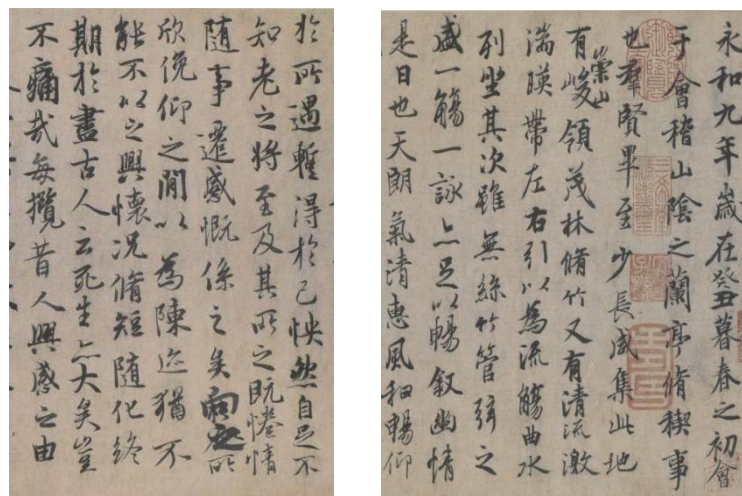


Fig 4: Orchid Pavilion Model

At age twenty-six, Dong began to discuss Mi Fu's calligraphic works using authenticity as the standard of evaluation. In his inscriptions on pieces such as Cao Ba's Horse with Mi Fu's Colophon, Grass Script Nine Letters, and Collection of Wu Zhao's Poems in Cursive Script, he consistently affirmed their value and placed Mi Fu's style alongside the Orchid Pavilion model (Figure 4 Orchid Pavilion model), highlighting the elegance and spirit of his running-cursive calligraphy. At this stage, when Dong was still forming his own practice, Mi Fu served as both a benchmark of connoisseurship and a model for artistic study.

In 1589, Dong admired a "Mi colophon" hung by a doorway, praising it lavishly; the following year he encountered Mi Fu's Tianma fu (Rhapsody on the Heavenly Horse), declaring that it was "vigorous and robust, standing uniquely within the calligraphic tradition." He further emphasized that without mastering the brush methods of Mi Fu's Cherry Blossom Letter (Ying tie), no one could hope to capture his style. This statement reveals Dong's deep understanding of Mi Fu's technique and his shift from mere admiration to methodological formulation: taking the Ying tie as a touchstone, he sought to grasp the spirit of Mi Fu's running-cursive brushwork, which became central to both his connoisseurship and his own practice.

By 1626, Dong Qichang's connoisseurial maturity was evident when he authenticated Li Sheng's Tang painting The Lofty Scholar. In doing so, he directly cited passages from Mi Fu's Huashi and cross-referenced them with his own collection, including the Snow Landscape scroll. This demonstrates the interplay of "Mi's text—Dong's authentication," wherein textual authority and personal observation mutually reinforced each other. At this stage, Dong consciously invoked Mi Fu's writings as authoritative reference, integrating them with his empirical judgment. This dual reliance gave his connoisseurship both inherited legitimacy and personal credibility.

5 Connoisseurs and Dilettantes: A Value Spectrum of Two Subject-Types

In his authentication practice, Mi Fu attached great importance to the qualities of the beholder and explicitly divided collectors of calligraphy and painting into two types: the dilettante (haoshizhe) and the connoisseur (jianshangjia). Dilettantes, driven by a thirst for fame and competition, acquire objects indiscriminately without distinguishing authenticity or quality, motivated largely by display and the accumulation of social capital. Mi Fu criticized such figures for amassing artworks as tokens of wealth while lacking true aesthetic cultivation and the ability to judge, thereby abetting a market atmosphere of forgery and frivolity. By contrast, the "connoisseur" is Mi Fu's ideal subject: endowed with talent and sustained learning—often capable of painting and well-versed in pictorial principles—such a person does not stop at possession but repeatedly savors a work as if conversing with the ancients. Connoisseurs emphasize the concordance of evidence, brushwork, mounting, and provenance, and they situate judgment within an overall contextual investigation rather than deciding authenticity in isolation. Mi Fu further articulated concrete working rules—"Do not view paintings by lamplight; do not view them when intoxicated; improper rolling and unrolling is most harmful"—which make clear that true connoisseurship concerns not only eye and learning but also rigor of attitude and method.

This binary of "connoisseur versus dilettante" was widely accepted and elaborated in Ming-Qing writings. Wang Duo in the Qing, for example, writes in Huishi beikao: Shangmiu that "viewing a painting is like beholding a beautiful woman; its spirit and charm lie within the living body," privileging shen yun and qi yun—an obvious continuation of Mi Fu's analogy "to view a painting is like beholding a beauty." Through this bifurcation, literati distinguished authentic aesthetic subjects from profit-seeking collectors and, at the level of value, established a boundary between "true discernment" and "pseudo-appreciation." The discourse mirrors literati self-identification in relation to art consumption, cultural capital, and taste distinctions. Building on this,

Ming–Qing practice further differentiated “collectors” (shoucangjia) from “collector-connoisseurs” (jiancangjia): the former used collecting as a means, pursuing profit and reputation with an emphasis on material possession; the latter not only collected but also engaged in authentication, inscription, and handling, investing spirit and time, and treating connoisseurship as moral cultivation and scholarly practice. Thus “collector” centers on the thing, while “collector-connoisseur” emphasizes the relational production between person and thing.

Taking the late Ming and early Qing as examples, five types of actors can be observed with relative clarity: grandees and magnates (e.g., Yan Song and his son), guided primarily by expropriation, whose collections functioned as symbols of political power and wealth; merchant-collectors with literati packaging (e.g., Xiang Yuanbian), profit-oriented yet culturally groomed to elevate status; pure literati connoisseurs (e.g., Wen Zhengming and his family), centering on appreciation and colophon-writing as modes of self-cultivation and scholarly inquiry; monastic–bureaucratic connoisseurs (e.g., Cao Rong, Liang Qingbiao, Song Luo, Gao Shiqi), combining Buddhist cultivation and state resources to proceed along dual tracks of “self-cultivation/governance” and “inscription/authentication”; and dilettante circles, inclined toward curios and market wares, lacking aesthetic depth. Broadly speaking, the first three belong to “collectors,” whereas the literati and bureaucratic connoisseurs more aptly fit the type “collector-connoisseur.” This taxonomy displays social diversity and reflects the multiple functions of artworks in Ming–Qing society: markers of wealth and cultural capital, media of sociability, and instruments of self-cultivation.

The binary inaugurated by Mi Fu, inherited and expanded by Ming–Qing literati, eventually formed a relatively complete value spectrum: from “dilettante versus connoisseur” to the further distinction between “collector and collector-connoisseur.” It reveals both the logic of literati self-construction and the tensions between the art market and scholarly connoisseurship. Its significance unfolds in three dimensions: first, the differentiation of aesthetic subjects—by emphasizing learning, brushwork, provenance, and method, Mi Fu set an ideal standard for the connoisseur in contrast to the dilettante’s ostentation, thereby establishing aesthetic rationality; second, the symbolism of cultural capital—as artworks became emblems of wealth, status, and taste in the Ming–Qing, Mi Fu’s distinctions provided tools for value judgment that safeguarded literati cultural capital and discursive authority; third, the construction of social identity—from the binary to a layered taxonomy, a cultural identity system emerged in step with social stratification. Grandees, merchants, literati, and monastic–bureaucratic actors displayed tastes that refracted their social positions, cultural standing, and political resources. In sum, Mi Fu’s typology was not merely an internal concept of authentication; it decisively shaped the formation of art consumption and cultural order in the Ming–Qing. Its continuity made “connoisseurship” not only a judgment about objects but also a historical practice of social differentiation and cultural identity.

6 The Mythologization of Mi Fu: Eccentricities, Anecdotes, and Visual Reinventions

Already famed in the Song as “eccentric and untrammelled,” Mi Fu was received in Ming–Qing society not only through texts on painting and authentication but also via continual mythologization of his personality, anecdotes, and visual representations. This myth-making reaffirmed his artistic status while projecting literati taste and social psychology. Summoned by Emperor Huizong as “Doctor of Calligraphy and Painting,” Mi Fu appears in later sources as boldly self-assertive. Anecdotes relate that, commanded to write the Zhouguan upon a screen, he threw down his brush, proclaiming: “I have washed away the paltry manners of the Two Wangs, to illumine the august Song for ten thousand ages!” Huizong, far from angered, expressed admiration. When asked to assess leading calligraphers—Cai Jing, Cai Bian, Cai Xiang, Huang Tingjian, Su Shi—Mi Fu reportedly

pronounced blunt judgments and boasted, “I write with sweeping strokes.” Exaggerated or not, such stories, avidly retold by Ming–Qing writers, shaped the image of a brilliant, undaunted “doctor,” aligning his audacity with an idealized literati ethos.



Fig 5: Shi Yurun’s Hanging Scroll Bai Shi Tu

Foremost among the anecdotes is “Worshipping the Rock.” Encountering a curious stone, Mi Fu had it chiseled and inked, then, fully caparisoned, bowed to it as if to a venerable master, calling it “Elder Stone.” Mocked as “rock-worship,” he retorted self-mockingly, “merely scratching its ears.” In the Ming–Qing this tale was widely visualized—e.g., Shi Yurun’s hanging scroll *Bai Shi Tu* (Figure 5: Shi Yurun’s hanging scroll *Bai Shi Tu*) (Worshipping the Rock), now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei—iconizing Mi Fu as ecstatically reverent before a stone and thereby concretizing his “inspired eccentricity.” Another key topos is the “Calligraphy and Painting Boat.” As Huang Tingjian wrote, “Surely it is Mi’s boat of calligraphy and painting.” Later figures—Wen Tianxiang, Zhang Yan, Ni Zan—echoed the motif in verse, turning “Mi’s boat” into a shared literati metaphor: a craft laden with artworks, drifting across rivers and lakes, emblematic of refined gatherings, personal refuge, and a degree of self-sufficiency and transcendence. The trope thus permeated poetic imagination and social signaling among Ming–Qing literati.

Textual reinvention also played a role. Mao Zijin’s *Haiyue anlin* gathered Mi Fu anecdotes in a near-“fictional” register, privileging circulation of marvels over strict source criticism. Such compilations catered to the Ming appetite for curiosities and aesthetic judgment, transforming Mi Fu from the emblem of a connoisseur-scholar into a cultural sign of inspired oddity. In tandem with the authority of his treatises, this anecdotal reproduction furnished abundant narrative material for myth-making.

Taken together, Mi Fu’s mythologization in the Ming–Qing unfolded along two interlocking planes of art history and cultural psychology. On the one hand, anecdotes and visual reinventions cast him as a “mad yet methodical” cultural hero, with quirks and stories serving as templates for literati self-identification. On the other hand, myth-making fueled cultural consumption—satisfying curiosity while being endlessly reenacted in paintings, poetry, notebooks, and anthologies—thus elevating Mi Fu from a historical individual to a symbolic cultural persona. Consequently, beyond his status as an academic authority on authentication, Mi Fu’s reception in the Ming–Qing advanced through the multi-layered reproduction of anecdote, image, and text. His unbridled yet disciplined persona was personalized through story, symbolized through pictorial and poetic elaboration (e.g., “Worshipping the Rock,” the “Calligraphy and Painting Boat”), and popularized through compilations like *Haiyue anlin*. Hence, Mi Fu’s cultural image in the Ming–Qing followed two parallel trajectories: academic canonization

via Shushi and Huashi, and popular mythologization via anecdotes and images. This dual reception—scholastic and mythic—made Mi Fu simultaneously a doctrinal authority in art history and a projection of literati imagination and social psychology, ultimately establishing him as one of the most complex and resonant cultural symbols in the Chinese tradition of art connoisseurship.

In addition, Mi Fu was increasingly mythologized as a "marvelous and eccentric" master. His esoteric remarks, such as those associated with the so-called "School of Observing Aura" (wangqipai), were repeatedly invoked in connoisseurial discourse. This mythologization conferred a transcendent authority and a degree of mysticism upon his authentication judgments, making them immune to ordinary market forces and enhancing their appeal to the Ming-Qing literati. His eccentric persona thus became a symbol of transcendent authority, reinforcing the perceived infallibility of his connoisseurial insights.

7 Conclusion

Mi Fu's significance extends beyond being labeled a "famous Song master" or one of the "Four Great Calligraphers of the Song." He was an artistic practitioner and connoisseurship pioneer, a stylistic model emulated later, and a continually reinvented cultural symbol. Tracing his life, writings, authentication concepts, and their Ming-Qing reception lets us grasp his unique position in Chinese art connoisseurship history.

At the scholarly level, through informal, insightful texts like Shushi and Huashi, Mi Fu established an authentication language integrating textual and material evidence. From scrutinizing brushwork to focusing on mounting, provenance, and emphasizing seal verification, he provided a methodological framework for later generations. Though not systematic, this framework—grounded in first-hand observation and clear judgment—became the direct source of Ming-Qing catalogues. In this sense, Mi Fu transformed a connoisseur's experiential insight into transmissible scholarly discourse, marking authentication's shift from individual practice to academic tradition.

At the cultural level, Mi Fu's eccentric habits and anecdotes were continually retold and visualized in the Ming and Qing. From "Worshipping the Rock" to "Calligraphy and Painting Boat," from anecdotes to art, he was fashioned into a figure "mad yet methodical, eccentric yet disciplined." He embodied literati ideals of untrammelled spirit and satisfied society's appetite for curious tales. This mythologized persona made him not just a connoisseurship authority but a cultural emblem reflecting literati imagination and collective psychology.

At the receptional level, Dong Qichang's rediscovery and reinterpretation of Mi Fu were crucial. Through citations, creative imitation, and mythologizing, Dong turned Mi Fu from Song's "Doctor of Calligraphy and Painting" into Ming-Qing literati's "patron saint of authentication." This chain perpetuated Mi Fu's scholarly influence and gave his concepts new legitimacy and symbolic weight, making them central to late-Ming and early-Qing authentication and artistic creation.

Finally, studying Mi Fu offers a vital way to understand how Chinese art authentication evolved from Song to Ming-Qing. His concepts and methods marked connoisseurship's academicization, and his persona/myths show how appreciation discourses were reproduced in markets, social practices, and cultural consumption. Thus, Mi Fu was more than a celebrated artist: he became an indispensable coordinate in Chinese connoisseurship history, embodying authentication's transformation from lived experience to canon, text to marketplace, and finally historical figure to enduring cultural myth. Future research could explore local applications of Mi Fu's texts in Ming-Qing regional collections or circulation/authentication challenges from his forgeries/imitations in later markets.

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