Li Bo Unkempt
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Published by Punctum Books

Smith, Kidder, et al.
Li Bo Unkempt.

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Chapter 66. Wild Cursive Script

Huaisu 懷素 (725/737–post-782), great genius of wild cursive calligraphy, here’s a glimpse:

![Calligraphy by Huaisu](image)

*Fig. 81. Calligraphy by Huaisu.*

It’s a portion of a letter. The fourteen graphs say:

Bitter bamboo-shoots with tea would taste exceptionally great, so I’ll go get some straightaway. From Huaisu.

苦筍及茗異常佳，乃可徑來。懷素上

Li Bo’s poem:
A ballad of cursive script

To the excellent youth Huaisu, “Cherishing Simplicity.”
Your cursive script knows no equal in this world,
the Darksea whale flies out from your inkwell,
and a million rabbits are killed to make your brush-tips.

In the autumn months, as the weather cools,
drinkers and poets crowd the hall.
Rolls of paper and fine silk fill their boxes,
and black ink shines on the Xuanzhou inkstones.
You, my Master, lean drunk on your chair,
dispatching a thousand sheets in an instant —
a whirlwind, a galloping storm, the spattering of rain and wind,
falling flowers, flying snow, wilder than any eye sees.
You rise, your brush never stopping —
a line of words as big as the Dipper,
terrible as the voice of god or demon,
traceless as the gait of snake and dragon,
spiraling and shrinking, like startled lightning,
two empires battling for the world.

How many households are there in the seven lake counties?
And every one has a screen covered with your writing.
How many brushmen in by-gone times have found such fame?
And even Zhang Xu will die before reaching this success.
But you, my Master, do not imitate the ancients.
What’s most precious is born from Heaven,
so why watch a Persian sword dance to learn to write?615

草書歌行

少年上人號懷素, 草書天下稱獨步
墨池飛出北溟魚, 筆鋒殺盡中山兔
八月九月天氣涼, 酒徒詞客滿高堂
Did Li Bo write this poem? Probably not. He’d been dead some years when Huaisu made a big splash in the capital about the year 768. So most traditional commentators have called it a forgery. But Adele Schlombs, true connoisseur of Huaisu, argues that this piece of calligraphy is a forgery too, merely a “freehand copy,” not even a tracing or rubbing of Huaisu’s work.

Mixed in with real and fake is the secondary artist, an agent emanated from the originating source. Like an Elvis impersonator. Is this mix a dilution? We do the same when we read, though, interposing our own mind between a something and a meaning, making bad copies all the time. Complicit with these fakes, we have offered this piece of calligraphy, this poem, and our translation.

Huaisu, born in poverty, raised in a monastery, devoted above all to the cursive script — this is his early life. Like Li Bo, he seems to have had no significant human teachers. He tells us I’d observe how summer clouds formed many strange peaks, and I took them as my master. Summer clouds are constantly transforming in the wind, never with the same configuration. I also happened on cracks in a wall — each one is completely natural to itself.
But also, like Li Bo, exceptionally well versed in his artistic traditions. When Huaisu arrives in post-war Chang’an, his wild swagger is immediately lionized. He brings with him a dizzying “Autobiography” (Huaisu zishutie 懷素自叔帖), to wit:

The text contains some details of his life, but it’s mostly assembled accolades of the famous. Thus it’s closer to a cv cum reference letters than our sense of autobiography — it’s a foot in the door, both stylistically and socially.


Schlombs situates these triumphant displays of “wild, dramatic spontaneity” in the socio-intellectual context of Chang’an after the Rebellion. Something had gone terribly wrong, and iconoclasm, a further breaking of symbols, spoke to this directly. She identifies a coterie of new men — mid-level scholar-officials...
without pedigree or ties to the moribund aristocracy— who adopt Huaisu as a vision of their truer self.627

Li Bo has been curated by later Chinese tradition in much the same terms. But these terms are a post-rebellion creation. In his own time Li Bo elicited comments like “This poem would set ghosts and gods to weep,”628 or “The pupils of his eyes blazed sharply, quivering like a hungry tiger,”629 or “Even more singular than singular.”630 Post-war the new categories of individual identity, uniqueness and self-expression gradually become available, even necessary, and they scoop him right up.631 Thus two generations later, poets speak of his “virile élan and untrammeled abandon, his casting off of restraints.”632 So if we approach Li Bo through the last millennium of his Chinese readership, from late Tang onwards, we find him reflected in that mirror.

Here I’ll mark some stages through which that curation passes. First, both Li Bo and Huaisu do something unaccountable, something past measure or immeasure, simply overwhelming and mind stopping, like an orgasm. What can you say about that? There’s no place to stand and view this from within.

Then, as we’ve seen, come the names, “untrammeled,” “unrestrained,” the identification of qualities that surround this (((energy field)))).633

Next the languages of religion enter. For Huaisu, it’s Zen (or, in its Chinese pronunciation, Chan). But that is only in late Tang, a hundred years post hoc.634 And it is an aestheticized religion— “Zen as artistic experience.”635 Eventually Li Bo too is praised in Zen language.636

Finally, as Schlombs notes, in the early eleventh century “the image of the wild monk was converted into that of a versatile scholar-artist.”637 In the new literatus culture of Song, there’s a place for conventions of unconventionality.638

This devolution process is yet more striking in the case of Li Bo’s close contemporary Mazu 馬祖 (709–788), “Patriarch Ma,” co-founder with Huineng 惠能 (638–713) of the Zen style, the only Chinese monk I know who’s known by his original family name, “Mr. Ma.” Just a few years younger than Li Bo and, like him, growing up in Sichuan. Like him, leaving town and roam-
ing out, then connecting with his own master at the Southern Marchmount, Mt. Heng. His extant speech was collected in the eleventh century as the *Mazu yulu* 馬祖語錄. It consists of two parts—public sermons given before hundreds of monks and lay people, and some thirty private dialogues with students. Mario Poceski has studied these texts intensively and concludes, “I think we have fairly strong grounds to infer that the extant sermons are based on edited transcripts of various talks Mazu gave during his long teaching career.” They are also hardly distinguishable from other good Buddhism of the time.

The dialogues are way different. Here Mazu kicks, shouts, beats, indirects, all activities we now associate with the Zen school. Some mild examples:

What’s a Buddha like?
This very mind, this very Buddha.

大梅問：「如何是佛？」
師云：「即心即佛。」

Why did Your Reverence say, “This very mind, this very Buddha”?
To stop the little children crying.
What’s it like when the crying stops?
Not a mind, not a Buddha.

僧問：「和尚為甚麼說即心即佛？」
師曰：「為止小兒啼。」
問：「啼止時如何？」
師曰：「非心非佛。」

Please tell me directly the intention of the Patriarch bringing us Zen from the West.
I’m tired out today and can’t answer you. Go ask Zhizang.

僧問：「離四句、絕百非，請師直指西來意。」
師曰：「我今日勞倦，不能為汝說得，問取智藏。」
There is no evidence that anyone taught this way before Mazu.642 There is also no evidence that Poceski can find for these stories until 250 years later, in early Song. For this and other good reasons, Poceski considers them recent fabrications, designed to establish the eccentric Zen brand among Song literati eager for iconoclasm.643

I think there are other reasons why we can’t find Tang dynasty evidence for these dialogues. They are the most private and personal exchanges imaginable, like the whispering of two lovers. They were never meant to be pawed over, gossiped about, or spread through the realm.644

Or to be turned into kōan collections for the instruction of later students. A kōan is a story put by a master to test and entice his student’s understanding. The practice evolved from the “question-and-answer” (Ch. wenda 問答, Jap. mondo) dialogues we see here, and by the eleventh century had become a widely used teaching tool. In 1125 some hundred were collected and printed as the Blue Cliff Records (Biyanlu 碧巖錄).645 Kōan (Chinese gong’an 公案) means “a public case.” It’s what happens when you go to court and your private affairs become the state’s possession. Zen Master Dahui 大慧 (1089–1163) burned the printing blocks of the Blue Cliff Records.646

Huaisu. Li Bo. Mazu. Something unbearable, unhearable, now held under the banner of spontaneity. It’s a way of hoping that it never happened.647