

Imitation and Originality, Theory and Practice

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Introduction

Long before the invention of film and the printing press, and before Neoclassicism had even begun to manifest in the art of Europe, artists and scribes across Eurasia had been making copies of paintings and texts by hand. The act of imitating a model, whether painting or text, spanned a spectrum of distinct practices ranging from attempts at exact replication to free interpretations. In China, the earliest terms referencing the production of such copies were: *mo* (copy made by tracing), *lin* (free-hand copy), and *fang* (imitation).¹ While each of these terms designated a specific mode of duplication, they represented a range of relationships between the original and the imitation. In China, as in Europe, imitation was the standard method by which artists and calligraphers learned their art, and so *mo*, *lin*, and *fang* appear in discussions of artistic training as well. In calligraphy, a student typically progressed from tracing (*mo*) to free-hand copying (*lin*). The shifting of the original from under the tracing paper to its side was a milestone in the development of a personal style. Choosing the appropriate model was another formative moment, a step that involved far more than esthetic preference. Rubens maintained that the judicious study of models was essential to achieving “the highest perfection in art” (Alsop 1982: 6–9). Likewise, as theorized by Dong Qichang (1555–1636), choosing a group of models from the past was a key to artistic creation. The process involved selecting models, assimilating styles, and then developing a distinctive personal identity. The term imitation or *fang* therefore encompassed a whole span of practices ranging from the quotation of a stylistic trait to the interpretation of the idea, the *yi* informing the model. In this chapter, I will discuss the definition and practice of these three terms, using both painting and calligraphy as examples. The first part of the chapter explores

the different modes of free-hand copying (*lin*) and tracing (*mo*) in cases where the establishment and transmission of a canonical piece of Chinese calligraphy was based mainly on copies. The second part focuses on the practice of *fang* imitation, exploring the various modes in which early modern Chinese painting referenced the past. In examining the practice of *fang* during the influential period of late Ming (mid-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries), I posit that the term "*fang*" is far richer than its literal English translation. "*Fang*" is not merely the practice of "imitation;" it denotes a range of repetitions: borrowing, quotation, paraphrase, interpretation, reference, and appropriation.

The Canonization of Wang Xizhi's *Preface to the Poems from the Orchid Pavilion Literary Gathering*

This section begins with a discussion of the terms that have been used since early times to describe the production of images. In the *Shuowen jiezi* (Explanations of simple and compound words) (100–121 CE), the first comprehensive dictionary of Chinese characters, the word *mo* is defined as "to regulate" or *gui*. *Gui*, in its noun and verb forms encompasses a cluster of meanings including "rules" and "customs", or "to plan", "to advise", and "to imitate." In explaining the meaning of the character *mo*, the most authoritative annotator of the dictionary quoted two examples. One of these relates the term to planning, while the other refers to an artisan painter in the act of delineating or modeling an object. *Mo* was interchangeable with another character with the same pronunciation: *mo* meaning "norm" or "model," a term that could be used both as a noun and as a verb. *Mo* appears in compounds such as *guimo* and *moxie*, both used to describe the act of learning the master's style through replication. For example, the famous scholar official and calligrapher Cai Yong (133–192) wrote out the text of the classics and the text was engraved on stone steles. When the steles were erected, people flocked to make copies/*moxie*, both for appreciation and for learning. *Mo* is more often used in compounds such as *molin* or *linmo*, as seen in one of the most celebrated texts on painting, the *Xuanhe huapu*, a catalog of the imperial collection produced during the reign of Huizong (r. 1102–1127) of the Song Dynasty.

The compound *linmo* was widely used in the Song dynasty to describe the practice of making exact replicas from original works of art. More than one Song scholar observed the distinction between *lin* and *mo*. One of these, Zhang Shinan (thirteenth century), commented on the difference between these two modes of copying:

Contemporary writers all maintain that *lin* and *mo* are the same thing. They don't know that *lin* and *mo* are distinctly different. *Lin* means placing the paper at the side [of the original], studying the original by observing the size, thickness [of the ink and colors], and composition. In this practice, the word *lin* is used as in the phrase *linyuan* [walking right next to an area of deep water]. *Mo* means placing a piece of thin paper on top of the original, tracing the turns and bends of the brushwork. (Zhang Shinan 1228: X2b.)

In the *Shuowen jiezi*, *lin* means to supervise or watch over, and when combined with *jian*, it thus connotes the act of looking down from above. In using the phrase *linyuan*,

Zhang Shinan seemed to be cautioning the copyist that when making a freehand version he should move gingerly and study the original work of art as if he were looking down on a deep ravine while walking on a cliff or, walking on thin ice, per the traditional metaphorical association. Zhang went on to introduce two new technical terms: *yinghuang* (literally, “hardened yellow”) for paper treated with wax to be placed on top, and *xiangta* (echoing copy), for the process of tracing against a light source.

In painting, the technique of making a copy by tracing was early on described by the famous Six Dynasties period artist, Gu Kaizhi (ca. 345–ca. 406), in his advice to the copyist: “When a copy is made on silk from silk, one should be placed over the other exactly, taking care as to their natural straightness, and then pressing down without disturbing their alignment.” Gu even went into detail about how one should avoid silks with warped threads, “since after some time they will again become straight and the proper appearance [of the forms] will be lost” (Zhang Yanyuan 9th century b: V9a–b; Bush and Shih 1985: 33 translation). In addition, the copyist should put his mind to the process, paying special attention to the brushwork of the original. The outline should be exact in thickness, while the curves and bends should be executed with an understanding of the gestural pattern in which the artist manipulated his brush. Although Gu’s instruction seemed to focus primarily on figure painting, he offered direction on color application for landscape elements such as bamboo and pine, rock and soil as well.

However, Gu did not use technical terms commonly mentioned in later texts such as “double-outlining with color filled in” or *shuanggou tiancai*. The method of “double-outlining” was first used in calligraphy during the Six Dynasties period (Ledderose 1979: 33). In copying calligraphic work, each stroke of the character was traced with double outlines including its bend, curve, and hook. Ink was then filled in between the contours. The thinning and thickening of the stroke, even the traces of the split end or the single uncontrolled hair from a brush, would be faithfully followed. A skillful copyist would not only reproduce the physical structure and spacing of the characters, but also preserve signs of the speed of the writing brush. It was also essential to include all inconsistencies, corrections, and mistakes from the original manuscript so as to capture the moment of artistic creation. In other words, the ideal was that the spontaneous and momentary movement of the artist’s hand would be recorded and permanently preserved in the copy traced by hand.

The Technique of Ink Rubbing

Just as Roman sculptors made copies of Greek masterpieces in stone, so in China characters and pictures also could be carved into wood and stone for the purpose of preserving canonical models. A skillful carver could render the shapes of the brushwork with surprising fidelity, so that the inscription could serve as a model for copies. Cai Yong’s “Stone Classics” inscription is an early example greatly valued through the ages. When first unveiled, the steles attracted huge crowds rushing in to make copies. During the Han period, Cai’s writing would have been copied from the stone back to paper or silk, creating a dialectical relationship between brush and knife, original and duplicate. Since calligraphy was already considered an art form, in addition to being the primary vehicle for conveying meaning, one can imagine that people gathered around the stone steles to copy not only the content but also the style of Cai’s calligraphy. Once carved in stone, other methods were developed for making multiple copies for documentation

and preservation. The technique known as “rubbing” (*ta*) was developed during the Tang dynasty to make two-dimensional copies from the surfaces of three-dimensional objects such as stone steles, bronze vessels, and jade carvings. This technique involved laying a piece of wet, flexible paper on the surface of a stone stele. The liquid used generally consisted of a dilute mixture of water and glue. The paper would be pressed down with a stiff brush so that the paper would follow perfectly every crevice and protrusion on the stone, bronze, or jade surface. The paper would then be allowed to sit until it was slightly damp but not dry, at which time a pad would be inked and patted onto the paper lightly so as to leave ink on the raised portions. This would leave the incised part of the object blank in contrast to the ink-darkened raised surface. The advantage of rubbing lay in the production of an exact impression of the object, instead of a mirror or reversed image of the original as in the case of a woodblock print. The maker of a well-executed rubbing transfers to the rubbing the traces of the carving knife, as well as the effects of damage caused by man-made and natural causes such as cracking, erosion, and fragmentation. Rubbed copies made from the same stele during different periods therefore will reflect the passage of time.

Since the Song dynasty, collecting, dating, and authenticating ink rubbings taken from ancient steles developed as a specific branch of study. In late imperial China, the fashion for visiting famous stele stimulated interest in tourism, archaeological field work, and philological studies among the educated members of society. Ink rubbings taken from stone steles were anthologized and published, the collections functioning as calligraphic model books or *tie*. One of the earliest examples of such an endeavor was the compilation of the ten-volume *Chunhuage tie* (Model calligraphy from the Chunhua Pavilion) of 992, sponsored by Taizong (r. 977–997), the second emperor of the Song dynasty. Named after a pavilion in the imperial palace, the compendium replicated more than one thousand pieces in the imperial collection by renowned calligraphers from the Han to the Tang dynasties. Copies were sent to court officials as an imperial favor. Through the ages Chinese collectors, connoisseurs, and calligraphers never ceased to discuss and revise this, the first calligraphic model book in Chinese history. As late as the mid-eighteenth century, stones engraved with pages from this model book were remade and placed in the imperial garden. A commemorative essay was composed by the Manchu Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736–1795) himself, exhibiting his deep appreciation of Chinese culture and in deliberate emulation of the Song ruler.

In early times the word *ta* could also imply tracing, as seen in Zhang Yanyuan's *Lidai minghua ji* (*Famous Paintings through the Ages*) of ca. 847, the first text on the history of painting in China:

In the old times, people loved to “copy paintings” (*tabua*). Seventy or eighty percent of the works were copied, without losing the spirit of the brushwork. There were also “copies” (*taben*) made by the court, named “official copies” (*guanta*). Capable members of the imperial house and scholars from the Hanlin academy continuously gathered in the imperial gallery and worked on “copying” (*taxie*). In the days when the empire enjoyed peace, copying works of art was very popular, but after the troubles [of An Lushan's rebellion ca. 755–763] such things were gradually neglected. (Zhang Yanyuan 9th century b: II8b)

From this it would appear that the popularity of making exact copies declined after the mid-eighth century.

*Replication and Transmission: Establishing the Classical Tradition
in Chinese Calligraphy*

As in early modern Europe, collecting, cataloging, replicating, and distributing works of art were by no means neutral acts. Such practices could be used to enhance one's status, to gain access to certain social circles, to promote specific kinds of social values, or otherwise to engage in forms of cultural negotiation. And, as in Europe, monarchs were among the first to make use of the arts for such purposes. For the ruling houses, collecting and compiling records from earlier periods was important for creating a sense of historical continuity and establishing cultural legitimacy. When a new regime was instituted or when issues of authority appeared to be at stake, cultural strategies such as obtaining historical relics or compiling a history of the previous dynasty often could be effective for asserting legitimacy. Long before the Song emperor Taizong, another Taizong (r. 627–649), the second emperor of the Tang dynasty, had collected more than two thousand pieces of calligraphic works by a single calligrapher, Wang Xizhi (307–365), who lived during the Eastern Jin (317–420) (Zhang Yanyuan 9th century a: IV8b). Wang was known for his proficiency in various script types and for his fluid, elegant style. Taizong's enthusiastic promotion of Wang's writing enhanced his canonical status in the history of Chinese art.

According to some later critics, Taizong's enthusiasm for Wang Xizhi's calligraphy may have exceeded Wang's artistic achievement. A native of northern China and winner of a fierce battle for succession to his father's throne, Tang Taizong consolidated the unification of northern and southern China. He took an already flourishing China and built it into a dynamic and cosmopolitan empire both economically and politically. His reign and the cultural endeavors he undertook have been regarded as exemplary throughout Chinese history. His passion for Wang Xizhi's calligraphy had its roots in existing southern cultural traditions that had been established by literati in earlier centuries. Moreover, as a northerner and a conqueror to his subject in the south, his affinity for southern cultural heritage may have been a calculated political move (Kraus 1991: 32–34; Ledderose 1979: 24). Wang Xizhi was a scion of an aristocratic family that migrated to the south during the political upheavals following the fall of the Han Empire. By the time of Wang's death, his calligraphy was already being collected by powerful warlords and was widely appreciated in the southern courts of that period. During the Sui dynasty (581–618) the monk Zhiyong, a seventh generation descendant of Wang Xizhi, reportedly spent three decades reproducing the eight hundred pieces of the "Thousand Character Essay" in Wang Xizhi's style, afterwards distributing the copies to monasteries in the Zhejiang region. With his power and influence as a ruler and actor in the cultural arena, Tang Taizong's appropriation of Wang Xizhi's work impacted the course of Chinese calligraphy for more than a millennium.

Reportedly, the monk Zhiyong was also the last owner of what would become the most celebrated piece of calligraphy in Chinese history, an essay known as the *Preface to the Poems Composed in the Orchid Pavilion Literary Gathering* (353), or the *Lanting xu* (*Orchid Pavilion Preface*), written by Wang Xizhi himself. Considered the finest example of running script in all of history, this essay of 324 words is said to have been composed on a late spring day in 353, right after a literary gathering with friends and family members at Wang Xizhi's family estate named Lanting (Orchid Pavilion). While socializing in the company of kindred spirits, Wang executed the piece with exceptional

freedom and spontaneity of style, possibly while inebriated from celebrating. The inspiration of that moment subsequently eluded him, so that when he tried to rewrite the essay the next day, perhaps to make corrections, he allegedly could not reproduce the style even after many trials. Thus the most celebrated piece of calligraphy in China's cultural heritage passed down with characters crossed out and corrected, smeared and rewritten, such as to reveal fully the creative process. When Tang Taizong learned that the masterpiece had resurfaced, he sent an imperial agent to acquire it. The incident was recorded in both text and image, adding to the prestigious aura of the piece. Once he had obtained it for his collection, the emperor ordered copies to be made by professional copyists at court, including Feng Chengsu (617–672), in order to distribute them among officials and members of the imperial household. Renowned calligraphers and court officials, including Chu Suiliang (596–658), Ouyang Xun (557–641), and Yu Shinan (558–638), all made copies of Wang's masterpiece. One carved stone based on Ouyang Xun's version was erected on the palace grounds. Regarded at the time as peerless, Wang Xizhi's calligraphic style became the canonical norm for calligraphic style during Taizong's reign. Replicas of the *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, including those made with the double-outline method of tracing, as well as in freehand style, all became models for stone and woodcut versions. Rubbed and printed renderings were in turn used as models that generated even more copies. Taizong's obsession with this work culminated in his deathbed order that it should be buried with him.

After the original was lost, the many variants of the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* multiplied, especially during the Southern Song period due to the advancement of printing technology. According to the author of *Lanting Kao* (1208), a multi-volume monograph investigating this famous piece, there were 46 versions, amounting to more than 150 copies, in circulation. The number expanded to 117 versions during Emperor Lizong's reign (1225–1264), when thousands of pieces were reportedly in the possession of the notorious prime minister and antique collector Jia Sidao (1213–1275). It is not without irony that the single piece of calligraphic work that even Wang himself could not repeat was replicated by generations of calligraphers and carvers and transmitted solely in reproduction in a narrative that echoes the fate of some of the most famous pieces of Greek sculpture.

In the eighteenth century, copies of the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* collected by the Manchu ruler Qianlong included Feng Chengsu and Chu Suiliang's copies, the renowned calligrapher Liu Gongquan's (778–865) rendering of all the poems written at the literary gathering, and a copy of Liu's work by the great Ming artist and critic Dong Qichang, not to mention Emperor Qianlong's own copy of Dong's copy. Under the auspice of Emperor Qianlong, all were carved on the stone columns of a pavilion in the imperial Yuanmingyuan garden named Eight Columns of the Lanting (*Lanting bazhu*). After the destruction of Yuanmingyuan by British and French armies in 1860, it was found that the eight columns had survived the fire and so they were moved to a public site, Zhongshan Park in Beijing. Since the early twentieth century they have been admired by tourists both as ruins and as cultural symbol. In 2011, more than a hundred replications of the *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, including rubbings, woodblock prints, and the Emperor Qianlong's treasury of eight copies, were gathered for public display at the Palace Museum, Beijing, drawing international attention. In other words, whether strict or loosely interpretive, replication of canonical masterpieces "engenders a new and compelling aura of its own" (Freedberg 1989: 126) in both the East as well as the West.

Compendium of Characters

Tang Taizong's view of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy as canonical was furthered by his successor Gaozong (r. 650–683), resulting in the development of another kind of replication known as *jishu* or *jizi*, a compendium of characters. This extremely laborious practice, involving the collecting of all known characters by a canonical calligrapher, in essence made possible the selection of different "fonts" for editions of important texts. This practice developed during a project to assemble Taizong's writings in Wang Xizhi's character style. In the year 648, in response to the monk Xuanzang's (602–664) request, Taizong had issued an edict as the preface to the Chinese version of 657 volumes of Buddhist sutras brought back from India by Xuanzang and since translated. Entitled *Preface to the Sacred Teaching/Shengjiaoxu*, the text of 781 characters was later cut into stone to commemorate the event. In addition to a monumental version based on the work of the contemporary calligrapher Chu Suiliang erected in 653, a more elaborate rendition was cut in Wang Xizhi's calligraphic style as homage both to Taizong and Wang Xizhi. The monk Huai ren, who was in charge of the latter project, spent twenty-five long years finding examples of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy for each character required in order to compose the full text in Wang's calligraphic style. When the precise character could not be found, its radical and parts were extracted from different characters and then combined to form the new character. This tedious process also required exceptional artistic judgment from Huai ren for arranging characters into lines with proper spacing, as well as matching the rhythm and the fluidity of the master's brush. The finished product included both Taizong's and Gaozong's essays as well as a rendering of the *Heart Sutra*, the ensemble amounting to 1903 characters, all in Wang's calligraphic style. Huai ren could not have accomplished such a project without imperial support and access to a comprehensive collection of Wang's original manuscripts. His version of the *Preface to the Sacred Teaching* of exceptional quality was among the most valued calligraphic models or *tie* for generations of calligraphers and copyists. It functioned both as a model and effectively, as a dictionary of Wang Xizhi's style.

Admiration for Wang Xizhi's style in fact fluctuated considerably throughout Chinese history, but the canonical status of the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* was rarely challenged. Though the issue of authorship has been disputed, throughout the ages the manuscript continued to serve as a model for beginners as well as established artists. Repetition as a method of learning appears to be common to early modern societies with a tradition of art collecting. Not long ago the practice was lampooned in China in a piece of installation art entitled *Copying the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times*. Taking as his model the *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, the artist Qiu Zhijie (1969–) claimed to have copied the 324-character text onto the same piece of paper a thousand times during the years 1990–1995. On a single piece of paper, Qiu reenacted the copying and tracing practiced by hundreds of generations of calligraphers. The resulting work was a pitch black palimpsest of ink. The piece problematized the whole question of imitation versus originality. Whether we view it as a criticism of the culture of imitation in premodern times, a challenge to the authority of the artistic canon, or a satirical reference to an important cultural relic such as the *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, the pitch dark paper resulting from a mechanical and performative series of virtually identical acts also reminds us of the importance of copying and tracing in the history of art. To East and West alike, the practice of ritualistic imitation has been a double-edged sword in the history of artistic creation.²

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Fang Imitation and Dong Qichang's Southern School of Painting

The duplication of painting reached a peak during the medieval period under the patronage of the early Tang courts. Copies were viewed as significant mainly for pedagogical purposes or as collectible objects of appreciation. During the Song period (960–1278)—an era in which the established canon was challenged as new esthetic standards burgeoned—it became increasingly common for critics to insist that an artist “create his own unique style.” Wang Xizhi’s preeminence, along with other features of traditional taste, was challenged by leading literati in defiance of courtly standards (Powers 2010: 116–121). Yet these innovations principally expanded the range of imitative practices available. In succeeding centuries some artists created their own individual styles, and some offered free interpretations of canonical styles, while others continued to imitate classical styles. In the late Ming period, the paradigm and praxis of imitation once again changed radically. As in Europe, copying still played a role in an artist’s training, but ambitious artists increasingly regarded the study of canonical masters as a point of departure for historically self-conscious stylistic invention. This shift can be traced to the Ming (1368–1644) dynasty. The trend is best summarized by late Ming artist Dong Qichang and his use of the term *fang*, which has since been translated into English as “creative imitation” (Cahill 1982a: 123), “non-imitative imitation” (Ho and Ho 1992: 30), “reference”, or “free imitation.”

In *Shuowen jiezi*, the author identifies *fang* as part of a compound *fangfu* or “similar/resemble,” which means “as if it were the same, [but] when looked upon [closely], is not.” *Fang* is also often used in terms like *fanggu* or “in the style/manner of the old [ancient].” *Fang Songzi* or “character in the Song style,” therefore refers to “imitating” the character type as well as the page design in books printed during the Northern Song. It remains one of the favored fonts of computing and print media nowadays. *Fangxiao* or “modeling after” indicates the existence of a model. *Fang*, a slightly different character with exactly the same pronunciation, bears the same meaning and is used interchangeably in art and literature, such as *linfang* (freehand imitation) and *mofang* (pattern imitation).

Fang appears in the titles of Dong Qichang’s extant and recorded paintings and is almost ubiquitous in his inscriptions and writings. His use of *fang* was entirely distinct from any previous use of the term, and it imbued the word with a more protean and expansive meaning. Under Dong Qichang’s definition, *fang* could be understood as an act of free interpretation, or as an appropriative iteration of a model. In other words, *fang*, could refer to the imitative act as well as the product of such an act. The object of his *fang*, whether a picture, a composition type, a landscape motif, a texture stroke, or even the idea/intention of the artist, served as a source of inspiration, a point of departure for a new creation. *Fang*, when combined with the name of an artist or a painting title, can be read as “alluding to” or “in reference to.” Noteworthy also is that the object of *fang* could be singular or plural. As an artist, Dong Qichang turned *fang* from an art critical term into a practice whereby the artist expressed his personal attitude and motivation. As an art historian, Dong championed the canonical status of a select group of classical masters from out of the much larger traditional canon of masters. In his theory of “Southern and Northern Schools of Painting,” he essentially redefined the meaning and function of canon for later Chinese art.

The Expanded Meaning of Lin

In order to understand the transformation of *fang* imitation in the late Ming, it is instructive to consider Dong's use of traditional terms relating to copying. In general, Dong used *lin* for calligraphy and *fang* for painting, while *mo* is used to refer to the production of faithful facsimiles of originals for documentary purposes, such as those made by professional copyists Dong employed. *Fenben* (study copy) a term that formerly referred to the old method of making a replica of a painting and subsequently to the sketch passed down from master to disciple as individual sheets bound into manuals for study, had also been used to describe the study copies he made. The term *lin* was used to indicate that the original was at one's side for intimate viewing, as in the compounds *lintie*—copying with calligraphic model in sight, or *beilin*—copying from memory. *Fang* is used to refer to a painting that plays with ideas, forms, and formal means connecting to an individual painter in the past. Deriving from traditional practices, Dong seemed to have used these terms rather loosely. But it was this very looseness that enriched traditional practice with new layers of meaning.

According to Dong's own account, he began painting in 1577 (several years after he had commenced his studies in calligraphy) while but a young student with a primary academic degree. Initially he learned about art within the circle of painters and educated collectors living near his hometown in the Yangtze Delta area. His success in attaining the advanced civil service examination degree in 1589, followed by his entry into a high-level government career, offered him opportunities not only for viewing great art collections, but also the resources to collect art on his own. In 1595 for instance, he was able to inspect a rare painting by his most admired Tang poet-painter Wang Wei (701–761). In 1596, he acquired Huang Gongwang's (1269–1354) legendary *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* handscroll (www.lunacommons.org/luna/servlet/detail/ChineseArt-ENG~1~1~4689~1406011:Dingwu-Lanting-xu—Dingwu-Orchid-P?qvq=q:dingwu%2Blanting;lc:ChineseArt-ENG~1~1&mi=0&trs=2), followed by two paintings by the tenth century master Dong Yuan (act. 937–976). During the same period, Guo Zhongshu's (d. 977) copy of Wang Wei's *Wangchuantu* (Painting of Wangchuan Villa) also entered into his collection.

As a high ranking official in the central administration, Dong had been able to borrow Song paintings from collectors in Beijing ever since he first entered officialdom. The practice of borrowing and making study copies accelerated during his leave of absence from office in 1592, when he was situated near his native home in the south. From collectors in this region he was able to study paintings from the previous Yuan dynasty. According to Dong, in the years 1592–1593, he made dozens of *fenben* of masterpieces borrowed from local collectors (Kohara 1992: 84). In spite of the use of the term *fenben*, one wonders how closely these “study copies” would have actually resembled the originals, had they survived. A painting entitled *Sketches of Traditional Tree and Rock Types* (*Jigushushi huagao*) (undated, ca. 1611) now in the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing, could serve as one example of Dong's study sketches. The handscroll is an assemblage of motifs from old paintings with a variety of trees and rocks with landscape passages arranged randomly over the pictorial surface. One recognizes, for example, a group of trees on a rock extracted from Guo Xi's (ca. 1000–1080) landscape, a pavilion under a withered tree transplanted from Ni Zan's (1301–1374) work, and a seated figure in scholar's attire surrounded by trees from Shen Zhou's (1427–1509) painting of Suzhou garden. This is essentially Dong's study sketch in

which important landscape components and brushwork that are both characteristic and referential to the old masters were recorded as an aide-memoire for future use, as confirmed by the inscription by his close friend Chen Jiru (1558–1639) at the end of the handscroll: “Whenever he made a large composition, he would bring [the sketch] out and copy (*mo*) from it” (Ho and Smith 1992: vol. I, 72, pl. 19). Reading this rare pictorial document against Dong’s own writing on art, one observes that Dong’s great facility for tree drawing was gleaned from nearly all the major painters of Song and Yuan periods (10th to 14th century). Among them, Dong discussed various tree types most frequently with technical details, establishing connections between painters of different periods (Dong 1555–1636: vol. II, 3a, 3b, 7a). For example, he posits that Mi Fu’s (1052–1107) signature dots came from Dong Yuan’s dots for delineating small trees in the far distance; (Dong 1555–1636: vol. II, 4b) that Ni Zan’s trees were a softer version of the Li Cheng (ca. 919–967)–Guo Xi type (Dong 1555–1636: vol. II, 2b).

Dong used the term *lin* only rarely with respect to his finished painting, but it does occur on his *Landscape after (lin) Guo Zhongshu* (undated, ca. 1598–1599) in the Östasiatiska Museet of Stockholm (Figure 14.1). In the spring of 1603, Dong left the following inscription at the end of the painting,

This is a *fenben* that I produced by free-hand copying (*lin*) Guo Shuxian’s [Guo Zhongshu] painting when I was in the Yuanxi Thatched Hut in Beijing. I regret not having applied color and painted the small trees. However, the compositional arrangement is close to the original.³

While there is no original Guo Zhongshu for comparison, Dong’s composition does refer to the Northern Song landscape mode, even though his forms and formal means reject Song naturalism. It opens with a group of trees at the lower right, and two thrusting mountain ridges in the middle that leads to the monumental bluff on the left, all in monochromatic ink. In fact, the painting has been identified as a composition of the Guo Xi mode (Ho and Ho 1992: 30–37). Nonetheless, Dong’s stylistic traits are impossible to ignore in the highly abstracted landscape elements, the unconventional upward momentum of the cliff, the thrusting and leaning rock masses, and ambiguities in the spatial arrangement.⁴

In a second inscription dated to later the same year, Dong spoke of finishing the painting on a boat trip to Nanjing, remarking “because the original work wasn’t on the boat, I fear I wasn’t able to achieve likeness.” Whether Dong’s postscript inscriptions were meant to be self-deprecating or ironic, they did allude to the issue of resemblance. For Dong, “not being able to achieve likeness” was actually the ultimate goal in copying, as he believed in seeking “non-resemblance through resemblance.” This is most evident when Dong Qichang once complained after he had copied Liu Gongquan’s version of the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* (*Lantingxu*): “I, however, resent that I cannot avoid resembling Chengxuan’s [Liu Gongquan’s] brushwork!” At another occasion, Dong declared, “My aim is to depart from the original, not to conform to it.” He maintained that “when one studies the calligraphy of ancient masters, it is acceptable if one’s own work does not resemble the models, so as to avoid the ridicule of being called a slave of slaves.” Apparently, Dong’s relatively unconventional paradigm of copying was criticized by his contemporaries. As he pointed out himself: “I have heard that my copy [of the *Langting xu*] has been severely criticized because it is different from the original.”⁵ *Langting xu*, in Dong’s belief, however, was still *Langting xu*, whether written in cursive

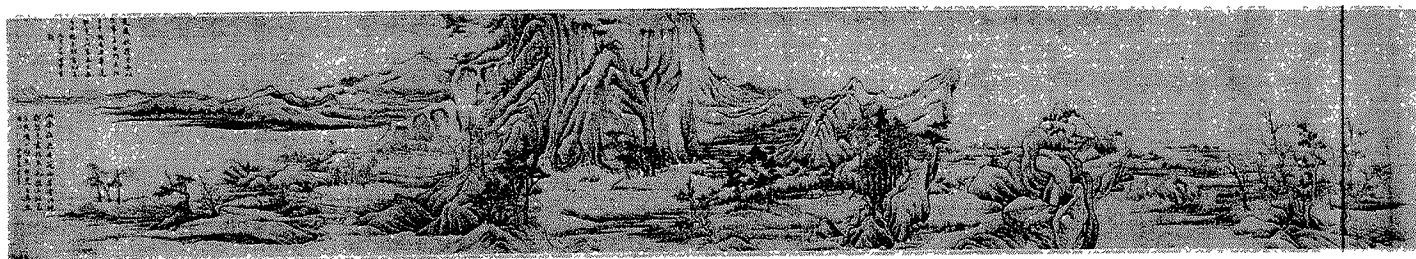


FIGURE 14.1 Dong Qichang (1555–1636), *Landscape after Guo Zhongshu*. Undated (ca. 1598–1599, inscription dated 1603). Handscroll, ink on silk, 24.5 × 140.4 cm Östasiatiska Museet, Stockholm. Source: Photographer Karl Zetterstrom and the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm/Ostasiatiska Museet).

or running script; "formal resemblance is dispensable," he asserted, rather presciently pointing to the emerging trend in calligraphy of the late Ming. Mixing different script types, taking characters and phrases out of context, as well as combining style and text from various models of calligraphy, were popular practices among the calligraphers of the late Ming period. Such elegant art historical play required that the artist be well-versed in classical styles and also have a good memory for the variety of calligraphic modes available for reference. Having achieved technical proficiency through firsthand knowledge, Dong certainly fulfilled, if not exceeded, such requirements. Metaphorically, he declared himself to be "plucking a stringless zither," as he wrote *Langtingsu* from memory (Dong 1555–1636: vol. I, 26a). Not only was Dong able to play the music, but he also performed it without constraints of form, medium, and technique; he was able to create thus, a general impression or an idea with but a lingering connection to the old. He created a new type of *lin* copying in calligraphy that was followed by generations of calligraphers.⁶ When Dong used the term *lin* to describe the relationship of his painting with its model—in this case Guo Zhongshu's landscape—he had transposed his practice in calligraphy to the art of painting. What resulted were paintings reminiscent of the old yet without any traceable resemblance. They were works of art based on art—art historical commentaries of the old. His innovations influenced the discourse and the practice of Chinese painting for centuries to come.

*New Definition of Fang*⁷

It has been suggested that Guo Zhongshu's version of the famous *Painting of Wangchuan Villa* (originally ascribed to Wang Wei) was the model for Dong Qichang's painting *Landscape after Guo Zhongshu*. If so, then Dong's response to it was steps away from the original. No matter how remote Dong's painting was from the original or whether that original was indeed the *Painting of Wangchuan Villa*, the shell-like folds of the rock formation delineated by dry linear brushwork with dotted contours in Dong's copy remained a painterly convention for alluding to Wang Wei. Dong developed this idiom into shades of variation, sometimes painting with a heavy, textured stroke in monochromatic ink to create an engraving-like effect, and at other times, softening hard contours by lacing them with rolls of colorful foliage. Rock convention as such became a site at which Dong played willfully with the established canon; in some paintings, oyster-shell-like rocks were a main compositional element, and in others, they were merely the passage in the middle of a towering mountain. Similarly, Dong might reduce and transform a canonical type of texture stroke (*cun*), dot, or ink tone. As Dong's models multiplied, stylistic idioms from other classical painters were integrated as if Dong were simultaneously maintaining a fluid conversation between old masters from various previous periods. For example, Dong applied Yuan painter Huang Gongwang's alternating dry-and-wet brushwork as well as Dong Yuan's signature hemp-fiber-like texture strokes or *pimacun* to his Wang Wei motif, creating layers of juxtaposed stylistic references that challenge the viewer as riddles.

A leaf in the album whose title has been translated as *Landscapes in the Manner of the Old Masters* dates from Dong Qichang's late period (1621–1624) is a good example (Figure 14.2). In this painting, the shell-like rock formation was adopted as the main theme with monumental proportions recalling a Northern Song landscape. Although Dong indicated in his inscription that the painting was "a *fang* of Wang Meng's brushwork," the Wang Meng (1308–1385) element is not at all apparent and seems to have



FIGURE 14.2 Dong Qichang (1555–1636), *Landscapes after Wang Meng*, Series: *Landscapes in the Manner of Old Masters*. Various leaves dated 1621–1624, Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Album leaf; ink and color on paper; 69 × 40.6 cm. *Source*: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the Hall Family Foundations and the exchange of other Trust properties, 86-3/3. Photograph: Mel McLean.

been reduced to a brief reference reflected in dense and busy brushwork, or more vaguely in the restless composition crowding the picture to its very edges. The cliff thrusting upward toward the right, consisting of repeated ridges laced with dots and trees and echoed by the boulders at the bottom right, calls to mind Huang Gongwang's system of geological formation. The stringy rope-like brushstrokes defining the tactile as well as the three-dimensional quality of the cliffs are Dong Qichang's reference to Dong Yuan's texture stroke. Throughout the picture Dong alternated cool and warm tones of color—bluish green and brownish red—a color system associated with Huang Gongwang. The intensity of the green foliage and well-defined tree trunks in particular are reminiscent of Huang Gongwang's execution of trees in layers of darker and drier ink that typically accentuate his otherwise softer and wetter mountain ridges.

The consistency of tone in Dong's painting, however, negates the receding depth implied by the diminishing sizes of the trees, flattening the pictorial surface in a manner unknown to the earlier masters he references. One could go on to compare the tree group in the foreground to another Yuan period painter, Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) and read the three-part composition as a vertical version of a horizontal Yuan type. Nevertheless, the spatial discrepancy between the right and left side of the main bluff and the arbitrary abstraction of landscape elements permeating the whole pictorial surface are characteristic of Dong's own compositional device. In this instance the picture consists of three or four parts divided yet counter-balanced against one another so as to form a coherent whole, a good example of Dong's "divide and unite" or *fenhe* structural principle. A sense of dynamic momentum/*shi* as seen in the thrusting mountain ridge was also a visual translation of Dong's words on landscape composition. In other words, a few elements from Wang Meng's painting—composition and brushwork in this case—served only as a "starting point" for Dong's new piece. In paraphrasing and commenting upon old models, Dong pushed the practice of *fang* imitation to a level beyond the traditional practices, arguably exceeding the so-called "apian imitation" or "bee topos" of Renaissance art.⁸ *Fang* is also set apart from imitative strategies seen in, for example, seventeenth French art or Italian Baroque.⁹

Although a diligent student of classical masterpieces, Dong's goal was not to step in the footprints of the old masters. In his practice, the goal of painting was not to delineate a physical likeness, or even to achieve a likeness of the masters' paintings that he admired. What Dong had created was a type of abstract art that operated through visual effects, in which brushwork was essential. Dong's oft-quoted line is most revealing: "Painting is no equal to [the real scenery of] mountains and streams when one speaks in terms of the wonder of those narrow [natural] passages; mountains and streams are definitely no equal to painting when one speaks in terms of the exquisiteness of brush and ink" (Dong 1555–1636: vol. I, VIa). To startle the viewer, he rearranges a mountain consisting of three to four large units on the pictorial surface, making them push and pull, thrust and bend. He connects ridges and hillocks into a mountainous structure that moves upward then subsides. Stylized texture strokes from old masters are taken out of context, transformed and blended. They are used to accentuate the contrast between light and shade, or to delineate a passage of water, creating thus a sense of depth that effaces itself as soon as it presents itself. Dong liberated landscape painting from its function as a representational medium. And in that way, he also freed landscape painting from the metaphorical, allegorical, and philosophical concepts commonly projected onto the subject of nature. In sum, Dong's landscapes were neither manifestations nor investigations of the cosmic order, nor were they the vehicles by which the landscapist expressed his inner character or mood (as had been claimed by preceding generations of artists

and critics). For Dong, to achieve an imaginary conversation or “spiritual communion” (*shenhuì*)¹⁰ with classical masters was both the means and the end in the process of learning from them. These dialogs were the vehicles through which Dong parsed the minds of the great artists he addressed in his own paintings, and, demonstrated his understanding of their intentions. In this sense, one could add another meaning to Dong’s *fang*: “in communication with” or “in connection to” the old master(s).

Dong Qichang’s Southern School of Painting

In Dong’s erudite study of ancient paintings, he focused on the art historical development of stylistic features, including brushwork, color, motif, and compositional mode. These purely formal features were analyzed and dissected, then recast in Dong’s own unique manner, reappearing in his work as a historically recognizable type of rock formation, a passage of hillock, a group of trees, or a stretch of water. These formal features became historicized modules for Dong’s landscape compositions, a vocabulary with which he essayed into a dialog with the past. Dong revealed his preferred sources in a passage where he makes recommendations about technical detail, compositional devices, and individual landscape components:

When painting the level-distance view, learn from Zhao Danian [Zhao Lingran, d. after 1100]; when painting rolling hills and craggy ranges, learn from Jiang Guandao [Jiang Shen, ca. 1090–1138]. For texture methods (*cunfa*), use Dong Yuan’s “hemp-fiber” stroke, as well as the “dotted” stroke (*dianzicun*) from his *Xiao and Xiang Rivers*. For trees, use the methods of Beiyuan [Dong Yuan] and Zi’ang [Zhao Mengfu]. For rocks, refer to those found in the great General Li’s [Sixun] *Waiting for the Ferry at the Autumn River* and in Guo Zhongshu’s snow scenes. Li Cheng’s style included ink-wash [monochrome] in small scroll and blue-and-green; one should learn from both. With all the above sources, one should achieve a “great synthesis”—the creation of one’s own style. (Dong 1555–1636: vol. II, 7b)

Like a text quoted from a literary model, forms and brushwork were lifted and inserted into a fresh context. These references to old masters—whether allusion, paraphrasing, citation, borrowing, or translation—were so layered and convoluted that it required a highly trained eye to recognize the source, or to appreciate the rhetorical strategy, differentiating the new from the old. Dong then used the term *dacheng* (great synthesis) to describe this result, a phrase used by Mencius to characterize Confucius’s all-encompassing accomplishment as a scholar and a teacher. It is also a term that Mi Fu of the Song dynasty adopted in describing his own practice in calligraphy, feeling that he had achieved his own identity through assimilating multiple styles (Ledderose 1979: 64).

In his adaptations and interpretations of Song and Yuan masters, Dong provided not only practical advice on how to view and appreciate painting but also a method for transforming art historical styles. In his Southern School of painting, Dong compiled a lineage beginning with Wang Wei, the ultimate model poet-painter of the Tang Dynasty. In addition to Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), Wu Zhen (1280–1354), Ni Zan, and Wang Meng—four Yuan painters of literary background—he also named four Five-Dynasties landscapists: Jing Hao (act. ca. 870–930), Guan Tong (act. ca. 907–923), Juran (act. ca. 960–980), Dong Yuan, and the Northern Song painter Guo Zhongshu,

Mi Fu, and his son Mi Youren (1072–1151). Zhao Boju (act. ca. 1120–1162) and Zhao Bosu who were famous for their blue-and-green style, and Ma Yuan (act. ca. 1190–1264) and Xia Gui (act. first half of thirteenth century), court artists of Southern Song, were relegated to the opposite camp, the Northern School. Dong's division of north and south was based not only on style but social status as well; he favored amateur over professional artists and the Yuan over Song style. It recommended a group of models for those men of letters who took up painting as their leisure pastime and as a means of self-cultivation and self-expression.

With the models canonized and styles coined, Dong's mode of imitation, like any theory, could limit as much as inspire artists of later generations. Dong's influence was so great that eminent artists working for the court, such as Wang Shimin (1592–1680) and followers, made Dong's synthesized style the orthodox style within the court. At the same time artists of a more independent temperament working outside the court reacted against the trend, creating new styles. A painting entitled *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Dots* (dated to 1685) by the "individualist artist" Daoji (1642–1708) has been recognized as challenging those past styles favored by Dong, moving beyond Dong's strategy of art historical repetition (Cahill 1982b, figs. 6–16). In this painting, which consists almost entirely of dots and lines, Daoji employed a variety of brush techniques but with no apparent intention to describe natural appearances, except perhaps for a few houses at the end of the handscroll. Wet ink dots of assorted sizes coalesce into tree branches at both ends of the painting and scatter across the middle section. These mottled patches alternately suggest moss or accentuate the repeated round hilltops next to the houses. Ranging from jet black blotches to grayish puddles, they also create shallow spaces here and there, adding palpably to surface richness. Stringy lines in diverse ink value rapidly executed give shape to clinging twigs or aerial roots that hang down from tree branches or trunks. Foliage of many types, including pine needles and bamboo leaves, develop into the main theme of the painting, as if commenting on Dong's technical notes on trees. Moreover, as if parodying Dong's "dividing and uniting" compositional principle, Daoji creates a screen-like surface of abstracted elements without any apparent formal organization. In his inscription, Daoji describes his stylistic references in an ironic, mocking tone:

Ten thousand dots of ugly ink to vex the Mad Mi [Fu] perpetually to death.
 Several strings of gentle lines to make Beiyuan [Dong Yuan] drop in laughter.
 The far side is not united; one sees no twists and turns of the mountains and streams.
 The near side is so cluttered; one sees only the crude vulgarity of country living.

Daoji's intention to challenge his immediate predecessor Dong Qichang is apparent in his reference to Mi Fu and Dong Yuan, Dong Qichang's most revered artists and core members of his Southern School canon. Caricaturing Mi Fu's signature dots and Dong Yuan's lines, Daoji produced a visually challenging picture that excites the viewer every bit as much as Dong's intellectually captivating compositions. As with any artist who has sought to assert his autonomy against his predecessors, Daoji had to address the conventions of the past in order to distance himself from them. To this extent all artists inevitably participate in a history created by their predecessors. Nonetheless, viewed in the context of the early modern world, Daoji created a highly sophisticated mode of repetition, both parodistic and satirical, producing as well one of the most original paintings in the history of Chinese art.

SEE ALSO: Jang, The Culture of Art Collecting in Imperial China; Sturman, Landscape; Vinograd, Classification, Canon, and Genre; Bai, Calligraphy; Silbergeld, On the Origins of Literati Painting in the Song Dynasty

Chinese Terms

<i>beilin</i> 背臨	<i>jian</i> 監	<i>Shengjiaoxu</i> 聖教序
Cai Yong 蔡邕	<i>Jigushushi huagao</i> 集古樹	<i>shenhui</i> 神會
Chen Jiru 陳繼儒	石畫稿	<i>shi</i> 勢
Chengxuan 誠懸	Jing Hao 荊浩	<i>shuanggou tiancai</i> 雙鉤
Chu Suiliang 褚遂良	<i>jishu</i> 集書	填彩
<i>Chunhuage tie</i> 淳化閣帖	<i>jizi</i> 集字	<i>Shuowen jiezi</i> 說文解字
<i>cun</i> 皴	Juran 巨然	<i>ta</i> 搨 (拓)
<i>cunfa</i> 皴法	<i>Lanting bazhu</i> 蘭亭八柱	<i>taben</i> 搨本
<i>dacheng</i> 大成	<i>Lanting Kao</i> 蘭亭考	<i>tahua</i> 搨畫
Daoji 道濟	<i>Lantingxu</i> 蘭亭序	Taizong 太宗
<i>dianzicun</i> 點子皴	Li Cheng 李成	Tang Taizong 唐太宗
Dong Qichang 董其昌	<i>Lidaiminghua ji</i> 歷代名	<i>taxie</i> 搨寫
Dong Yuan 董源	畫記	<i>tie</i> 帖
<i>fang</i> 仿 (倣)	<i>lin</i> 臨	Wang Meng 王蒙
<i>fangfu</i> 仿佛	<i>linfang</i> 臨倣	Wang Shimim 王時敏
<i>fanggu</i> 仿古	<i>linmo</i> 臨摹	Wang Wei 王維
<i>fang Songzi</i> 仿宋字	<i>lintie</i> 臨帖	Wang Xizhi 王羲之
<i>fangxiao</i> 仿效	<i>linyuan</i> 臨淵	<i>Wangchuantu</i> 輞川圖
<i>fenben</i> 粉本	Liu Gongquan 柳公權	Wu Zhen 吳鎮
Feng Chengsu 馮承素	Lizong 理宗	Xia Gui 夏圭
<i>fenhe</i> 分和	Ma Yuan 馬遠	<i>xiangta</i> 響搨
Gaozong 高宗	Mi Fu 米芾	<i>Xuanhe huapu</i> 宣和畫譜
Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之	Mi Youren 米友仁	Xuanzai 玄宰
Guan Tong 關同	<i>mo</i> 模 (摹)	Xuanzang 玄奘
<i>guanta</i> 官搨	<i>mofang</i> 模倣	<i>yi</i> 意
<i>gui</i> 規	<i>molin</i> 摹臨	<i>yinghuang</i> 硬黃
<i>guimo</i> 規摹 (規模)	<i>moxie</i> 摹寫	Yu Shihnan 虞世南
Guo Xi 郭熙	Ni Zan 倪瓚	Yuanmingyuan 圓明園
Guo Zhongshu's 郭忠恕	Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢	Zhang Shinan 張世南
Huairan 懷仁	<i>pimacun</i> 披麻皴	Zhao Boju 趙伯駒
Huang Gongwang 黃	<i>qi</i> 奇	Zhao Bosu 趙伯驥
公望	<i>Qianziwen</i> 千字文	Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫
Huizong 徽宗	Qiu Zhijie 丘志杰	Zhiyong 智永
Jia Sidao 賈似道	Shen Zhou 沈周	

Notes

- 1 For previous discussion and translations of these three terms in calligraphy and in painting respectively, see Fu 1977: 3–5 and Fong 1962: 95–103. *Lin* has also been translated as “free copy” both as verb and noun. Bai 2003: 268n69.

- 2 For a study of imitation as a form of repetition that encompasses a discussion of originality, see, for example, Loh 2004.
- 3 I am indebted to Zining Joseph Chang for discussing with me his interpretation of this inscription. Any mistake is mine alone.
- 4 For further discussions of this painting and its placement, see Cahill 1982a: 91–92, Richard Vinograd's catalog entry in Ho and Smith 1992: vol. II, –8–10; and Cahill 1982a: 273n3.
- 5 For quotations of Dong Qichang's writing on the issue of "resemblance", see Xu Bangda 1992: 117–118.
- 6 For a discussion of the esthetic value of *qi* (strange, marvelous) in the late Ming period and Dong's role in this new trend of calligraphy, see Bai 2003: 20–34. I also want to express my gratitude to Anne Burkus-Chasson for sharing her insight with me on issues and terms relevant to late Ming esthetics.
- 7 I am deeply indebted to James Cahill for his work on Dong Qichang, which characterizes Dong's modes of imitation as free, analytical, and creative. Cahill 1982a: 87–128, 1982b: 59–68.
- 8 See Pigman III 1980: 6–7 for "apian" imitation and Summer 1981: 191–193 for bee topos. I am indebted to Martin Powers and Regina Stefaniak for bringing my attention to these publications.
- 9 See Duro 2009 and Loh 2004.
- 10 Quoting Tu Wei-ming, Cahill introduces the concept of *shenhui* in his discussion of Dong's practice of imitation. Cahill 1982a: 102, 123. Dong Qichang's idea of establishing an immediate relationship with the ancient models can be read in the context of Neo-Confucianism of the late Ming period. For a brief and clear discussion of creativity in relation to the past, see Tu 1976: especially 14–15.

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