

37. Song Cao [Sung Ts'ao] (1613?-1692?)

“Poem in *Xing* running-script-style Calligraphy”

Hanging scroll, ink on paper
155.6 x 48.6 cm. (61 1/4 x 19 1/8 in.)

Inscription:

“The sound of the bamboo flute ceases
as the ocean of clouds reddens,
Carrying along flowers which fly
to the eastern corner of the temple;
The wild fragrance leads me
along the road to a high lookout
Where a land barren for a thousand autumns
appears within the setting sun.

As the song of the man from Wu stops,
a reed whistle takes over,
In the old park the walls are empty,
as a mounted hunter rides by;
The lanterns light the stage
in the place where music is enjoyed,
Don't tell me this evening
to sigh over the decline of fairyland.

Song Cao, called Sheling.”

Artist's seals:

Sheling; Song Cao; Zhongmi qiushi



Song Cao, *zi* Binchen, *hao* Sheling (“archer mound”), was born in Yancheng, Jiangsu province. Although nothing is recorded about his early education, Song developed great skill in calligraphy and poetry and served the imperial court as a *zhongshu* “drafter” during the waning years of the Ming dynasty. On the fall of the dynasty in 1644, Song withdrew to the mountains and lived as a recluse. His reputation for calligraphy and scholarship continued to grow, however, and in 1679 he was one of 188 scholars summoned to the special examination known as the *boxue hongci*. Thirty-six of this number declined to participate, pleaded illness, or were prevented by death from competing; Song was one of those who declined, thereby evidencing his loyalty to the dynasty under which he had been born and that he had served with dedication.

Song Cao's commitment to scholarship manifested itself somewhat later in a text he published on the art of calligraphy, *Shufa yueyan* “Brief Remarks on the Methods of Calligraphy.”¹ The text contains many thoughtful insights into the basic nature of the art: “The method of studying calligraphy rests entirely in the heart and mind. If the heart and

mind are able to communicate with the wrist, the hand will be able to pass this on to the brush...When the ancients wrote, they did so for a reason and did not begin for nothing. People of today love to sink into perverse practices and employ the brush solely to make manifest their own attitudes and ideas...”² Other of Song’s comments are concerned with more practical matters, such as how one should begin the study of calligraphy: “When beginning to make characters it is not necessary to waste a lot of paper and ink. Get an old rubbing of some model text, examine it carefully, and when you are thoroughly familiar with it, turn over the text and think about it, studying through thinking, thinking about learning. When you have it perfect in your mind, then pick up the brush and pursue it. If it seems clear and distinct in your mind but you are unable to be clear and distinct with your hand, then study again and think again, think again and compare again. If you get twenty or thirty per cent to begin with, you will later get forty to fifty percent, and from then on give free reign to your writing so as to enlarge your range and capacity...”³

The practiced discipline required by Song Cao’s approach to calligraphy is readily apparent in his own work (fig. 1), which as in the present example manifests a compelling combination of strength, fluidity, and elegance. The audience for these later works very likely included the merchants of Yangzhou who during the later 17th century brought new prosperity to the city. According to the *Ganquan Xianzhi*, the gazetteer for the neighboring district of Ganquan, Song lived in the city of Yangzhou and was highly regarded for the excellence of his calligraphy. Song’s birth and death dates are not recorded in standard sources. His latest calligraphy known at present is dated to 1692, while another work was signed and dated at the age of eighty *sui* or seventy-nine years of age; assuming that Song died in the year 1692, he would have been born in 1613, a date which seems reasonable in light of his service to the Ming court before 1644.

1. Song Cao: *Shufa yueyan*, *Meishu congshu* edition, part 1, section 3, pp. 3-16.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*

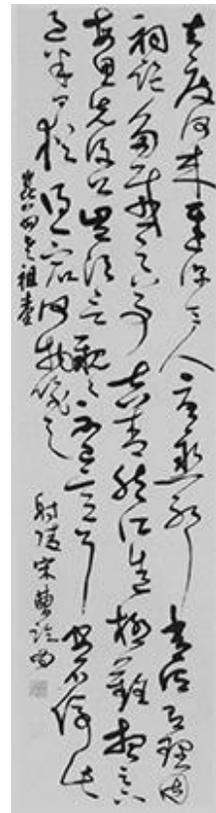


Fig. 1. Song Cao: “Calligraphy,” after *Zhongguo gudai shubua tumu* (Beijing, Wenwu, 1992), vol. 9, p. 171, no. Lu 7-0459.