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The New Result of Studies in the History of Medieval Calligraphy: A Review of The Manual of Calligraphy by Sun Guoting of the Tang: A Comprehensive Study on the Manuscript and Its Author

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Abstract: *The Manual of Calligraphy by Sun Guoting of the Tang: A Comprehensive Study on the Manuscript and Its Author* is one of the representative monographs by the Italian sinologist Pietro De Laurentis, which includes the textual and historical research of Sun Guoting (a famous calligrapher and calligraphic theorist in the Tang Dynasty) and his calligraphy. The integrity and circulation of *Shu pu* (one of Sun Guoting's most famous calligraphic works, which is an important work of traditional Chinese calligraphic theory) and its textual content and visual form, featuring meticulous historical analysis and unique insights, have created a dialogue with the existing studies of *Shu pu* in China. The English translation of *Shu pu* and historical records regarding Sun Guoting are presented in this monograph, with informative notes in the translation that convey Sun Guoting's aesthetic ideas and experiences while learning calligraphy. This book enriches the studies of calligraphy history in China by presenting a new perspective and approach, and the research-based translations provide inspiration and reference for the transmission of Chinese calligraphy in the West.

Keywords: *Shu pu*, Sun Guoting, calligraphy history, translation of Chinese classics

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The Book under Review: *The Manual of Calligraphy by Sun Guoting of the Tang: A Comprehensive Study on the Manuscript and Its Author*. By Pietro De Laurentis, Rome, Herder International Book Centre, 2011, xxiii+126 pp.

Overseas studies on the history of Chinese calligraphy have, in recent decades, undergone a period of boom and now is in a relative downtrend. At the beginning of the 20th century, Western sinologists with deep knowledge of Chinese language and philology, represented by Herbert Allen Giles (1882) and Friedrich Hirth (1905), made pioneering contributions to the introduction to Chinese calligraphy in the West. Then, the American scholar John C. Ferguson's (1919) publication of *Outlines of Chinese Art* in 1919 made calligraphy a separate art discipline in the West on a par with Chinese painting. Later, the Chinese American scholar Jiang Yi's (1938) masterpiece *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetics and Techniques* addressed the doubts of Western society at that time about the relationship between modern Western abstract painting and Chinese calligraphy. The first scholar in the West to begin studying Chinese calligraphy was the Dutch sinologist Robert Hans van Gulik (1910–1967), who made the initial effort to fill the gap in the Western literature on traditional methods of appreciation of the art of Chinese painting and calligraphy. Currently, calligraphy research in Germany is the most outstanding in Europe. Professor Lothar Ledderose of Heidelberg University has done research on the *Zhuan* script in the Qing Dynasty and the classical tradition of Chinese calligraphy. Adele Schlombs, the curator of the Oriental Museum of Berlin (Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst), has studied the emergence of the wild cursive script of the cursive calligrapher Huai Su. While in the US, Princeton University cannot be neglected. For instance, Fang Wen reached high attainments in exploring the history of Chinese art and culture, and has trained several Ph.D. students who are devoted to calligraphy research. Their research findings cover many branches of calligraphy, including many influential calligraphers throughout history, the aulic calligraphy in the early Tang Dynasty, the stone carving calligraphy of the Northern Wei Dynasty in Luoyang, and the relationships between the political leanings and the various styles of calligraphy. Also, Peter Sturman, professor of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has focused on the calligrapher Mi Fu of the Song Dynasty, and stresses text-image relationships. However, since their research is not done from the perspectives of sinology and the history of Chinese civilization, they have not clearly defined some of the fundamental calligraphical issues, nor have they fleshed out many of the specific calligraphical issues. Meanwhile, virtually no attention had been paid to *Shu pu* [书谱] and its author Sun Guoting, even though both the text and the author are of great significance in the history of Chinese calligraphy. Among the scholars in this field, the Italian sinologist Pietro De Laurentis is widely recognized as the most outstanding at present. Compared with other researchers, he is concerned with what the Chinese calligraphic tradition really is and sorts out the many intricacies of the relationships between calligraphy, culture, and society. Since the publication of the reviewed book, he has produced much more research, contributing substantially to the academic research related to Chinese calligraphy.

Laurentis' study of Chinese calligraphy is inextricably linked to his learning of the Chinese language and calligraphy, and it was in 1998 that he came to China for the first time and was exposed to the culture of calligraphy and stone inscriptions. Later in 1999, he found Wang Chengxiong, a Chinese calligraphy teacher living in Italy, and began to learn calligraphy under

his guidance. During his learning, he gradually realized that the connotations of calligraphy are more than the aesthetics of the characters, which led him to study the history of calligraphy and focus on the spread of Chinese calligraphy in the West. Since his first trip to China, he has made many field trips to China to collect first-hand materials and information. He visited many museums and forests of steles around China, such as the Xi'an Stele Forest, Inscriptions on Cliffs of Hanzhong, Tai'an in Shandong province, Wangcheng in Changsha, and the Taipei Palace Museum to observe the original monuments and authentic manuscripts, as well as to communicate with local experts and residents to gather research data. He frequently visited various bookshops, second-hand markets, and even auction markets to buy calligraphy copies, rubbings, and reference books. In addition, due to the close relationship between Japanese and Chinese calligraphy, he also made trips to Nagoya, Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, and Nara and acquired many useful books. He met teachers and friends in related fields, such as Tian Shusheng, Zhang Tian Gong, Zhang Naizhu, Bi Fei, and Yao Yuliang, who provided a great deal of help to his research on the history of calligraphy. Moreover, he was invited to some top Chinese universities as a visiting scholar, giving lectures and participating in academic seminars as a way of reaching out to Chinese scholars in related research fields, sharing his own research, and gaining access to developments in Chinese academia. Reflecting on Laurentis' research journey, he attached great importance to the fundamental elements that underpin the art of calligraphy, "I wanted to get my calligraphy research on the track of sinology, otherwise, it would always be floating on a superficial surface. Given the large number of calligraphic treatises collected through the ages, I could start with the original documents describing calligraphy. Thus, I gradually began to focus on early calligraphic treatises" (Laurentis, 2019). Laurentis has done solid research on the history of Chinese calligraphy and took *Shu pu* as the starting point for his research, as it is the most direct way to see the background and status of the literati's writing in the Chinese tradition of the Middle Ages. His study of *Shu pu* goes far beyond the study of art on a visual level and is solid sinological research, which is an entry point into Chinese civilization in his view.

The reviewed work is a revised and enlarged English version of Laurentis' Italian Ph.D. dissertation and two Chinese papers. It aims at providing a new approach regarding some key questions related to Sun Guoting (647–690) and his *Shu pu*, such as the core meaning of *Shu pu*, and its relations with the life of its author, a calligrapher and calligraphic theorist of the Tang Dynasty during the reigns of Emperors Gaozong and Empress Wu Zetian. There was a great deal of research and preparation that went into the completion of this book. In 2008, Laurentis arrived in China and went on his study tour in Hangzhou. During this time, he devoted himself to exploring the relations between Sun's aspirations and the literary form of *Shu pu*. Later, he further examined Sun's biography, and the relationships between characters and their strokes in classical Chinese calligraphy by starting from the eight methods of the character *yong* [永]. Although he had been studying calligraphy since 1999 and had made several field trips

to China to gather first-hand information, such solid groundwork led him to the successful completion of this book.

Apart from an introduction, the book is composed of three chapters. Chapter One explores the biography of Sun, from the years of his birth and death to his relationship with the society of his time, and many aspects of his life are included. Laurentis believes that Sun's biography is essential to appreciating and fully understanding the content of *Shu pu*, which is both a calligraphic work in cursive script and a text about calligraphic theory. In his view, Sun was a very outspoken person who liked expressing his inner heart in a direct way, an example of which there were very few in China at that time. Many literati in those days, due to their personal habits, covered up much of their real opinions about Chinese characters, writing, practicing, and appreciating calligraphy. *Shu pu* was different in that Sun spoke of many of his own experiences.

Unlike some famous ancient Chinese calligraphers or literati who have many biographical sources, very few records are available regarding Sun's life. Nevertheless, based on previous research, Laurentis collected all the possible information related to Sun, which he translated and attached as an appendix to Chapter One. The current information shows that Sun was born in the year AD 646 and died in AD 691. However, through an intensive reading of the last column of *Shu pu* and the *Epitaph* written by Chen Zi'ang, the exact year of his birth and death, 647 and 690, were deduced by combining the ancient Chinese rule of counting age and tombstone conventions. Then, Laurentis clarified Sun's personal and courtesy names, birthplace, the official posts he achieved, and the place where he died. More of the information presented in Chapter One is on Sun's social relationships. By analyzing the limited sources, Laurentis discovered that Sun kept great friendships with famous literati and high officials like Chen Zi'ang, Wang Shaozong, Lu Cangyong, Du Shenyan, Song Zhiwen, and many others, which demonstrates that Sun had a great reputation during his life and played an active role in the cultural circle though few records of this have survived. The reason for Sun's death also could be deduced from his nature and connections. Till now, Laurentis' exploration of Sun is the most exhaustive and the best supported by the evidence, leading to a better understanding and more extensive discussion of this prominent figure once neglected by academia. Furthermore, this more precise biography of Sun benefits our knowledge of his aspirations, which is one of the key factors contributing to confirmation of the literary forms of *Shu pu*.

Chapter Two offers the transcription and translation of *Shu pu*. Since the manuscript of *Shu pu* is in cursive script, which is difficult for westerners to recognize and read, and even most Chinese readers for that matter, Laurentis used the Chinese literature and studies conducted by Western scholars to help decipher and analyze *Shu pu*'s cursive script. A total of 369 lines of precise transcription are listed in the format of the original manuscript, and the characters omitted by Sun and those missing due to the damage to the manuscript are marked with () and [], respectively. Moreover, the doubtful characters are footnoted with explanations and

deductions. After that, the translation of *Shu pu* is the highlight of Chapter Two. In order to serve the research and better convey Sun's aesthetic views, Laurentis did not adopt the existing two English versions translated by Sun Dayu and Chang Ch'ung-ho and Hans H. Frankel, but presented his own work. Due to the demand for a deep and thorough exploration of *Shu pu*, Laurentis worked diligently to make his translation as literal and unembellished as possible. He declared that his version is merely one of the possible interpretations of the original text. Detailed textual criticisms are included in his translation, and there are seventy-four annotations.

Chapter Three, with many creative points, focuses on the textual content and visual form of *Shu pu*, and is the key part of the book. Since the character *pu* [谱] in the title had been rendered differently, Laurentis tried to clarify the true meaning of *pu* by exploring its usage in ancient Chinese literature and combining them with the explanation in the *Great Dictionary of Chinese Characters* (*hanyu da zidian* 汉语大字典) and more importantly, the structure and content of *Shu pu* itself. Meanwhile, it was demonstrated by Laurentis that Sun frequently expressed his confidence and determination to teach calligraphy. Through the close reading of *Shu pu*, Laurentis determined that Sun made every effort to stress the uniqueness of *Shu pu* to prove his talent for teaching calligraphy and speaking frankly about the core knowledge of this fine art. He concluded that the word "manual" interprets the connotation of *pu* as far as possible. Moreover, "discussion on the movements of the brush" (*yunbi lun* 运笔论) is found to be just a common noun to describe *Shu pu*, and not another heading of this work. The Chinese illustrious calligrapher and scholar Qi Gong (1999) once discussed this issue and asserted that what Zhang Huaiguan referred to as *yunbi lun* is exactly *Shu pu*. Although Qi Gong has authority and great influence in academia, Laurentis did not have a negative idea about his conclusion based on thorough analysis. Then, Laurentis analyzed the writing techniques within the text and the influence of this work. In particular, he suggested with concrete proof that the calligraphic technique described in *Forbidden Classics of the Jade Hall* [玉堂禁经] written by the influential calligrapher of the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Huaiguan, was quite similar to that of *Shu pu*. Besides *Forbidden Classics of the Jade Hall*, Laurentis analyzed other texts relating to the technique of calligraphy and pointed out that the authors were likely to quote Sun's words directly or be enlightened by *Shu pu* and tried to make them their own. At the same time, comparisons between *Shu pu* and other works on calligraphy in the pre-Tang period have been made. From a wide perspective of calligraphy during Sun's era, Laurentis confirmed his view that Sun's *Shu pu* should be considered a manual, as it is superior to other calligraphic treatises from the Tang Dynasty and unique in dealing with writing techniques, aesthetic possibilities as well as the several stages of learning calligraphy. As Sun did not have high status at that time, he repeatedly stated his legitimization in teaching calligraphy in *Shu pu*. His aspiration to demonstrate his unparalleled talent in calligraphy was revealed by Laurentis' analysis. Finally, Laurentis focused on whether *Shu pu* is just a preface to another work or a whole text

in itself. The date of the completion of *Shu pu*, its transmission during the Tang and early Song dynasties, and some Dunhuang Buddhist manuscripts are listed to discuss the integrity of the scroll. Laurentis' conclusion on this issue is that *Shu pu* is neither a preface nor a whole work, but an undetermined text with a hastily written ending, perhaps due to Sun's health, which is also the most probable reason for the "knot-strokes" phenomenon in the manuscript of *Shu pu*, based on Laurentis' speculation.

In the history of Chinese calligraphic theory and ancient Chinese theories of literature and art, *Shu pu* plays a momentous role, which is imbued with Chinese traditional culture and Chinese peculiar philosophical thinking. Because of its superb calligraphy and incisive viewpoints, it has been drawing scholars' attention at home from the time it was written to now. Many classics and series included the words in *Shu pu* before the Ming Dynasty, but they did not deal with the theoretical aspects of calligraphy. The first to comment on *Shu pu* was Ge Shouzhi (1720–1786), a literatus in the Qing Dynasty, but the commentary was limited to separate words and sentences and was not systematic. A comprehensive study of *Shu pu* was made by Bao Shichen (1775–1855), a calligrapher in the Qing Dynasty, but it was mainly used to advocate "stele study" and failed to fully elaborate the essential theoretical ideas therein. Modern research on *Shu pu* began with Zhu Jianxin's monograph published in 1963, which pointed out that the manuscript of *Shu pu* that has come down to us was the full text, not just a preface, and specifically delineated the beginning and end of the six chapters and two volumes. In 1964, Qi Gong and Zhen Yu, both famous scholars, did research on *Shu pu*, during which Sun Guoting's biography, its transmission and circulation, and the copies and the editions of *Shu pu* were discussed. Meanwhile, Zong Baihua (1962) and Zhu Tong (1980), with their philosophical thinking and focus on aesthetics, were concerned with the ideological and theoretical significance of *Shu pu*. In addition, as the understanding of *Shu pu* itself is the foundation of studies and comments on it, books explaining and annotating *Shu pu* by scholars like Feng Yongqiang, Wu Fangping, Feng Yiwu, and Li Lianmin were published, which demonstrates that the research of *Shu pu* was becoming increasingly comprehensive, and the methods and perspectives more varied and broader. In recent years, many articles have been published in related journals discussing different aspects of *Shu pu*, from general criticism to theoretical content and artistic characteristics, increasingly touching on the exploration of core arguments, but there are still many unanswered questions and no comprehensive monographs. As calligraphy has developed considerably in Japan, research on *Shu pu* in Japanese scholarship is also worthy of consideration. Laurentis' book seems to have created a dialogue between the past and present, at home and abroad, addressing Sun's strengths and perceived inadequacies through new methods and perspectives, and publishing complementary reviews regarding Sun and his calligraphic skill. Laurentis' book is a comprehensive study, covering the author Sun, the integrity and transmission of his manuscript, the text itself, and his calligraphy. The book offers readers the opportunity to acquire an immersive experience, a panoramic, deep

understanding of *Shu pu*, the great calligrapher Sun, and the calligraphic culture embedded in it, and provides valuable reference material for subsequent researchers, and takes the study of *Shu pu* to new heights.

It should also be noted that in addition to Laurentis' English translation of *Shu pu*, which has been widely recognized by academia, there have been several Western works published that present and review Chinese calligraphy, but there remains only a handful of translations of the original texts of calligraphy theory, and it is these texts that are the foundational work in the study of calligraphy and that have first-hand documentary value. In 2016, the new version of Laurentis' English translation of *Shu pu* was first cited in a master thesis (He, 2016), in which Laurentis' translation motive and the translator's quality were discussed. Prior to He's paper, there had been more than ten published papers written from perspectives, such as thick translation, translators' subjectivity, memetics, and skopos theory. Since *Shu pu* is a landmark in the progress of calligraphic theory, its translation versions are beneficial to transmitting Chinese culture and intercultural communication. Compared with the existing versions by Sun Dayu, Chang Ch'ung-ho and Hans H. Frankel, Laurentis' version is the most precise and academic among the three versions. Being different from the previous versions that are translated as a single text, it is conducted in the context of the whole calligraphic literature system, and its target readers are calligraphy or art history researchers in academia. Considering that *Shu pu* was written in ancient Chinese, featuring succinctness, the meaning of the original text would not be very clear to today's readers without the addition of explanations and annotations. Also, Laurentis, in his pursuit of a doctoral degree, presented a rigorous academic attitude. Almost all the terminology, culturally loaded words, and mentioned celebrities and allusions are briefly and naturally explained in the inserted brackets, without breaking the sentence structure, or introduced in detail in the footnotes. It is also due to his strong sense of rigor and ambition to conveying Sun's aesthetic view as accurately as possible, that Laurentis paid attention to every detail in the original text; thus the translations of some allusions and analogies are a little wordy, which slightly hinders the smooth reading. Except for this single shortcoming, it well achieves cultural equivalence.

In today's situation of advocating the introduction and translating of Chinese culture to foreign countries, it is worth thinking about who should be doing the translating. Due to the vast differences in linguistic and cultural perceptions between China and the West, a collaboration between Chinese and Western translators would be a workable and complementary mode of translation. Among the Western translators, sinologist-translators such as Laurentis should be given much attention. This is because most of their translations are closely linked to their sinological studies and premised on a deep understanding of the translated object. At the same time, as native speakers of the translated language, they are, to some extent, able to accommodate the habits of the readers of the translated language. However, sinologist-translators tend to apply the technique of "thick translation," as a result, the extensive

annotations, explanatory notes, prefaces, and postscripts can also hinder the dissemination and reception of the translation. To maximize the benefits of translation, further thoughts, explorations, and practices are needed.

From the reviewed book, the research methods and unique perspectives Laurentis applied when dealing with calligraphic history could be concluded in three aspects.

At first, he paid special attention to the close connection between the work and its author and the socio-historical context in which it is set. Being different from previous research that focused on the work itself, he made a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the author Sun, leading to a much better understanding of the purpose for writing *Shu pu*, as well as adding new perspectives to the study of calligraphic history and the study of calligraphers. Meanwhile, a work of art cannot be produced without the context in which it is produced. Laurentis tried to enter the real context of calligraphy culture in the Tang Dynasty to sort out the meaning and function of *Shu pu*. In ancient China, there was a unique way of passing on skills, which was very different from the modern transmission of knowledge. Those who had truly mastered the tips of calligraphic brushwork kept them secret and only passed them on to a few of their own students. Combined with an intensive reading of the content, Laurentis revealed Sun's strong willingness to unveil the techniques of calligraphy and enable students to avoid being misled. He further pointed out the significant status of *Shu pu* in his conclusion, which was possibly the most direct expression of calligraphic theory as practiced during the middle ancient period.

The second aspect that should be mentioned is Laurentis' research methods. The distinguishing feature of his studies is a research approach that places equal emphasis on documentary sources and the visual form of calligraphic works. He made full use of traditional bibliographical methods, such as historical sources, editions, proofs, and catalogs while introducing scientific and empirical methods to extend the problem logically from a cultural and sociological perspective. Many scholars in the West who study Chinese painting and calligraphy prefer to use methods of analyzing images to study artistic styles, which appear to be novel and effective, but in fact, fall into the misconceptions of fragmentation and diversion. Such a perspective is indeed refreshing, but it also ignores the holistic concept of Chinese art, which emphasizes atmosphere and vividness. In contrast, Laurentis stressed more on the continuity of calligraphy. In his view, both Chinese characters and phonetic scripts are composed of small units of meaning that make up a larger unit of meaning, and as it seems possible to construct an infinite number of characters from a small number of units, he argued against the independent existence of the strokes of ancient Chinese characters, holding the opinion that the fundamental aspect of the strokes was to embody the particular form of the Chinese character as a whole. Therefore, Laurentis' research established its uniqueness and insightfulness through the integration of Chinese and Western academic methodologies, as well as his holistic vision, which prompted him to explore the inspiration behind Chinese art and the spiritual aspirations of Chinese culture.

Finally, the extensive references to existing literature should also be noted. Laurentis provided an eighteen-page bibliography, including ancient Chinese books, monographs, and papers by Western, Chinese, and Japanese scholars. Some of which have several versions, and through which we can perceive his prudence. Based on his extensive review of the literature, he made precise selections of materials to use and included copious citations supporting his research findings and conclusions. The listed references not only reflect his broad academic horizon and the accuracy of his conclusions, but they are also reliable sources for related research. Moreover, Laurentis included the plates of nearly all the mentioned steles and autographs in his book, providing readers with visual impressions of the objects of his research.

This book expands our research horizons on Chinese calligraphic theory and calligraphy history, as well as proposes possible entry points for exploring famous ancient calligraphic works. Since calligraphic literature is not so valued in the West, Laurentis' efforts in translating them also have great significance in introducing calligraphy culture and promoting overseas calligraphy research. In Laurentis' view, as calligraphy is the essence and the most representative carrier of Chinese traditional culture, it helps westerners to understand Chinese culture. Among the thousands of years of Chinese calligraphy history, he specifically explored that from the Han Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty, when calligraphy was at the peak of its development. Laurentis holds the opinion that only by putting insights into Chinese culture from minute angles can Western countries and westerners truly understand the value and charm of Chinese calligraphy. At the same time, the reviewed book marks the rise of a new generation of sinologists studying Chinese calligraphy through new perspectives and methods, following the generation of scholars represented by Prof. Ledderose. In this area of research, it is a breakthrough that the connection between Sun's temperament and the context in which *Shu pu* was written has been linked, giving a more realistic picture of the cultural situation during Sun's time, thus enabling readers to better understand its meaning and Sun's writing talent.

On the other hand, there are also a few minor inadequacies. The author did not provide a scholarly landscape of the relevant research on *Shu pu*, so it is a bit difficult for readers to clearly realize the creative points of this study. Meanwhile, when discussing the description of calligraphic techniques in *Shu pu*, Laurentis mainly focused on rising and falling (*qifu* 起伏) and believed it is equal to lift and press (*ti'an* 提按). However, according to the writing techniques in the time Sun lived and the era before him, the rising and falling within a stroke was achieved by giving full play to the brush's performance. As what is mentioned in *Shu pu*, wielding and moving (*huiyun* 挥运) is the exact way of controlling the brush, meaning the hand was basically in a natural state of flat movement, without deliberate lifting and pressing movements. Finally, it would be better if more writing techniques and Sun's view of calligraphic appreciation were discussed in this book.

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