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A survey on the epistolary calligraphy art of Kim Jeonghui during his early exile period

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Abstract: Kim Jeonghui holds the highest esteem as a calligrapher in Joseon and played a significant role in cultural exchanges between China and Joseon. His creation of the ‘Chusa style’ marked a new trend in the calligraphy scene of late Joseon. The early period of his exile was a crucial phase for his engagement with external influences and learning, serving as a key moment in the formation of his artistic style. This study examines three key stages in his development: his foundational learning phase, his period of artistic training, and the time from his official appointment up to the early stage of his exile. By analysing these stages from the perspectives of calligraphy studies and aesthetics, this paper seeks to further explore the formative clues of the ‘Chusa style’ while offering a theoretical reference for understanding the development of calligraphic aesthetics in both Qing China and Joseon.

Keywords: Kim Jeonghui; early exile period; letters; calligraphy art.

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1 Introduction

Kim Jeonghui (1786–1865) was a distinguished figure who excelled in calligraphy, epigraphy, literature, and Confucian studies (Jun, 2015). His status as a calligrapher was held in the highest regard during the late Joseon period, and he was also a key figure in cultural exchanges between China and Joseon (Hong, 2019). This study explores the characteristics of his calligraphic style in letters from the early period of his exile (primarily referring to the years 1786 to 1840).

Kim Jeonghui was born in the late Joseon Dynasty, specifically on 3 June 1786. He was born in Yonggung-ri, Nonsan-gun, Chungcheongnam-do, South Korea today. His family belonged to the renowned Gimhae Kim Clan. He came from a noble lineage, his ancestor, Kim Ja-choe, passed the civil service examination in 1374, his father, Kim No-gyeong, held the position of Panseo, a high-ranking government official, and his mother was from the Giheung Yu clan, the daughter of Yu Jun-ju, the governor of Gimje. Kim Jeonghui's calligraphy is characterised by its vigorous and forceful style, known as the 'Chusa style'. The formation of the Chusa style is inseparable from his life experiences and studies. The early period of his exile was particularly significant as a time of intellectual exchange and learning, playing a crucial role in shaping his calligraphic style (Jeon, 2024).

The letters of Kim Jeong-hee and his family are regarded as classics among Korean letters in the Joseon Dynasty and are highly acclaimed (Lee, 2024). Their Chinese letters have also been studied by researchers from many Asian countries. In particular, the styles of these letters vary greatly during the early stage of his exile, making them of high artistic value and important materials for researching the formation of Kim Jeong-hee's calligraphy style. Therefore, this study focuses on the early stage of Kim Jeong-hui's exile, analyses the factors contributing to the development of his calligraphy style and theoretical methods, and further explores the connection between the formative stage of his exile and the evolution of his artistic style. Currently, research on Kim Jeonghui can be broadly categorised into three main areas.

The first category focuses on Kim Jeonghui's personal background, including studies on his life (Kim, 2017), family lineage, and social connections.

The second category examines his intellectual and academic thought, covering areas such as Confucianism, Sinology, Practical Learning, and Classical Studies (Kim, 2025; Zhan, 2017).

The third category explores his artistic achievements, with research primarily centred on his calligraphy, seal engraving, poetry, and contributions to calligraphic and cultural exchanges (Han, 2025). There are relatively few studies specifically focused on the calligraphic art of Kim Jeonghui's letters.

2 Overview of Kim Jeonghui's letters before exile

A significant number of Kim Jeonghui's letters have been preserved. Among them, Volume 2 of *The Complete Works of Master Wondang* records 37 letters, while Volume 10 contains 241 letters. Additionally, *Yinghai Duoyun Tie* includes 38 letters, *Muwan Tie* records 5 letters, and *Chusa Correspondence* documents 16 letters. In addition, several of Kim Jeonghui's letters are held in museums and private collections across various countries, primarily in Asia. The recipients of these letters include his mother, father, wife, two younger brothers, and members of his uncle's family. His correspondents also included his students and several prominent figures in Qing China, such as Weng Fanggang, Ruan Yuan, Liu Yong, and other renowned scholars of the Qing dynasty. During the early period of his exile, Kim Jeonghui maintained extensive interactions with the outside world, and his calligraphic style underwent several transformations. This study selects a portion of his letters written between the ages of 30 and 50 as the research focus. The materials originate from China, Korea, Joseon, and Japan, including records from books, conference proceedings, exhibition displays, museum collections, and a small number of privately held pieces.

The existing research materials indicate that the preserved letters vary significantly in size. Their height ranges from 20 to 40 cm, while their width falls between 22 and 94.5 cm. Among them, letters measuring 40 to 50 cm in length are the most common, whereas those around 20 cm are relatively rare.

In terms of text layout, the number of lines in these letters generally falls between 8 and 50 lines. Letters containing around 10 lines are the most frequent, followed by those with approximately 20 lines. The fewest lines appear in letters addressed to his hometown in Changdong, with some containing as few as 8 lines.

3 Foundational learning period (1786–1809)

Kim Jeonghui, as one of the most significant figures in the calligraphy history of the Joseon Dynasty, was adopted at a young age as the heir to the head lineage of the Wolseongwi Palace due to his uncle, Kim No-yeong, who served as Third Minister of the Ministry of Rites and had no direct heir. He was the great-grandson of Wolseongwi, the royal son-in-law of King Yeongjo (Jeong, 2018). From an early age, Kim Jeonghui was immersed in the extensive collection of books and calligraphic rubbings housed in Wolseongwi Palace, which provided a strong foundation for his calligraphy studies.

Kim Jeonghui was influenced by his mother from an early age and became proficient in Classical Chinese, which laid a strong foundation for his writing skills (Lee, 2025). His mother frequently wrote letters to his father, and her calligraphy was characterised by continuous and flowing strokes, resembling the 'Lianmian style'. As shown in Figure 1, Kim Jeonghui's mother's letter exhibits a well-balanced composition, skilled brushwork, and a structured yet dynamic arrangement of strokes. The variations in stroke intensity highlight the graceful and dignified qualities of the Korean palace script. Her proficiency in character structure, composition, and cursive script conventions suggests a understanding of calligraphic principles, which played a crucial role in Kim Jeonghui's early calligraphic education.

Figure 1 Letter from Kim Jeonghui to his mother



Notes: Height: 24.2 cm, width: 28.3 cm.

According to Dadong Qiwen:

“Jīn Zhèngxī qī suì shí, shū lichūn tiē, tiē yú dàmén, Cài Fányán Jīgōng guò ér jiàn zhī, wèn zhī zé Jīn cān pàn Lǚ Jìng jiā, ér cān pàn Qīūshǐ fù yě.”

(When Kim Jeonghui was seven years old, he wrote a Spring Welcoming Couplet and pasted it on the main gate. Chae Beon-am Jae-gong happened to pass by and saw it. Upon inquiry, he learned that the house belonged to Kim No-gyeong, who was the father of Chusa.)

“Jīgōng yǔ Lǚ Jìng jiā shì xián, bù xiāng jiàn, rán tè fǎng zhī, Lǚ Jìng dà jīng yuē: ‘Géxià, hé yǐ fǎng xiǎorén zhī jiā?’”

(At that time, Jae-gong and No-gyeong’s families had unresolved disputes and did not associate with each other. However, upon seeing the calligraphy, Jae-gong made a special visit. No-gyeong was greatly surprised and asked, “Your Excellency, why have you come to my humble home?”)

“Jīgōng yuē: ‘Dàmén suǒ tiē zhī shū, hé rén suǒ shū?’ Lǚ Jìng duì yǐ ér shū.”

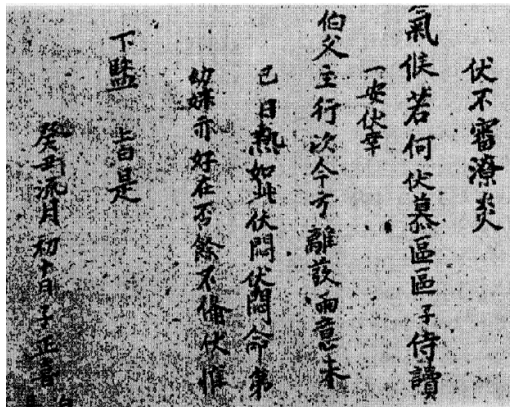
(Jae-gong replied, “Who wrote the calligraphy on your gate?” No-gyeong answered, “It was written by my son.”)

“Jīgōng yuē: ‘Shì ér, bì yǐ míng bǐ, shàn míng yī shì, rán ruò néng shū, zé bì míng dào qíqū, jué bù shǐ zhībì. Ruò yǐ wénzhāng míng shì, zé bì dé dà guì yǐ.’”

(*Accounts of Cabinet Minister Taeje during King Cheoljong’s reign*: Jae-gong then remarked, “This child will surely become a renowned calligrapher. However, if he follows the path of calligraphy, his life will be full of hardship. If he instead pursues literature, he will achieve great prestige.”)

When Kim Jeonghui was seven years old, he pasted his self-written Spring Welcoming Couplet on the gate of his home. At the time, renowned scholars who saw it expressed admiration for his work. During that period in Joseon, only a limited number of aristocrats were proficient in Classical Chinese (Choi, 2020). From an early age, Kim Jeonghui received a solid education, which laid a strong foundation for his later studies in Chinese inscriptions and calligraphy.

Figure 2 Kim Jeonghui at age eight



Notes: Height: 24 cm, length: 44.6 cm.

“Ruǎn wēng de zì cóng xiǎo dào niánlǎo qí zìtí yǒu duō cì biànhuà. Niányòu shí zhǐ chóngbài Dōng Qīchāng.”

(“Ruan Weng’s calligraphy changed multiple times throughout his life. As a child, he exclusively admired Dong Qichang.”)

“Jīn Zhèngxǐ yòu shí shūxiě yǐ kǎishū wéi zhǔ, bā suì shí jiù gěi qí fù xiěle yī fēng wèn ān de shūxìn.”

(“Kim Jeonghui primarily wrote in regular script during his childhood. At the age of eight, he wrote a letter of greetings to his father.”)

Please refer to Figure 2, The letter consists of eight lines. The first line begins with:

“Fú bù shěn liáo yán”

(Amidst the summer heat, I do not know whether there has been excessive rainfall or scorching dryness.)

The middle part mainly discusses the hot weather and expresses greetings to his father.

The number of characters per line varies, creating a natural and unrestrained layout. The letter exhibits an unaffected simplicity and a spontaneous charm. From an early age, Kim Jeonghui demonstrated both a deep passion for calligraphy and remarkable talent. His grandfather, A long with the profound knowledge and rigorous academic attitude of his uncle and father, Kim Jeonghui was strongly influenced by their scholarly environment from an early age. This exposure allowed him to inherit and continue their intellectual pursuits. The profound knowledge and rigorous, truth-seeking approach to scholarship demonstrated by his uncle and father deeply influenced Kim Jeonghui from an early age. Growing up in such an environment, he was immersed in their intellectual pursuits, which enabled him to inherit and further develop their academic legacy.

According to The Short Biography of Kim Wondang,

“Pànshū gōng (Lǚ Jìng) shǐ yú Yān, gōng (Zhèngxǐ) suī ér rù, shí nián èrshìsì, Ruǎn gélǎo Yuán, Wēng Hóngghù Fāng Nà, jiē dāngshì hónggrú, dàmíng zhèn hǎi nèi wài, qiě xiǎn bù qīng yǔ rén jiē, yī jiàn gōng mò nì yě.”

Minister Panseo (Kim No-gyeong) was sent on a diplomatic mission to Beijing, and Kim Jeonghui accompanied him at the age of 24. Ruan Yuan, Grand Secretary of the Cabinet,

and Weng Fanggang, a distinguished scholar, were both highly esteemed figures whose reputations resonated within and beyond China. They were known for being selective in their interactions, yet upon meeting Kim Jeonghui, they developed an immediate and profound rapport.

Kim Jeonghui became a disciple of Park Je-gia, who had made four trips to Yan (China), at the age of 15. Under the influence and guidance of his teacher Park Je-gia, in September of the 14th year of the Jiaqing era (the 9th year of the reign of King Sunjo, 1809), Kim Jeonghui, in the capacity of a junior military officer, accompanied his father on a diplomatic mission to China (Xie and Meng, 2021). During his time in the capital, he visited Ruan Yuan, Weng Fanggang, and Li Ding, among other Chinese scholars. He established a teacher-student relationship with both Weng Fanggang and Ruan Yuan, and through their interactions, he had the opportunity to study a vast number of inscriptions and rubbings. He also gained knowledge in textual criticism and authentication techniques, which greatly influenced his scholarly and artistic development (Lee, 2024). According to the Korean scholar Im Chang-soon:

“Ruantang once said, “From a young age, I had a great interest in calligraphy. At the age of twenty-four, I traveled to Beijing, where I met many distinguished scholars and studied their theories.” He also remarked, “Their calligraphy was very different from ours. While there, I saw thousands of inscriptions and stone carvings dating back to the Han and Wei dynasties. However, the one who directly guided me was Weng Fanggang, a master of model script studies and epigraphy (Min, 2017). Weng Fanggang greatly admired the young and talented Kim Jeonghui. He not only explained calligraphic theories to him but also showed him his personal collection of calligraphy rubbings and inscription copies.”

Weng Fanggang believed that the study of calligraphy should begin with Northern Stele inscriptions and that one should first learn from the Huadu Temple Stele by Ouyang Xun of the Tang dynasty. Deeply impressed by Weng Fanggang’s vast knowledge, Kim Jeonghui formally became his disciple. It was during this period that Kim Jeonghui began to truly comprehend the essence of calligraphy.

4 Period of artistic development (1810–1820)

After his journey to Beijing, Kim Jeonghui devoted himself to studying Weng Fanggang’s calligraphy. According to a critique found in Autumn Scholar’s Remaining Ink from Yu Yaoxian’s collection:

“Dāngshí Qiūshì de zì guòyú fēngmǎn, měi yī huà dōu tài cū ér xiānde quēfā gǔǎn měi.”

(At that time, Chusa’s characters appeared overly full, with each stroke being too thick, making them seem lacking in the aesthetic of skeletal structure and elegance.)

Later, Kim Jeonghui went on to study the styles of Su Dongpo, Mi Fu, referring to, and Li Qi. Over time, his calligraphy became increasingly vigorous and dynamic. Eventually, he grasped the essence of Ouyang Xun’s style, leading him to gradually establish his own distinctive artistic approach.

According to Fujitsuka Rin, in the 31st year of Kim Jeonghui’s life (1816, Jiaqing 21st year), his work *On Seeking Truth from Facts* was written. Kim Jeonghui carefully

studied the core of Qing dynasty scholarship, particularly immersing himself in epigraphy and classical studies. He actively promoted the ‘Silsaguisheol (Jin, 2022)’ approach on the Korean Peninsula, playing a crucial role in counteracting the abstract and overly theoretical tendencies of later Neo-Confucianism. This made his contributions a unique and exceptional presence in the 500-year academic history of the Joseon dynasty.

As he himself stated:

“Tánxī yún ‘shì gǔ jīng’, Yúntái yún ‘bù kěn rén yún yì yún’. Liǎng gōng zhī yán, jìn wú píngshēng.”

(“Tanxi once said, ‘I have a deep passion for ancient classics,’ and Yuntai remarked, ‘I refuse to merely echo what others say.’ These two statements perfectly encapsulate my lifelong pursuit.”)

Figure 3 Kim Jeonghui at age 31



Notes: Height: 25.3 cm, length: 67.6 cm.

Figure 3 contains a total of 59 lines, with 27 lines forming the main text, while the remaining 32 lines are interlinear additions connected to the main content.

The overall layout is structured according to pauses in the text and line breaks, dividing the letter into several sections. Traces of corrections and modifications are faintly visible. The spacing between lines varies, sometimes loose and sometimes tight, creating a sense of natural movement and fluidity. The arrangement appears unordered, producing unintentional embellishments and unexpected variations.

This letter employs the circular correction method, which is similar to the technique used in Yan Zhenqing’s Eulogy for a Nephew. Additionally, it utilises ‘supplementary marks’ to insert missing characters, a method that closely resembles modern letter-writing practices.

In 1816 and 1817, Kim Jeonghui conducted two examinations of the Stele of King Jinheung’s Royal Tour. Through these investigations, he verified and confirmed 68 previously unverified characters, inscribing in clerical script:

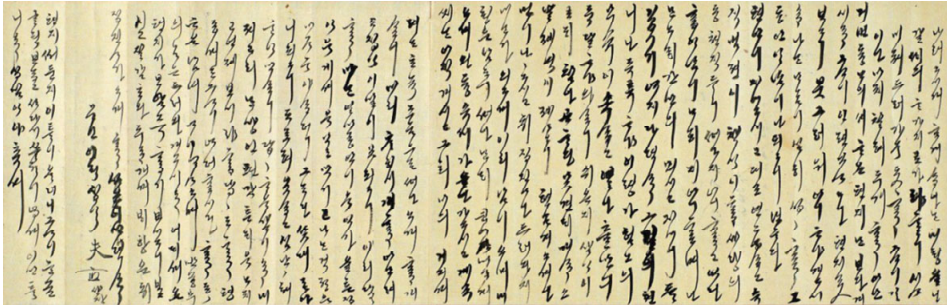
“Jīn Zhèngxǐ yǔ zhìyǒu Zhào Yínyǒng tóng lái shěndìng cǎnzì liùshíbā zì.”

(“Kim Jeonghui and his close friend Zhao In-yong came together to examine and confirm sixty-eight missing characters.”)

Later, he verified two additional characters and sent the newly revised content, noting the previous errors. He meticulously compared every character from this stele with inscriptions from *Huangcaoling Stele* and *Samguk Sagi*, recording their differences.

As recorded in *The Complete Works of Master Wondang*. In his correspondence, he also mentioned the origin of the place name Nanchuan and determined the historical period of the stele. This demonstrates how Kim Jeonghui corrected previously undetected errors, even those overlooked by historians. His rigorous textual analysis and meticulous scholarly attitude reflected the intellectual traditions of Qing dynasty scholarship, furthering its development and influence. Between the ages of 30 and 40, Kim Jeonghui wrote nearly 80 letters, most of which were addressed to his wife, colleagues, and associates. The majority of these letters were written in Korean calligraphy.

Figure 4 Kim Jeonghui at age 33 (see online version for colours)



Note: Height: 31 cm, width: 53 cm.

Figure 4 is a letter written by Kim Jeonghui in Daegu to his wife in Seoul. It is the longest surviving Korean-language letter among his existing correspondence.

The sender's signature reads ('Lǐnghú yóukè shàng zhuàng', A traveler from Yeongho submits this letter), and the seal area bears the inscription ('Jīn fēng', Respectfully sealed). The closing signature includes the character ('Fū', Husband) along with his wife's nickname.

The letter consists of 45 lines in total, with 25 lines in the first part and 20 lines in the latter part. The front side contains 21 main lines and four side lines, while the reverse side has 17 main lines followed by three additional lines. The first character in each side line on the front is indented by approximately one space, and the first character in each main line is aligned horizontally. On the back, the first character in each main line is slightly lower than those on the front, resulting in irregular alignment, while the three additional lines on the back have slightly raised initial characters.

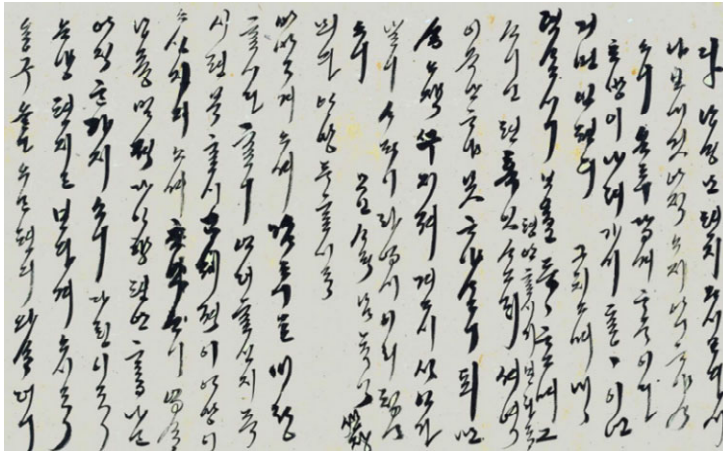
The letter is written from right to left and from top to bottom. The shortest line contains 12 characters, while the longest has 16. The writing order follows a distinct pattern: main lines first, side lines afterward, and additional lines appended at the end, which differs slightly from the structure of Kim Jeonghui's Chinese-character correspondence

“Shūxin zhōng zǐfù yǒu cū xī dàxiǎo biànhuà, qiě yǒu zhǔ cì zhī fēn, xīn zhōng kèyì qiánghuà bùfèn zǐfù, zì yòu xiàng zuǒ zì jiàn xiǎo, shūxiě qímài guàntōng, xiàndòng qūshì yǔ liánxù gǎn míngxiǎn.”

In the letter, the characters vary in thickness and size, with a clear distinction between primary and secondary elements. Certain parts of the text are deliberately emphasised, and the characters gradually decrease in size from right to left. The strokes maintain a continuous rhythm, with a noticeable sense of movement and fluidity.

The interplay of light and heavy, thick and thin, long and short strokes gives the letter a well-balanced and harmonious appearance. The composition reveals Kim Jeonghui’s exceptional control over the page layout, achieving a dynamic yet cohesive balance where rigidity and fluidity, as well as yin and yang elements, coexist in equilibrium.

Figure 5 Kim Jeonghui at Age 33



Notes: Height: 27 cm, width: 42 cm.

Source: Collected in the National Museum of Korea

Figure 5 is a letter written by Kim Jeonghui from his family home in Seoul to his wife in Daegu. The recipient is designated as ‘Lǐngyíng nàiyá rùnà’ (to be delivered to the Naeya Office of Yeongyeong), the sender is recorded as ‘Chāngdōng Xiāngjiāng’ (From Changdong Xiangjiang), the seal area bears the inscription ‘Jīn fēng’ (Respectfully sealed).

The letter consists of 16 main lines, with the top and bottom edges neatly aligned. On the right side, there are four side lines, with the top part indented by approximately one character while the bottom part is neatly aligned. Additionally, there are three interlinear annotations, bringing the total number of lines to 23. The arrangement follows a main text, side text, and interlinear text sequence. The first line contains five characters, the seventh line contains two characters, the eighth line contains nine characters, the bottom section has a significant blank space.

There is no recipient’s name explicitly mentioned in the letter. The text begins directly with the main content, followed by the date and sender’s name at the end.

This letter is considered one of the most unique in terms of structure and layout among Kim Jeonghui’s Korean-language letters. The brushstrokes appear rough and forceful, with disjointed components and clearly defined stroke movements. The writing exhibits rapid brushwork, with strong and rigid connections between strokes, presenting a stark contrast to his more fluid calligraphy in later years. This composition exudes a sense of grandeur, making it a notable work from this period.

At the age of 34, Kim Jeonghui successfully passed the civil examination. The royal court sent envoys to congratulate him with the following message:

“Yuèchéngwèi fèngsì sūn jīnrì dēngkē, shí nǎi kě hè zhī shì. Jīn xiàng guizhǔ de nǚwài miào sòng shàng chéngzhī yī biàn zhì jì.”

(As recorded in the *Annals of King Sunjo* “The heir of Wolseongwi has successfully passed the examination today, which is indeed a matter of celebration. We now send an imperial order to the ancestral temples of Your Excellency’s family for the proper ceremonial tribute.”)

5 Official career and pre-exile period (1821–1840)

After 1821, Joseon entered a period of fusion between stele studies and model script studies. During this time, stele studies gained prominence, while model script studies declined.

According to the August 1993 Korea-Japan Calligraphy Conference in the lecture *An examination of the character of Chusa’s calligraphy*:

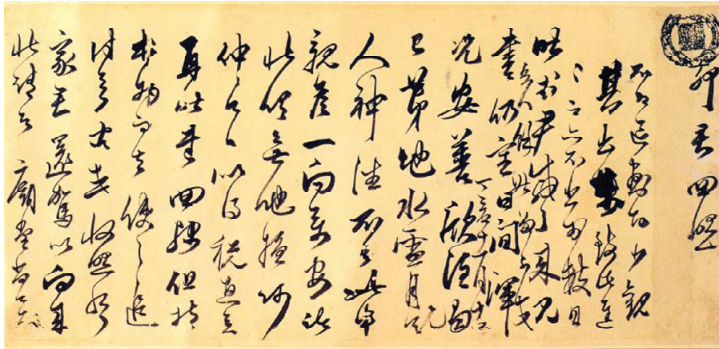
“Jin Zhèngxǐ sānshíwǔ suì Qiūshǐ tǐ zàoxíng chūxíng shēngchéng, ér dāngshí Jīn Zhèngxǐ yóu Táng rù Jīn, Níng Jīn fǎ Táng xīnlǐ qùxiàng hái wèi jiànli.”

(At the age of thirty-five, the formative structure of the Chusa style began to take shape. However, at that time, Kim Jeonghui had not yet fully established his psychological preference for either Jin or Tang dynasty calligraphic models.)

At the age of 40, Kim Jeonghui’s calligraphy combined clerical script and regular script, incorporating clerical script brush techniques. His style was classically elegant, balancing strength and softness—appearing calm on the surface while containing an underlying rhythm and dynamic tension.

This demonstrates that his research in epigraphy played a crucial role in shaping his calligraphic style.

Figure 6 Kim Jeonghui at age 42 (see online version for colours)



Notes: Height: 22 cm, length: 47.5 cm.

Chusa’s correspondence: 150th Anniversary Commemorative Exhibition – Fujizuka Neighbour Materials.

Figure 6 is part of the collected materials compiled by Fujitsuka Rin in Japan. Figure 6 is a family letter written by Kim Jeonghui to his younger brother, Kim Sang-hee. The front side of the letter consists of 13 main lines, three side lines on the right, and three interlinear notes, making a total of 19 lines. Each line contains six to eight characters, depending on the size of the characters. The number of characters per line varies, as the

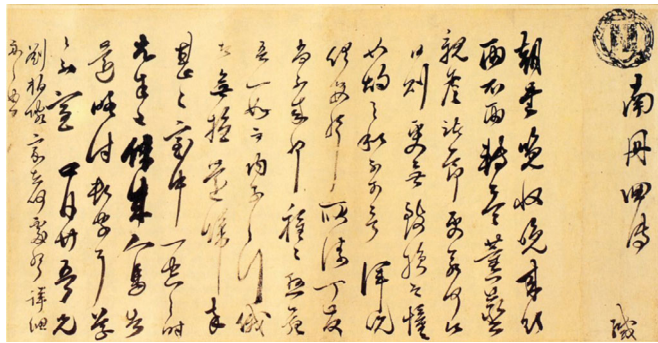
text adapts to the size of the paper and writing style. The interlinear text has no characters at the upper section, while the 13 lines of the main text are aligned at both the top and bottom. The side text and the later part of the letter leave considerable blank space, with the upper part of the side text indented by about one character, while the lower part remains relatively aligned. The interlinear text is slightly smaller, and its bottom edge remains mostly level.

To distinguish different sections of the letter, the interlinear text contrasts with the main text in terms of size, weight, and thickness of strokes. The entire letter is written from right to left, with the main text using larger characters, while the side text connects to the main content, and the interlinear text connects to the side text, followed by the date of writing.

During this period, Kim Jeonghui's brushwork and ink usage primarily featured rounded strokes and moistened ink. His characters remained precisely structured, and his writing style was predominantly semi-cursive script. At this stage, his distinctive 'Chusa style' had not yet fully developed, and his unique compositional structure had yet to be established.

The letter begins with 'Respectfully replying to you, Sir Mao' ('Mǎo jūn huí zhào'), and the closing section contains ('Dīnghài shíyīyuè shísi rì', November 14, Dinghai Year). The final line consists of a single character, ('Xiōng', Elder Brother).

Figure 7 Kim Jeonghui at age 43 (see online version for colours)



Notes: Height: 22 cm, length: 44 cm.

Figure 7 is a letter sent by Kim Jeonghui from Seoul to Hong Ik-ju. The envelope is inscribed with ('Nán cè huí chuán', To be returned to the Southern Register), with the character ('Jiān', Sealed) written below. The portion is written in cursive script with connected strokes.

The closing section of the letter includes the date:

'Xiōng siyuè niànwǔ rì' (Brother, April 25), ending with the character (Elder Brother).

The letter consists of 13 main lines, with two additional lines appended on the left, making a total of 15 lines. The entire text is written vertically from right to left. The main text contains seven characters per line in large script, while smaller script lines have eight to nine characters, and the postscript contains 14 characters. The brushwork is executed with center-tip strokes for initial structuring, producing thin and refined strokes, followed by side-tip strokes to enhance the variation in texture.

As Wang Xizhi once stated:

“Shí chù jiù fǎ, xū chù cáng shén.”

(“In solid strokes, rules are applied; in empty spaces, spirit is concealed.”)

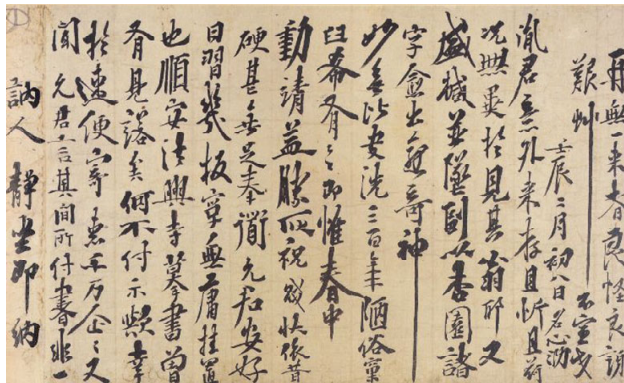
Similarly, in the Qing dynasty, Jiang He wrote in *Essays on the Study of Calligraphy*:

“Yùbǎn shísān háng zhāng fā zhī miào, qí háng jiān kòngbái chù, dàdǐ shí chù zhī miào, jiē yīn xū chù ér shēng.”

(“The brilliance of the layout in Jade Slips 13 Lines lies in the blank spaces between the lines. The beauty of the solid strokes emerges precisely because of the voids.”)

Kim Jeonghui’s calligraphy in this letter reflects similar principles. The number of characters per line remains relatively consistent, with bolder strokes at the beginning and end, creating a visual balance that echoes from start to finish. The interplay of solid and empty spaces generates a sense of harmony, blending direct visual impact with abstract aesthetic balance. The composition is restrained yet dynamic, seamlessly integrating fullness and emptiness.

Figure 8 Kim Jeonghui at age 47 (see online version for colours)



Notes: Height: 27 cm, length: 42.2 cm.

Figure 8 is a letter written by Kim Jeonghui to Jo Gwang-jin.

The inscription includes (‘Rénchén èryuè chūbā rì’, February 8, Renchen Year), followed by (‘Míngxīn Lè’). The envelope is inscribed with (‘Nèrén jìngzuò jí nà’, A reserved person, accepting immediately while sitting in silence).

The letter consists of 12 main lines and three side lines, totaling 17 lines, written in semi-cursive script. Each line contains between six and nine characters. The inscription’s side text consists of ten smaller characters, creating a noticeable contrast in size with the other lines. The final line, which includes the phrase, is written in smaller characters compared to the previous lines.

In the fourth line, the character, and in the second line of the side text, the character ‘cǎo’ have elongated vertical strokes, extending downward roughly the size of three characters.

The letter mentions receiving rare and extraordinary calligraphic rubbings, described as:

“Yù chū yù qí, shén miào wú bǐ.”

(“Each new piece is more extraordinary than the last, incomparably divine and marvelous.”)

Following this, Kim Jeonghui describes his experience copying inscriptions at Beopheungsa Temple: The characters in this letter exhibit strong individual expression, with less continuity between strokes. The brushwork bears similarities to Zheng Banqiao’s ‘Six-and-a-Half Script’. The structural composition of characters like ‘dòng’ and ‘shùn’ closely resembles Zheng Banqiao’s regular script. The characters ‘shén’ and ‘cǎo’ exhibit the technique Zheng described as:

“Jiè cǎoshū zhōng zhī zhōng shù, cháng piē yùn zhī.”

(“Borrowing the central vertical strokes from cursive script, extending the long slants accordingly.”)

The letter integrates regular script, semi-cursive, cursive, clerical script, and seal script, demonstrating a harmonious interplay of multiple calligraphic styles. The contrast between bold and delicate strokes, the variation in character structure, and the rhythmic interplay of thickness and movement contribute to an aesthetically pleasing composition.

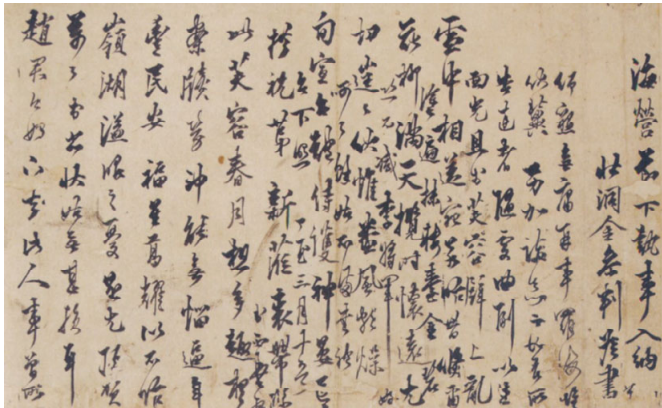
This reflects Zheng Banqiao’s calligraphic principle:

“Yǐ huà zhī guānniù, tòurù yú shū.”

(“Using the principles of painting to permeate calligraphy.”)

The letter demonstrates a dynamic fusion of calligraphic and artistic elements, with variations in stroke length, size, thickness, intensity, and speed, embodying the integration of painting techniques into calligraphy.

Figure 9 Kim Jeonghui at age 52 (see online version for colours)



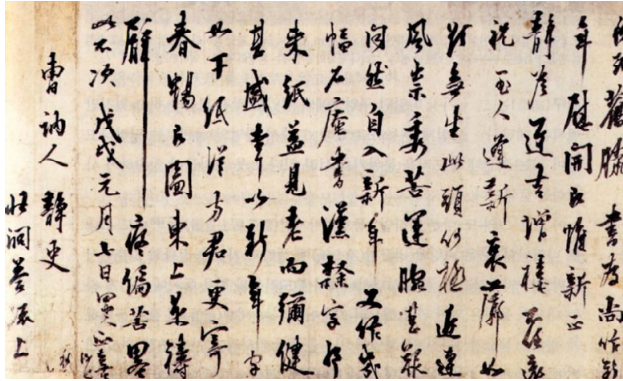
Notes: Height: 23.7 cm, length: 57.9 cm.

Figure 9 is a letter written by Kim Jeonghui to Jeong Gi-il. The envelope contains the inscription (‘Hǎi yǐng jié xià zhìshì rùna’, To be delivered to the honorable official at Hae-ying), followed by (‘Zhuàngdòng Jīn cānpàn wéi shū’, Written by Vice Minister Kim from Jang-dong).

The letter consists of 11 main lines, four side lines, and five interlinear lines, totaling 20 lines. The prose is elegant, and its composition follows a structure similar to his earlier letters. However, in comparison to his previous works, the continuity between characters has diminished, marking a significant shift in his calligraphic style.

Influenced by Wang Xizhi's 'single-character awareness', Kim Jeonghui's brushwork demonstrates a refined use of slanted strokes, achieving balance and harmony. The brush force is both strong and controlled, akin to 'iron wrapped in cotton'. His ability to organise the spatial relationships between characters, lines, and the overall structure of the composition has become increasingly fluid and confident.

Figure 10 Kim Jeonghui at age 53 (see online version for colours)



Notes: Height: 28 cm, length: 44.4 cm.

Figure 10 is a letter written by Kim Jeonghui from Seoul to Jo Gwang-jin. The envelope bears the inscription ('Cáo nǚrén jìngshǐ', Jo, the reserved and quiet historian), followed by ('Zhuàngdòng dásū shàng', Reply from Jang-dong).

The letter consists of 19 lines in total. The closing section contains the inscription ('Wúxū yuányuè qī rì zuìrén Zhèngxǐ', January 7, Wuxu Year, the criminal Jeong-hee), followed by a smaller inscription in the next line, ('Xiè shàng', Respectfully submitted). Unlike his previous letters, this letter does not contain interlinear or side notes. The shortest line contains seven characters, while the longest has nine characters, and the inscription section contains 13 smaller characters.

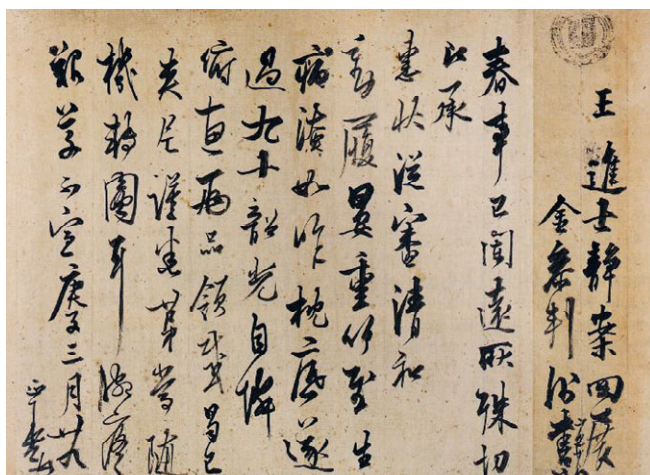
At this stage, Kim Jeonghui was advanced in age, yet his calligraphy had become even more forceful. The composition is dynamic and unrestrained, making this letter one of his finest works in semi-cursive script. The character 'bì' has an extended downward stroke, deliberately elongated to match the structure and atmosphere of the text.

As Kim Jeonghui noted in *Collected Works of Wondang*:

“Zhèng yǐ lì gǔ, piān yǐ qǔ tài.”

(“Upright strokes establish structure, while slanted strokes create expressive movement.”)

The lines are precise and balanced, predominantly maintaining a static posture, yet the brushwork remains lively, incorporating subtle shifts in direction. The composition harmonises movement and stillness, reflecting the maturity and depth of his artistic mastery.

Figure 11 Kim Jeonghui at age 55 (see online version for colours)

Notes: Height: 29.8 cm, length: 42 cm.

Figure 11 is a letter written by Kim Jeonghui to Scholar Wang. The envelope is inscribed with ('Wáng jìnshì jìng àn huí zhǎn', Respectfully presented to Scholar Wang for review), with a space between 'wáng' and 'jìn shì'. The second line reads ('Jīn cānpàn chuánshū xǐ', Vice Minister Kim transmits this letter).

This letter does not contain interlinear or side notes, and the composition is neatly arranged, consisting of 11 lines in total. The shortest line contains two characters, while the longest has eight characters.

At the end of the letter, the date is written as ('Gēngzǐ sānyuè niànjǐǔ', March 29, Gengzi Year), but the characters for 'nián' and 'rì' are omitted. The signature section replaces ten characters with eight smaller characters, clearly adjusted for layout considerations to create a balanced composition.

In the second line of the main text, a blank space is left at the end, and the next line begins with ('Huìzhàng', Your esteemed letter). This was a highly respectful form of address used in the Joseon royal court, known as 'header elevation'. During this period, Kim Jeonghui's 'single-character structure' became even more pronounced. His characters exhibited a dignified and composed stance, with restrained yet precise stroke endings. His brushwork displayed no excessive ornamentation, and the proportional relationships between characters were naturally arranged, exuding a sense of grandeur and refinement.

Through the analysis of Kim Jeonghui's letters from different periods, in combination with his calligraphic characteristics, this study arrives at the following conclusions.

During his foundation period, Kim Jeonghui developed a habit of writing letters from an early age and became proficient in Classical Chinese, deeply influenced by Qing dynasty culture. His mother's influence provided him with a solid foundation in writing, while the intellectual rigor of his uncle and father instilled in him a fact-based approach to learning, which played a crucial role in his early calligraphic education. By the age of 20, he had already gained recognition in the Korean calligraphy scene. At 24, he passed the Saengwon examination, traveled to Beijing with his father, and became a disciple of Ruan Yuan and Weng Fanggang. There, he studied a vast number of inscriptions and

rubbings, formally delving into the study of textual authentication and historical philology, marking the beginning of his artistic enlightenment.

Before and after his travels to Beijing, Kim Jeonghui studied epigraphy and extensively copied inscriptions, which significantly contributed to the formation of his Chusa style. In terms of calligraphic style evolution, before the age of 30, he was mainly influenced by Mi Fu and Dong Qichang. In his early 30s, he transitioned towards regular script under Weng Fanggang's influence. By the age of 33, his letters displayed meticulous structure, natural character proportions, and fluid connections between words. At 35, he began studying Weng Fanggang's large-character semi-cursive script, marking the emergence of the foundational structure of Chusa style. His calligraphy during this period was influenced by the continuous-stroke style, exhibiting fluid movement, a clear sense of rhythm, and a dynamic interplay between light and heavy strokes. His final strokes varied in length according to the available space, resembling semi-cursive script.

Before the age of 40, his calligraphy was still influenced by the continuous-stroke script, but gradually transitioned towards a stronger focus on individual character structure. The sense of continuous flow diminished, and his brushwork became more distinct and deliberate, displaying similarities to Zheng Banqiao's 'Six-and-a-Half Script'. By the age of 50, his calligraphy became more dignified and composed, with calm yet firm stroke endings, devoid of excessive ornamentation or dramatic flourishes. Every stroke carried strength and depth, reflecting the maturity of his artistic form. By this time, his unique calligraphic style was fully evident in his letters, and the Chusa style had reached its final stage of maturity.

Looking at Kim Jeonghui's calligraphic art through his letters, it is clear that his pre-exile period was a crucial phase for his artistic development. This was the key period in which the Chusa style took its final form. He was successively influenced by the Joseon royal court's continuous-stroke script, Dong Qichang's regular script, Weng Fanggang's large-character semi-cursive script, Zheng Banqiao's 'Six-and-a-Half Script', and Wang Xizhi's concept of 'single-character awareness'. By integrating stele studies and epigraphy, as well as combining Korean calligraphy traditions with Chinese character calligraphy, Kim Jeonghui solidified his position as one of the most influential calligraphers in Joseon history.

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Declarations

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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