

Calligraphy

TO THE TEACHER

OBJECTIVES OF THIS UNIT: To introduce students to the Chinese writing system and its emergence as an art form. To provide background on various script types and styles and the aesthetic criteria used to evaluate calligraphic works. To give students enough material to discuss traditional Chinese notions about the close relationship between style and individual personality.

TEACHING STRATEGIES: This unit asks student to look very closely at writing they do not understand, and some students may find it difficult to see all of the distinctions drawn. Discussing some of the examples in class could help students learn to see the distinctions between different scripts and styles.

Besides looking at calligraphy in aesthetic terms, it can usefully be linked to other aspects of elite culture, including the practice of other art forms (e.g., poetry, painting, and music), education and literacy, and Daoist and Confucian attitudes towards the individual and the cultivation of the educated person. Links to social and political uses of art can be explored through a discussion of why both scholar-officials and emperors formed collections of calligraphy. The shorter section on calligraphy in modern China may be of particular interest in a class with students interested most of all in contemporary China. Other teachers could omit it.

WHEN TO TEACH: Although writing was used from Shang times on (and this unit includes some examples of Shang and Han writing), it was not treated as an art form until after the fall of the Han. This unit draws primarily on Six Dynasties and Tang examples. Because calligraphy remained a major art form in later dynasties, this unit could just as easily be used when discussing the literati elite in later centuries. In a topically organized course, if the units on painting and calligraphy are both used, Calligraphy should be used first, as calligraphic skill served as a basis for painting technique, and the rise of calligraphy to "high art" status preceded that of painting by hundreds of years. This unit could also be used in a course on Chinese art.

In China, the style in which an individual writes has long been believed to communicate something essential about his or her personality, intellect, and abilities. Even today it is a common presumption that one can "read" the identity of the person through his or her handwriting.



Young man practicing calligraphy

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy Patricia Ebrey, 1978.

Our use here of the term calligraphy may be a deceptively inaccurate translation for this practice. Calligraphy is defined in western etymology as "beautiful writing," while the Chinese term, *shufa*, is rendered more precisely as the "method of writing" - which may indicate a greater emphasis on procedure, rules, or simply the way in which the written word is formed. The European term calligraphy highlights an interest in beauty and ornament in the external forms of words on the page; most European calligraphy is highly stylized, regular, and decorated with flourishes, which in themselves are lacking in personal expression. Calligraphy in the West was always considered a minor art and tended to curb spontaneity, producing fairly static forms.

In China, however, this was far from the case; the most widely practiced writing styles favored spontaneity, and the brush was thought to act like a seismograph in recording the movements of arm, wrist, and hand. East Asian calligraphy was established as a "high art" form well before the Tang dynasty. It has continuously enjoyed a high status among the arts ever since, and is practiced today by many people, including every school-aged child.

This unit will cover calligraphy in China up through the Tang dynasty, with an emphasis on the Six Dynasties and Tang. It was during this period that calligraphy first began to flourish as an art form. By the Later Han, the basic script types had been created, and no new types developed after this time. The first writings to evaluate calligraphic style also date from this period. These texts reveal a notable shift toward seeing an expressive quality in writing that went beyond the mere ability to communicate meaning.

As you go through this unit, keep the following questions in mind:

- *Why is calligraphy highly ranked as an art form in China?*
- *How is calligraphy connected to class or status?*
- *How are the materials and techniques used by Chinese calligraphers linked to theories about calligraphy?*
- *What types of skills and knowledge are required to appreciate and evaluate calligraphy? Who collected calligraphy, and why?*

Suggested Reading



Script Types



Techniques of Transmission



Six Dynasties Calligraphy



Tang Calligraphy



Calligraphy in Modern China

FURTHER READING FOR CALLIGRAPHY

Chang, Leon Long-Yien and Peter Miller. *Four Thousand Years of Chinese Calligraphy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Fu Shen. *Traces of the Brush: Studies in Chinese Calligraphy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

Sturman, Peter. "Calligraphy," in Lee, Sherman. *China, 5,000 Years: Innovation and Transformation in the Arts*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1998.

Tseng Yu-ho. *A History of Chinese Calligraphy*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1993.

Script Types

While writing is thought by the Chinese to communicate, perhaps better than any other art form, the cultural values and circumstances of its maker, calligraphy seems to be one of the more remote and inaccessible arts to the outsider who does not read Chinese. Here are a few simple characters and their meanings. As you look at the various examples throughout this unit, try to find them and compare how they are written.



*Da*⁴, meaning "big" or "great"



*Zi*³, meaning "son," "child," or used as the pronoun "you"



*Zhong*¹, meaning "middle"



*Zhi*¹, used as a possessive or as the verb "to go"

Written records hold a significant place in China's history. The earliest surviving examples, from the Shang capital of Anyang, date to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries BC. These oracle bone records were divination results inscribed on turtle shells and shoulder blades of oxen.

MORE: This type of writing functioned as a record of the spiritual communication between the temporal ruler (the Shang king and /or his priests) and the heavenly one (*Shangdi*, literally "god above"). The audience was, as a result, a highly restricted elite. Hundreds of these inscribed shoulder blades and plastrons were found in storage pits near the temples where they were used.

What was the purpose of this kind of written record? What factors do you think influenced the form writing took at this time?



Engraved ox scapula, Anyang (Shang dynasty)

Oracle bone scripts were first written with a brush, then inscribed with a stylus or animal bone tool.

Do you think this type of writing would have been considered easy to read?

SOURCE: Bi Gong, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 1: Shang Zhou zhi Qin Han shufa* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1987), pl. 1, p. 1. Collection of the National Museum of History.

Since Shang times Chinese has been written not with an alphabet-based script of the sort we are used to, but one with a symbol ("character") for each word. Many characters are made up of components, some of which can also stand on their own. Often characters can be broken down into two major parts, one which indicates the general meaning of the word, and one which indicates the sound.



The character *ren*², or person

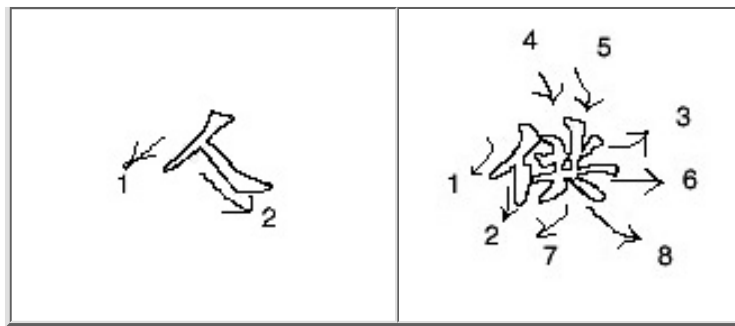


The character *gong*⁴, meaning to offer or provide, has the "person" character in red functioning as a semantic classifier (indicating meaning).

Each character is formed by a set number of marks, or strokes, made by the brush in a certain order. Simple and complicated characters alike follow the same rules of execution: the order of strokes is completed from left to right and from top to bottom; components that enclose other elements are "closed" after the inner ones are completed.

Can you guess the order in which the strokes of the above words were written?

ANSWER:
Stroke Order



Before the invention of paper, documents were written in vertical columns on strips of bamboo. The strips were then bound together with string.

What do you think the challenges were in writing on this type of surface?



Juting Hanjian written on bamboo strips (period of Han Wudi, 97 BC - 111 AD).

SOURCE: Qi Gong, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa jianke bian, 1: Shang Zhou zhi Qin Han shufa* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1987), pl. 54, p. 79. Collection of the Gansusheng wenwu kaogu yanjiu suo).

Many different types of regional scripts developed during the Warring States Period as the need for written records increased in state offices that were not centrally controlled. The Qin and Han periods were important for the standardization of script types. Following are four of the major script types used throughout this unit.

The seal script, also called smaller seal, is one of the last descendants of the ancient script types used in oracle bone and bronze inscriptions.

How do simple and complex characters compare in the example at right?

What do you notice about the overall shape of the characters? If you placed an imaginary box around each of them, what shape would it be? Is there a lot of variation in the way the lines (strokes) of the characters look?



Yi shan memorial stele inscription Qin dynasty

SOURCE: Qi Gong, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa jianke bian 1: Shang Zhou zhi Qin Han shufa* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1987), p. 22.

What kind of writing tool do you think was used to make these characters? Did the tool have a sharp point or a soft one? What makes you think so?

Compare this example with the oracle bone inscription earlier on this page. What are the differences in how the characters are formed and arranged on the writing surface?

ANSWER: The small seal script example shows characters that are of uniform size and shape, and which move away from the earlier pictographic forms of oracle bone script. The text itself conforms to a regular grid, arranged in vertical columns of characters which also fall into a fairly regular horizontal alignment. The lack of variation in line quality points to either painstaking execution with a fairly rigid brush or the use of a different type of writing tool altogether, such as a stylus.



Shi Weize, *Memorial text* (736 AD), detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 55, p. 124. Collection of the Beijing Library.

Clerical script developed from the small seal script in the first century BC, but its peak period of usage was during the Eastern Han (25-220 AD). This script is also referred to by the term "breaking wave," which refers to the outward flaring shape of the right and left downward slanting strokes. (Look for the word that means "big" in the example at left).

For what type of documents do you think this script type was used?

Compare this example of clerical script with the small seal script, above. What do you think the benefits of this new writing style might have been, especially to someone who wrote in great quantity?

In Chinese writings about calligraphy, much attention is paid to the beginnings and ends of strokes and whether the tip of the brush is visible or not. The expression "hiding the head" refers to the way the calligrapher makes the brush double back on the initial stroke to conceal the entry point where brush first meets paper, while "exposing the tail" refers to the way the calligrapher allows the tip of the brush to show, giving the stroke a pointed end.

Can you identify some strokes in the example at left where the tip of the brush is visible?

HINT: It will help to first decide where the beginning and the end of a stroke is. Rounded or squared-off ends indicate that the brush has doubled back over the entry or exit point; exposed brush tips typically result in strokes with pointed ends.

Script types generally evolved toward forms that were simpler and more expedient. Cursive script, or draft cursive, was widely practiced in the Eastern Han (25-220 AD).

What changes in China at this time do you think may have precipitated the development of this script type?

HINT: Changes in governmental structure and size during the Han dynasty likely had the greatest impact on the writing system at that time. A huge increase in the volume of documents produced and managed by officials placed a great burden on those clerks responsible for keeping official records. Think about how official copyists might have adapted to these new demands in modifying their methods of writing.

In later periods, cursive script was exploited for its expressive, aesthetic potential. From the fourth century onward, cursive was the vehicle in which a master calligrapher could express his or her individuality. It was also used for personal correspondence and non-official writings. Not everyone was in favor of the abbreviated forms of cursive script; one of the earliest texts about calligraphy still extant from the Han period is a fervent diatribe against the widespread use of draft cursive.

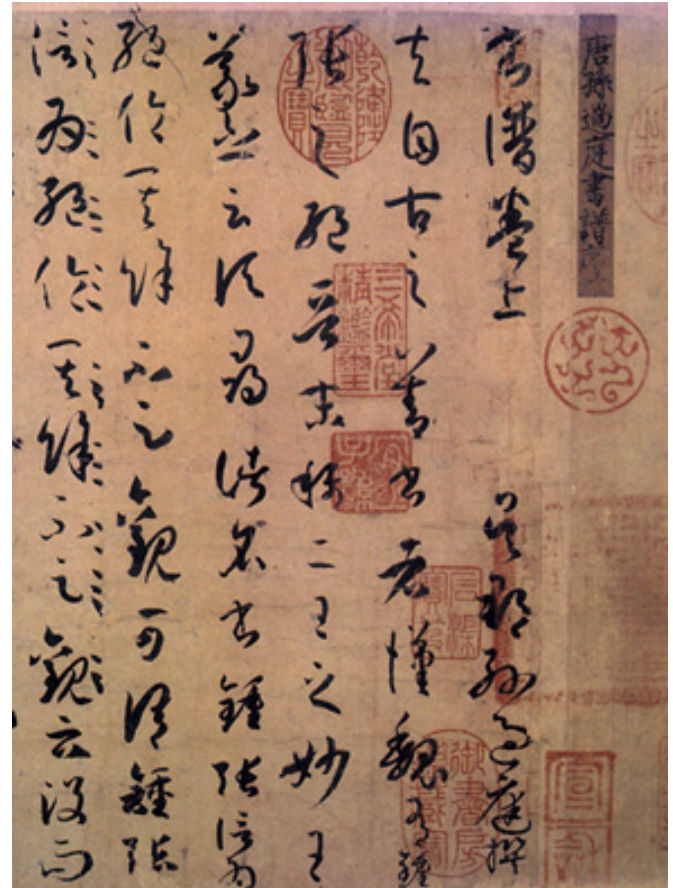
Can you recognize any of the characters you've learned?

HINT: Look for the possessive pronoun *zhi*.

What do you think were the principle advantages and disadvantages of the cursive style?

ANSWER: Advantages of the cursive style included increased speed of execution, simplification, and the ability to write with a more relaxed hand. Disadvantages included a lack of universal legibility and an informality that could be conceived of as inappropriate for official usage.

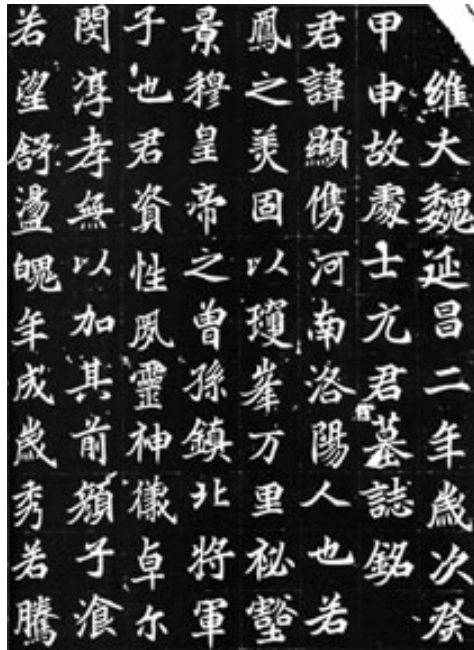
Why was cursive script considered a primary means of individual expression in calligraphy?



Sun Guoting, *Preface to the Shupu* (cursive script)

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), plate 45, pg. 94. (detail) 27.2 x 878.24 cm. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Regular or standard script was the last of the four major types to develop at the end of the Han dynasty. Execution of regular script involves techniques of brush manipulation that were adapted from the other script types. These include an increase in brush movement, hesitations and changes of brush direction as well as variations in the pressure exerted on the brush tip and the speed with which individual strokes were written. Regular script was considered the most legible and convenient form of handwriting.



Why do you think the regular script was the last to develop? Is it simpler than the clerical script in execution?

MORE: Regular script looked back to clerical script for clarity, but allowed for far greater nuance in the speed and overall movement of the brush to add expressive potential to an easily legible script type.

Northern Wei inscription (regular script)

SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 103, p. 192, detail. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

In the examples below of clerical (left) and standard/regular (right) scripts, what are the main similarities and differences? Look especially closely at corners and ends of strokes. Does one look as though it were more casually executed?



SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 55, p. 124. (detail) Collection of the Beijing Library. Shi Weize, *Da zhi zhan shi memorial* (736 AD).

SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke pian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), plate 103, p. 192, detail. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing. Northern Wei inscription (regular script).

Move on to [Transmission Methods and Learning](#)

Techniques of Transmission

Even before printing was invented in China, the Chinese devised other ways of preserving and transmitting texts. Hand copies were indispensable for passing on texts and provided ample opportunity for calligraphy practice. A tracing copy could be made by tracing the outlines of each character onto paper that was specially treated to make it highly transparent; after the outlines were drawn, the characters were inked in. The more skilled calligraphers made free-hand copies, keeping the original close at hand as they wrote. Original calligraphy, even from the most famous hands, often did not survive because of the fragility of the silk or paper it was written on.

Many of the examples of well-known calligraphers were collected soon after they were written and painstakingly inscribed in stone. Copies of these engravings could then be used as study guides. They were highly valued as being as close to the original ink-on-paper version as it was possible to get.

Several of the examples used in this unit are rubbings, which are easy to distinguish from handwritten copies, as the characters in a rubbing appear in white on a black ink background. Below are the steps in the process of making a copy of a calligraphic work from a stone surface.



First a tracing copy of the calligraphic work is transferred to the stone, and the engraver carefully carves out the stroke forms in proper order.

Why do you think it might be important to imitate the order in which the strokes of a character were originally written?

ANSWER: In following the stroke order of the original closely, the inscription carvers were trying to approximate the natural movement of the brush and come closest to the feeling of the original calligraphic work on silk or paper.

Engraved stone, Han Dynasty

SOURCE: Bi Gong, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, shufa juanke bian 1: Shang Zhou zhi Qin Han shufa* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1987), p. 40.



Adhering paper to stone surface



Adhering paper to stone with mallet and felt



Application of ink to paper edges

SOURCE: Xi'an, Beilin. Photographs courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1980.

Evenly moistened paper is applied to the clean surface of the engraved stone tablet and pushed into the incised areas, first with a brush and then with a mallet and piece of felt. An ink-filled cotton pad is used to daub ink onto the surface of the paper, turning it black where it contacts the uncarved flat surface underneath.



Applying darker layer of ink to paper

Applying final layer of ink to paper

Removing completed rubbing from stone surface

SOURCE: Xi'an, Beilin. Photographs courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1980.

When the paper is fully inked and the details of all the brushwork are visible on the surface, the imprint is pulled from the surface of the stone.

How successfully do you think this method of reproduction preserved calligraphic works?

MORE: Some calligraphers who were also connoisseurs and collectors, including Mi Fu of the Song dynasty, believed that rubbings could not serve as a close approximation of the written word in its original form; carving tools and stone could never imitate the qualities of movement of the flexible brush, and the subtleties of ink density on the absorbent surface of paper or silk were simply not present in rubbing form. At best, the rubbings were able to accurately transfer a sense of how the individual calligrapher composed characters on the page as well as the quality of the line structure in his writing.

The Chinese writing brush has a unique structure that allows it to hold ink in a reservoir (the solid black area inside the brush in the diagram at left) between layers of animal hairs, which are wrapped successively around a long, central core of bristles. The hairs themselves are highly flexible and responsive to slight changes in pressure and movement of the hand.



Drawing of cross-section, internal structure of brush

SOURCE: From Zabitsu-fu (1834) chapter of *Kanjonifu*, reproduced in Tseng Yu-ho, *A History of Chinese Calligraphy* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1993), p. 382.



Young man practicing regular script

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy Patricia Ebrey, 1978.

To learn calligraphy, students begin by copying the handwriting of famous masters, using copybooks of rubbings or, if possible, original examples.

Note the position of this student's hands as he works. *Why might he want greater control over the movement of the brush?*

The mature calligrapher, having learned the various styles of many famous calligraphers over decades of study and practice, develops a signature style of his or her own, usually based on or influenced by a calligraphic master of the past.

What is different about the working method of the calligrapher below? Do you think this affects the style in which he writes?

MORE: In comparing the working postures and attitudes of these two calligraphers, a more obvious point of difference might seem to lie in their levels of experience; a lifetime of practice should allow an individual to write with greater confidence and ease. The types of scripts being written, however, might also dictate particular ways of holding the brush. In what script is each calligrapher working, and what kinds of demands might that script type place on the individual writer?



Artist C.C. Wang writing in cursive script

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy Jerome Silbergeld.

As you look at the individual characters in examples throughout this unit, it may help to think of calligraphy as a type of performance. Try to think of each word as a visual space as well as a representation of an interval of time, and try to think about the following questions:

How fast did the brush move to produce a certain line quality?

Is the brush held at an angle? An angled brush typically produces asymmetrical lines that are straight on one side and swell outwards on the other. When the brush is held symmetrically, the brush tip travels along the center line of the stroke and the edges are both equidistant from this central axis.

Where does the calligrapher lift the brush from the page in order to negotiate a turn or get more ink?

Move on to [Six Dynasties Calligraphy](#)

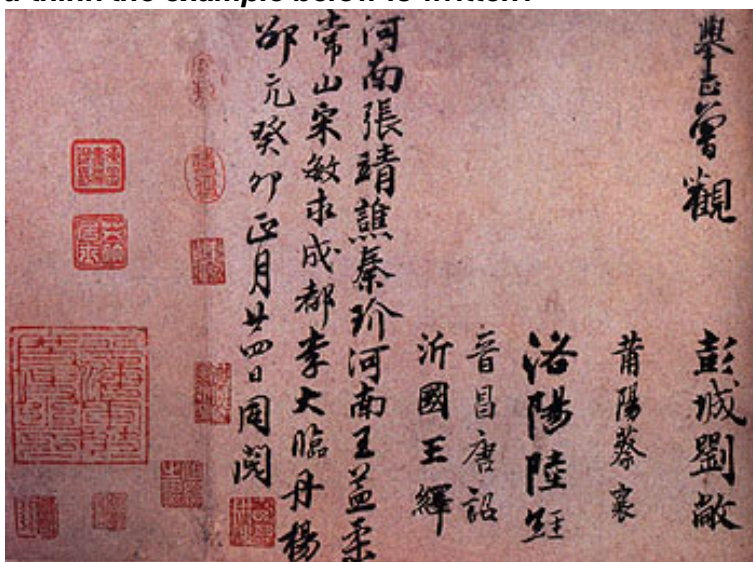
Six Dynasties Calligraphy

The Tradition of the Two Wangs

Some of the most famous calligraphers in all of Chinese history lived during the Six Dynasties period. At this time a wide appreciation for expressive writing styles also led to the first collecting and cataloguing of examples of the writings of individual calligraphers, even though some of these were merely fragments of personal correspondence preserved by chance.

Wang Xizhi (307?-365? AD) was the foremost among the calligraphers of the Eastern Jin period, and is revered today as the Sage of Calligraphy. He is best known for writings in cursive and running scripts. (Running script is a close variation of the standard script which features connections between individual characters and slightly abbreviated forms). Although his calligraphy was valued and collected from early on, few original works survive, and those that do are letters and notes. Because even as early as Tang times authentic handwritten examples of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy were rare, copies circulated, both legitimate reproductions and forgeries.

In which script type do you think the example below is written?

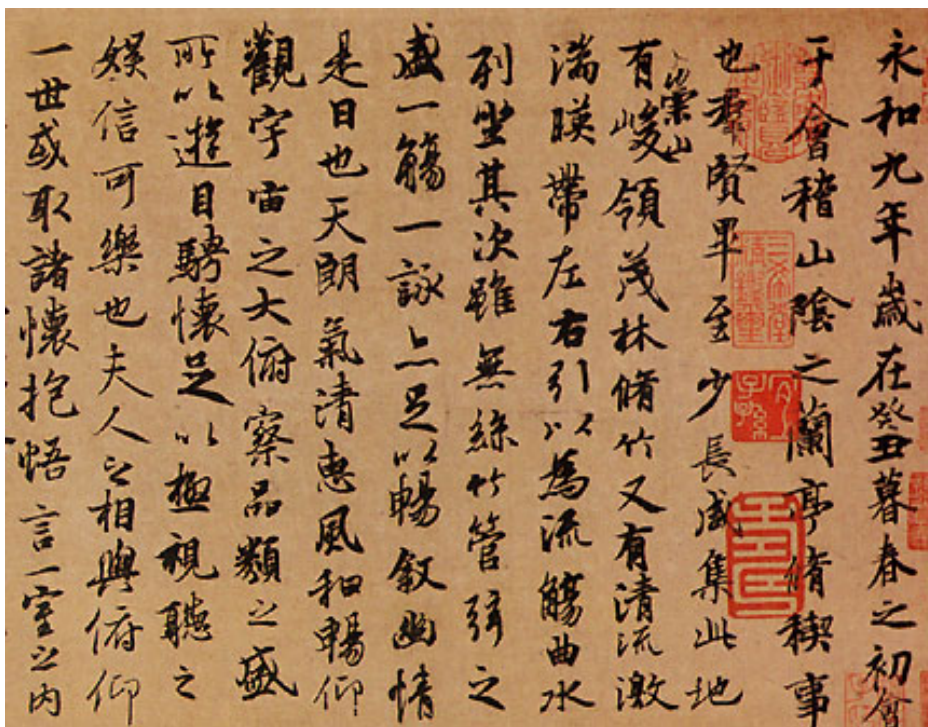


Wang Xizhi (Eastern Jin),

Note accompanying a gift of oranges

SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), plate 46, pp. 76-7. Collection National Palace Museum, Taipei.

ANSWER: Running, or semi-cursive, script. Wang Xizhi did not invent new script types but developed a style that melded the clerical and semi-cursive traditions of the Later Han dynasty.



Wang Xizhi (Eastern Jin), *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Manuscript Dated 353 AD* (detail)

SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 54, p. 90-91, detail. 24.5 x 69.9 cm. Collection National Palace Museum-Beijing.

Wang Xizhi's most famous work was the *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion* manuscript. In 353 AD, one year before his official retirement, Wang invited forty individuals to pass the Purification Rites festival with him at a famous pavilion in the Guiji area (modern day Zhejiang province) where he was serving as governor. A poetry contest was held alongside a stream, down which cups of wine were floated; anyone of the forty-two in attendance who could not finish his composition by the time the cup arrived would have to pay the forfeit and drink. This gathering soon achieved legendary status, and references to it occur throughout the poetry and painting of later eras.

The handwriting of the preface that Wang Xizhi wrote to accompany the poems collected from this event is praised for its spontaneity, lively rhythmic energy, and variation. The internal construction of his characters and his overall use of space is also highly admired.

During this period, the theory that a reader could see qualities of the man behind the brush arose. *Looking at the above example of Wang Xizhi's work, how do you think his personality might have been described?*

MORE: Note the very different overall shape of individual characters here, especially when compared with examples of the clerical script from the Han dynasty. A prominent feature of Wang Xizhi's character construction is the tendency of the right and left halves to pull away from the central axis.

As you look at each character, draw an imaginary box around it. *What is the overall shape of the character? Do the components hold together along a central axis, or do they tend to "pull apart"? Can you find any inconsistencies in the way Wang Xizhi wrote similar characters or individual strokes?*

Do you think this piece of writing was done methodically and carefully, or executed quickly? How can you tell?

Wang Xizhi's seventh son, Wang Xianzhi, was also renowned as a calligrapher. In his own time, his reputation even eclipsed that of his father. By the end of the Six Dynasties period, however, Wang Xizhi was reinstated as China's foremost calligrapher, displaying what was considered to be the most classical and sophisticated style. Look at the example below of Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy and pay special attention to the way in which individual words are spaced.

Can you identify a characteristic in Wang Xianzhi's writing that does not occur in that of his father?

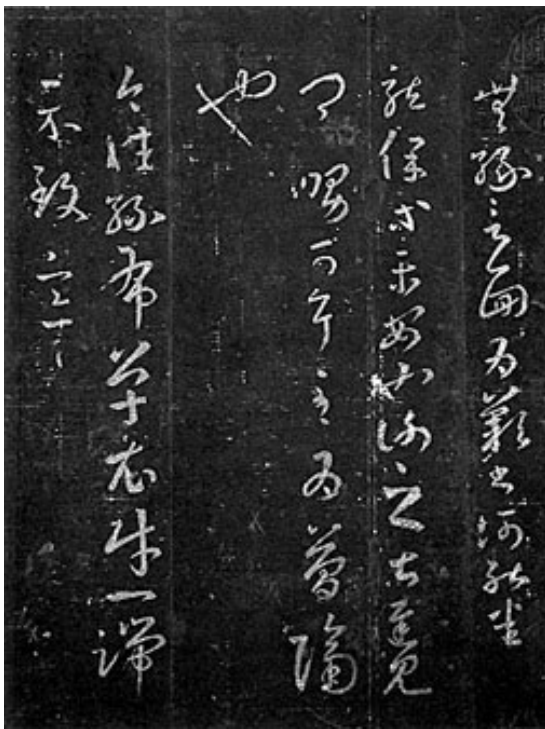


Wang Xianzhi (Eastern Jin), *Letter about a duck's head pill*

SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 60, p. 104. Collection of the Shanghai Museum. 26.1 x 26.9 cm.

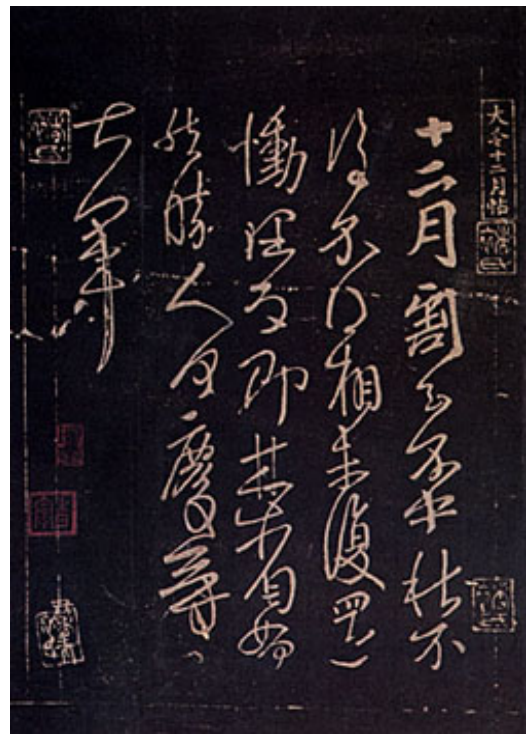
ANSWER: In Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy there is a linkage of consecutive characters, with connective brush strokes stretching like ligaments between individual words. This feature is not present in Wang Xizhi's calligraphy.

Compare these two letters below, the one on the left written by Wang Xizhi and the one on the right by Wang Xianzhi. *How many distinguishing features can you identify?*



Wang Xizhi, *On the Seventeenth* (letter)

SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 56, p. 95, detail. Collection of the Shanghai Library.



Wang Xianzhi, *On the Twelfth* (letter)

SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 63, p. 109. Collection of the Shanghai Library.

During the Six Dynasties period, calligraphy became an art form closely associated with the literate elite. Many members of the aristocratic class were like the Wang family, who had fled the political turbulence of the north and established new private estates in the south. The political and cultural center of the Southern Dynasties was situated in Jiankang (present-day Nanjing). The educated man developed his individual writing style as a means to express his inner self and to distinguish himself socially. The factors thought to contribute most to the maturation of a good calligrapher were his natural ability, a literary background, family connections, and exposure to a variety of written models, as the only way to master calligraphy was through practicing the major styles, basing innovations firmly on previous examples.



Because of the political division of north and south during the Six Dynasties period, a very different type of calligraphy flourished in the north. Almost all examples that exist today come in the form of memorial writings on stone tablets or steles.

What script type is used in this example of a memorial stele?

Inscription on a memorial stele, Northern Wei dynasty

SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 98, p. 181, detail. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

ANSWER: Regular, or standard, script. Calligraphy considered most appropriate for stele inscriptions was more formal and dignified and required a stateliness of execution for legibility and public display; therefore, the more conservative script types like clerical and standard script were consistently employed in such memorials.

What qualities of this writing style do you think people considered especially apt for this particular purpose?



Buddhist sutra engraved on Mount Tai, detail

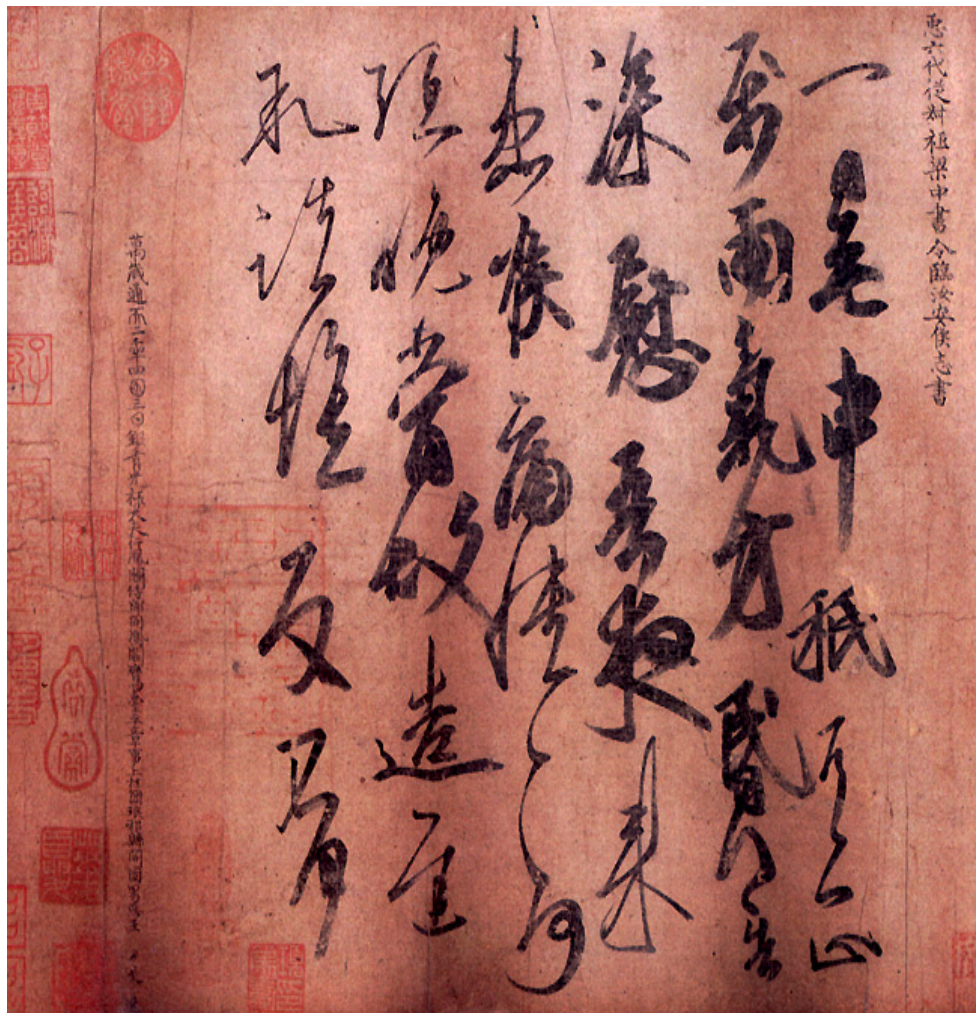
SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 110, p. 212. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

During this period as well, important texts like the Confucian Classics and the Buddhist canon were engraved on the rock faces of sacred mountains like Mount Tai. Colossal in size, these writings make use of highly simplified character shapes.

What do you think were the benefits of sponsoring such a project? Who would possess the resources and authority to do so?

Throughout the Six Dynasties period, educated individuals practiced calligraphy in the style of the two Wangs. Compare the following cursive script example by Wang Zhi, a later generation Wang-style calligrapher, with the letters of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi that we have compared above.

Which of the two Wangs do you think had the most influence on this particular calligrapher? Why?



Wang Zhi (Southern Qi), Letter beginning "One day, without spirit..."

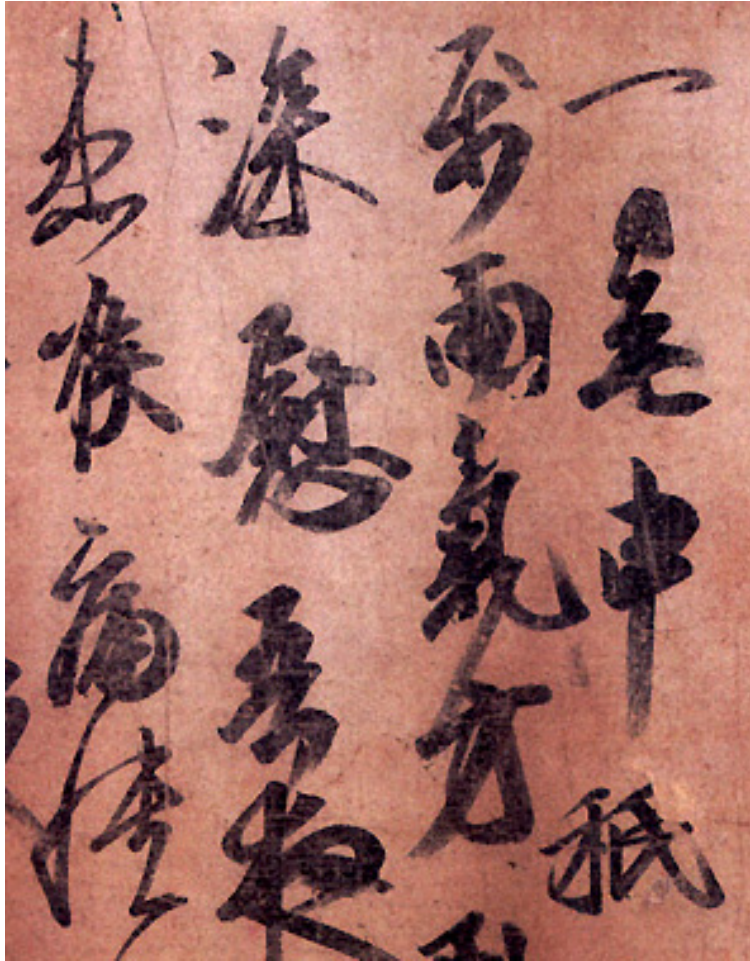
SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 78, p. 137. Collection of the Liaoning Provincial Museum.

ANSWER: Wang Xianzhi is the more likely precedent because of the fluidity of line and connections between many of the characters.

Move on to [Tang Dynasty Calligraphy](#)

Tang Calligraphy

Although the style of calligraphy developed by Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi was widely admired and practiced during their lifetimes, its continued influence on later calligraphers depended on the dissemination of original writings or reliable facsimiles to practitioners in other locales and to later generations.



Wang Zhi, detail of *Letter beginning*

“One day, without spirit...”

SOURCE: Wang Jingxian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke pian 2: Wei Jin Nanbeichao shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 78, p. 137. Collection of the Liaoning Provincial Museum.

During the Sui Dynasty (589-618 AD) the monk Zhiyong, a seventh-generation descendant of Wang Xizhi, produced many copies of traditional Wang style writings for distribution among various temples throughout (modern day) Zhejiang province. Zhiyong was also the teacher of Yu Shinan, an assistant in the Palace Library at the Sui court who went on to hold more senior academic positions at the early Tang court under Taizong. The Tang emperor appreciated Yu's steadfast personality and extensive learning as well as his excellence as a calligrapher.

It is important to note here that copying, in the history of both Chinese painting and calligraphy, does not carry the same pejorative connotation that it does in the European tradition, where the copy invariably stands in a subsidiary and inferior relationship to its original. Copying in China, on the other hand, was seen as a valuable educational tool, allowing the writer to model his writing stylistically, and more importantly, himself, on the character and intellect of the master calligrapher whose mode of writing he practiced.

The example above is a detail of a letter by the late Six Dynasties Wang style calligrapher Wang Zhi (which we compared in the last section with earlier letter samples by Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi).

Many of those who carried on the Wang tradition in calligraphy were from the same geographical region (southern China). What factors, other than aesthetic ones, might have caused a particular style of writing to be widely admired and imitated?

What aspects of Chinese philosophy or social theory may have contributed to this emphasis on traditions and lineages?

HINT: Think about the Confucian tradition and its attitudes towards education and lineages, and how this may have influenced the study of calligraphy.

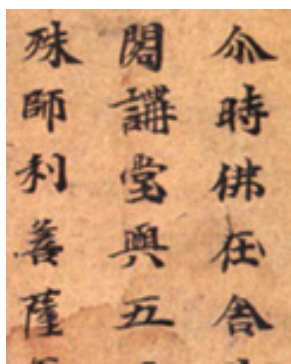
Tang calligraphy is discussed here in terms of four main directions of its development: the court and the styles it favored, the adoption of other styles by literati, the continuing importance of copying religious texts, and the development of individualist styles.



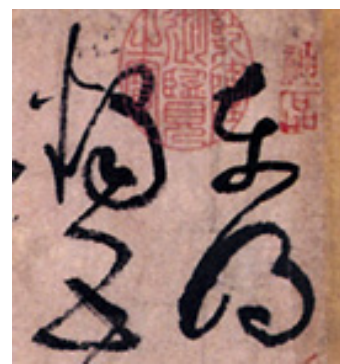
Early Tang Court
Calligraphy



Other Script Types



Religious Writings



Individualist Styles

Early Tang Court Calligraphy

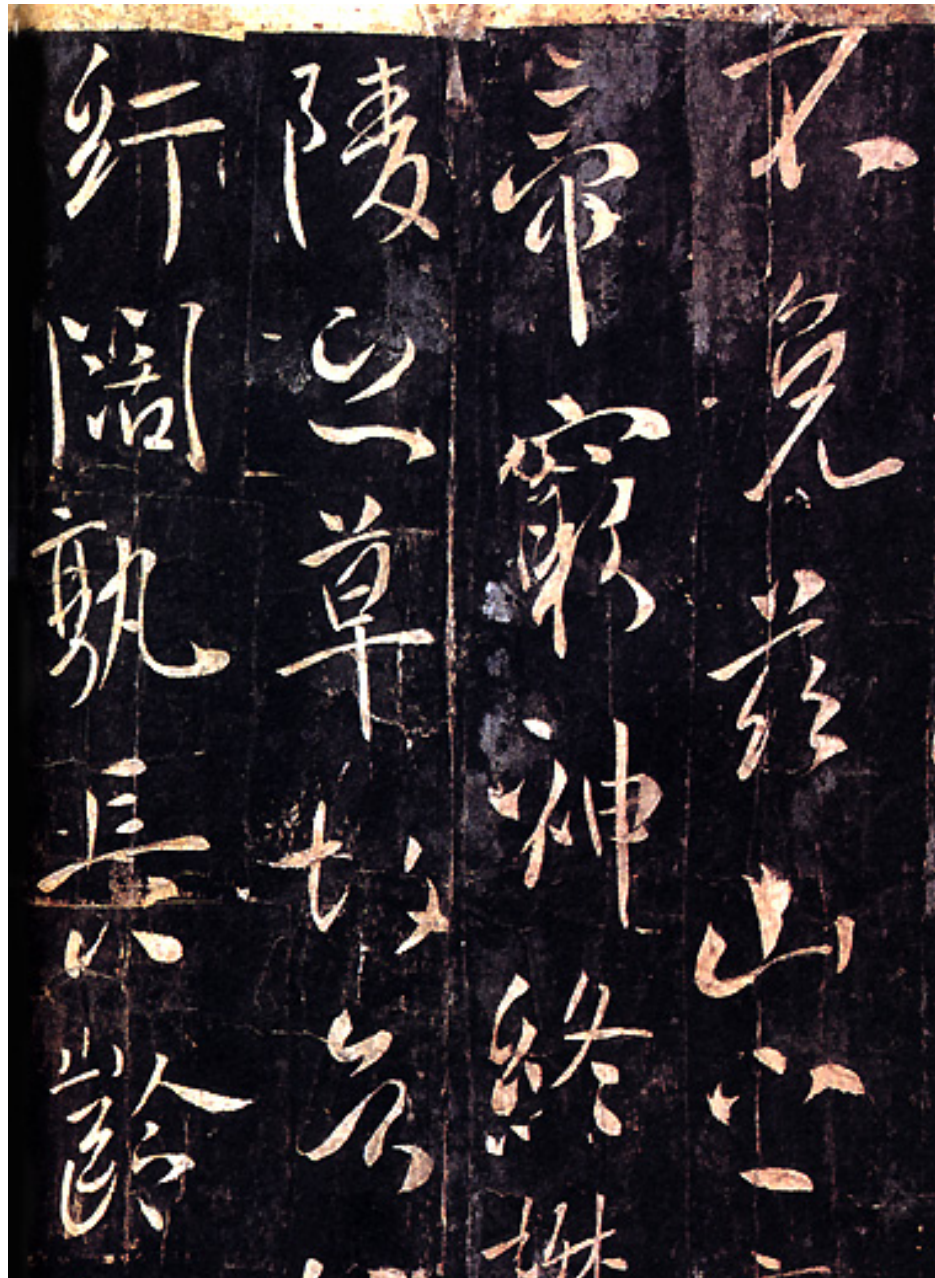
Calligraphy is an art form that has been closely associated with political power throughout China's history. Tang Taizong (r. 626-649 AD) himself was an avid collector of Wang Xizhi calligraphy during his day, and went to extreme lengths to gather up all the known extant Wang Xizhi works. He commissioned professional copyists to do careful reproductions of the works in the imperial collection and patronized Wang-style calligraphers at his court, many of whom held high-ranking posts.

Taizong took Wang Xizhi as the model for his own writing, which he practiced using copies provided by Yu Shinan (who because of his teacher Zhiyong was believed to be the closest Tang dynasty practitioner to the original Wang style).

Why do you think that an attempt was made to define a canon of accepted Wang Xizhi works at this particular time?

Why do you think Tang Taizong may have thought that sponsoring such a project would be beneficial?

MORE: Early Tang court calligraphy and collection practices likely followed Taizong's own personal interests. By the Tang dynasty, a substantial body of Wang Xizhi's calligraphic works, in both original and copy form, existed. The consolidation of significant cultural materials like calligraphy and paintings after the lengthy period of disunion may have served as a means to culturally unify and legitimize Tang rule.



Does Taizong's calligraphy at right seem like a close

descendant of the Wang Xizhi example shown in the previous section?



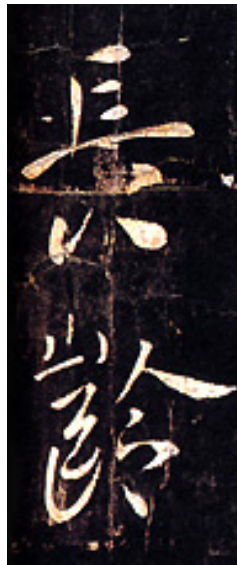
Li Shimin (Tang Taizong, r. 626-649 AD), *Encomium on the Warm Springs* (628 AD)

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 34, p. 70. Collection of the Louvre.

Two characters from each writing sample have been selected below to allow for a closer comparison.

Look especially closely at the places where the direction of a line changes.

Are these turns abrupt or fluid? Which is more characteristic of the earlier Six Dynasties writings seen in the previous section?



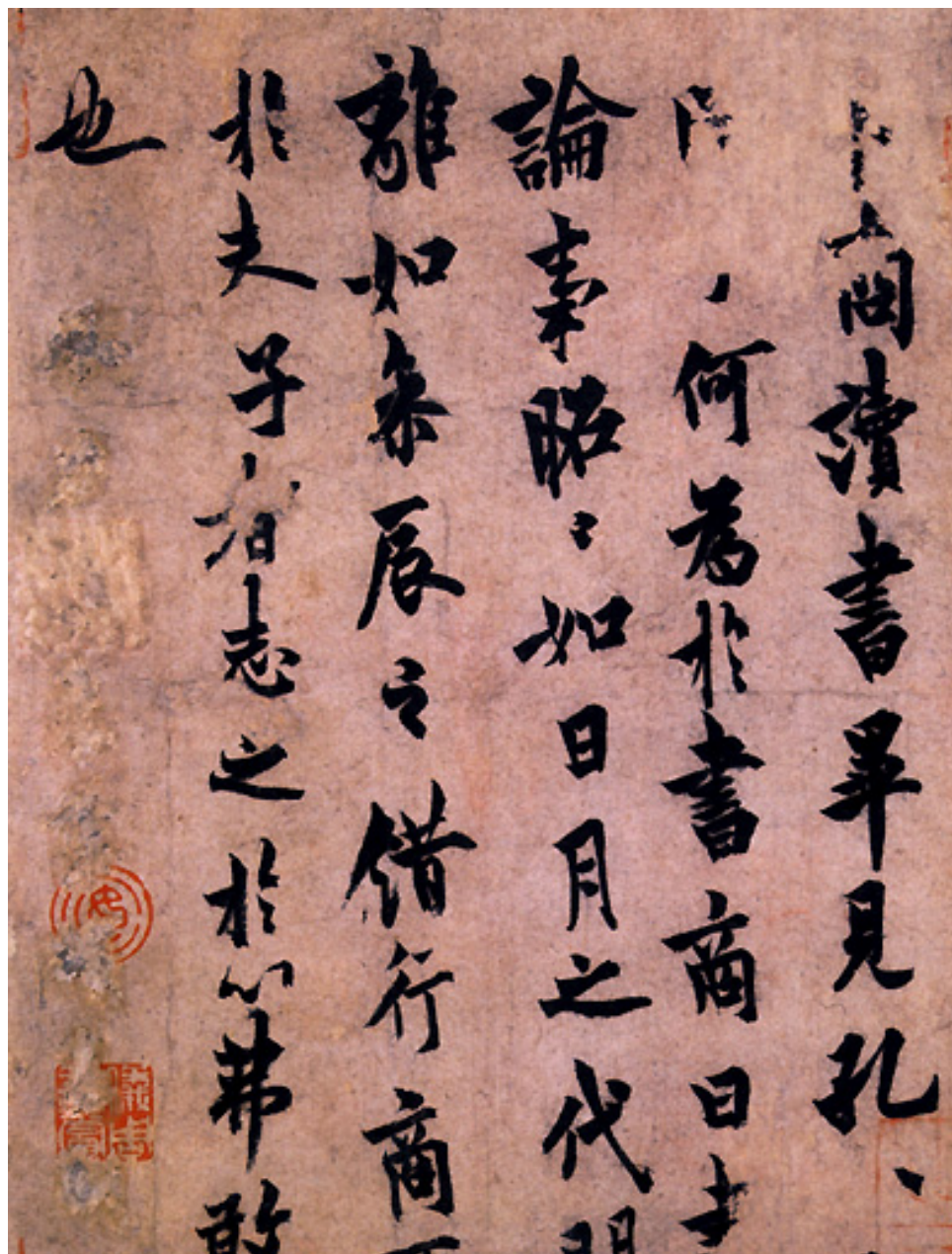
Do the lines seem more three dimensional in one example than the other? (Can you imagine a pushing down or pulling up movement of the brush when you look at them)? In what script types are these pieces of writing executed ?

In later writings on Chinese calligraphy, each historical period would be associated with a particular script type and the attitudes attributed to it. For example, the Six Dynasties period is associated with the cursive and running scripts, with a primary emphasis on “resonance” and harmony, likely because of the close relationship between calligraphy and lyric expression in poetry during this era.

During the Tang period, the predominant script was the regular or standard script, with a stylistic emphasis on brush methods or structure. The regular script was believed to have reached its maturity during the early Tang, representing a culmination of previous regional developments.

What impact do you expect political unification might have had on calligraphic styles and how they were passed on?

Tang calligraphy has been noted for its solidity and strength, which were also believed to demonstrate the author's irreproachable moral character. Of the more prominent academicians at Taizong's court, Yu Shinan and Ouyang Xun were valued as keepers of the calligraphic tradition, serving as tutors to the sons of nobility and as scholars of rank in the Palace library and Institute for the Advancement of Literature, respectively.



Compare this example of calligraphy by Ouyang Xun to those by Taizong and Wang Zhi above.

Look especially at the places where lines intersect. Do the characters seem to have a more organic or more geometrical structure?

Try to find characters that are repeated in the text (the character meaning “son” and the possessive pronoun *zhi* occur at least twice). Are they consistently executed from one instance to the next? Do the lines composing each character seem to adhere to a central axis?

Do you have an impression of the character of Ouyang Xun from the style of his writing?

What do you think calligraphic style can reveal about an individual?

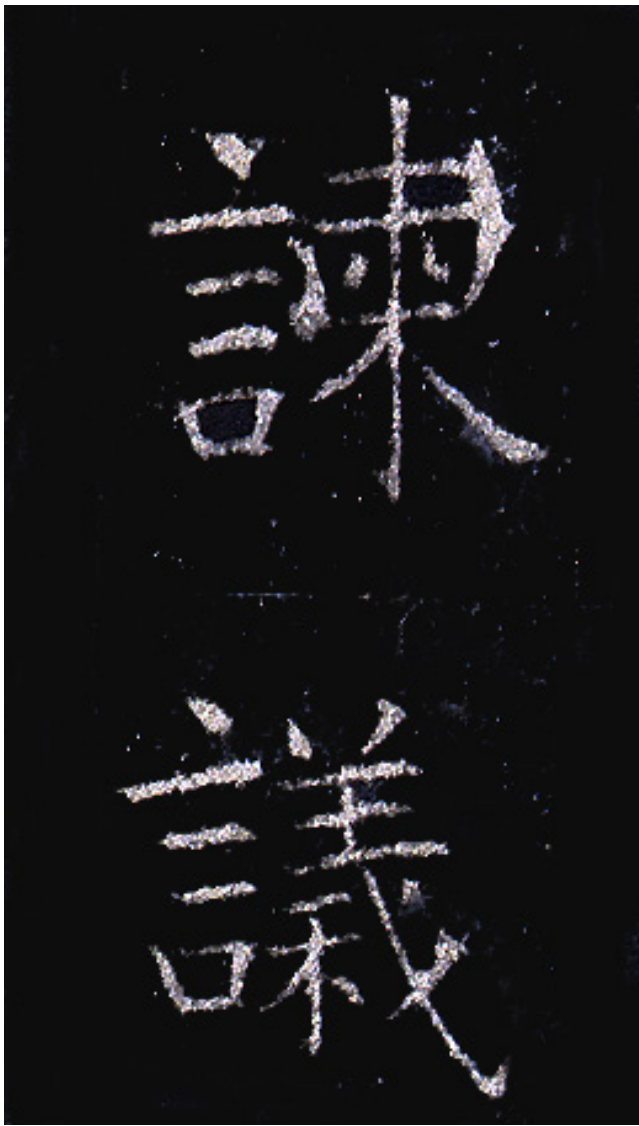


Ouyang Xun (557-641 AD), Letter

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 22, p. 40. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

The characters below are details from writings by Yu Shinan (left) and Ouyang Xun (right); both are in regular script. Think about the amount of precision or spontaneity that would have been required to form these words. *What do you think are the factors that contribute the most to their differences in appearance?*

MORE: Ouyang Xun's calligraphy was known for its sense of order and structure, while that of Yu Shinan was praised for its "effortlessness."



Yu Shinan (558-638 AD), *Memorial for the Kong family ancestral hall* (626 AD), detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke pian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 26, p. 51. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.



Ouyang Xun (557-641 AD), *Letter*, detail

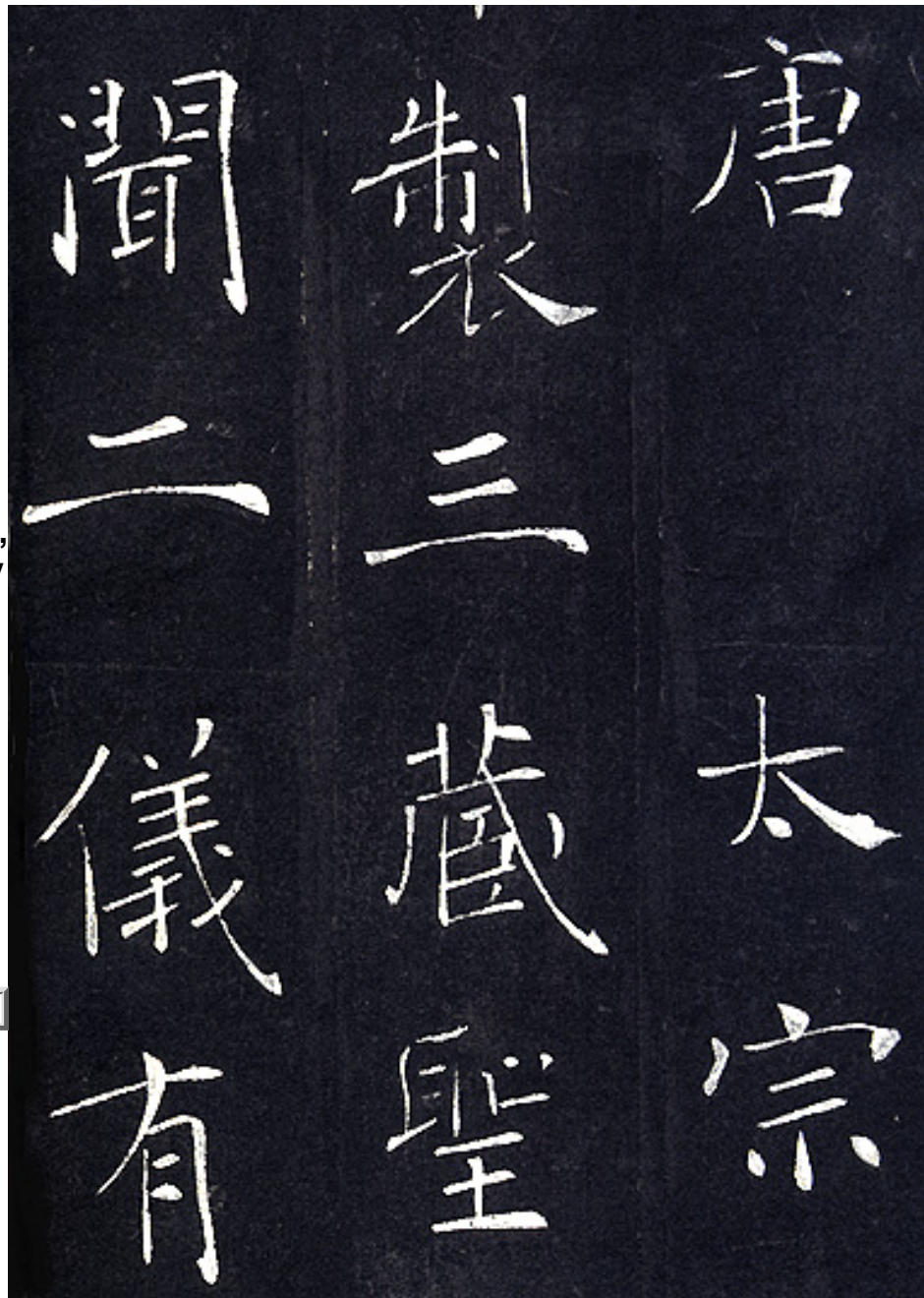
SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke pian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 22, p. 40. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

The calligrapher at right, Chu Suiliang (596-658 AD), was a student and protégé of one of the two shown above.

The calligraphic style Chu Suiliang used earlier in his life was said to be solid and firm. The sensitive, delicate style at right dates from his later years, and has been described as “a frail lady unable to bear the weight of her own garments.”

Based on this information and any stylistic affinities you can find, try to guess whether Ouyang Xun or Yu Shinan was his mentor.

ANSWER: Yu Shinan.



Chu Suiliang (596-658 AD), *Memorial for Meng Fashi* (642 AD)

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 32, p. 67. Collection of the (Riben san jing ting bing ke).

Move on to [Other Script Types](#)

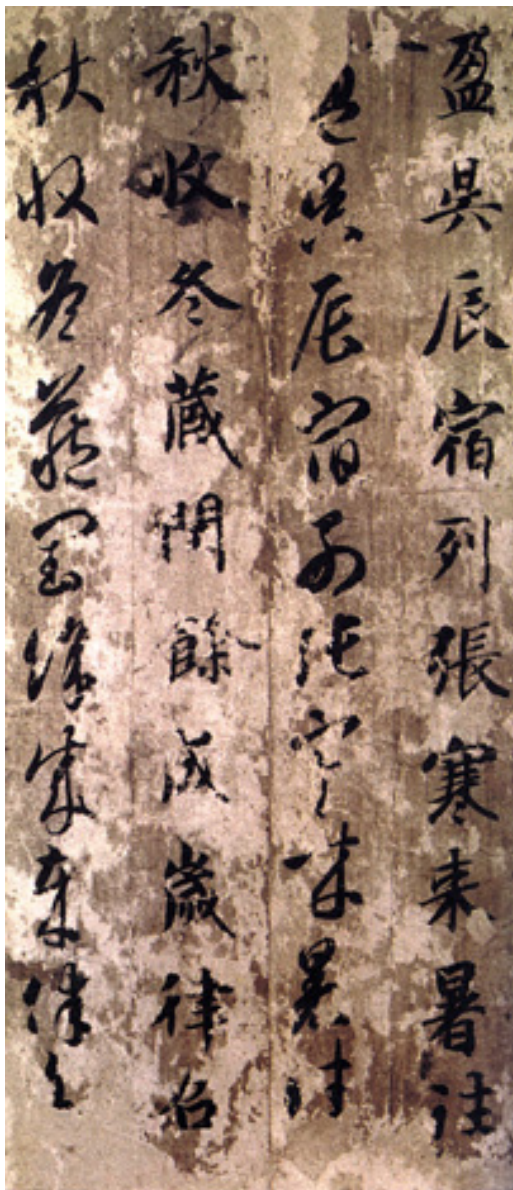
Other Script Types

Between the time of Wang Xizhi and the beginning of the Tang dynasty, calligraphy had come to be seen as a vehicle for expressing one's social status and learning. There was also a very close relationship between poetry and calligraphy as practiced by the educated elite from this time forward. More and more people who practiced calligraphy sought to develop facility with a variety of styles and script types. One of the means by which they did so was copying familiar texts that contained a wide range of simple and complicated characters.

Below are two examples of handwritten copies of the *Thousand character classic*, a children's primer written during the Liang dynasty (502-556 AD). Zhiyong, the descendant of Wang Xizhi who was also Yu Shinan's teacher, was said to have made eight hundred copies of this text for distribution among various Buddhist temples in his native Zhejiang province.

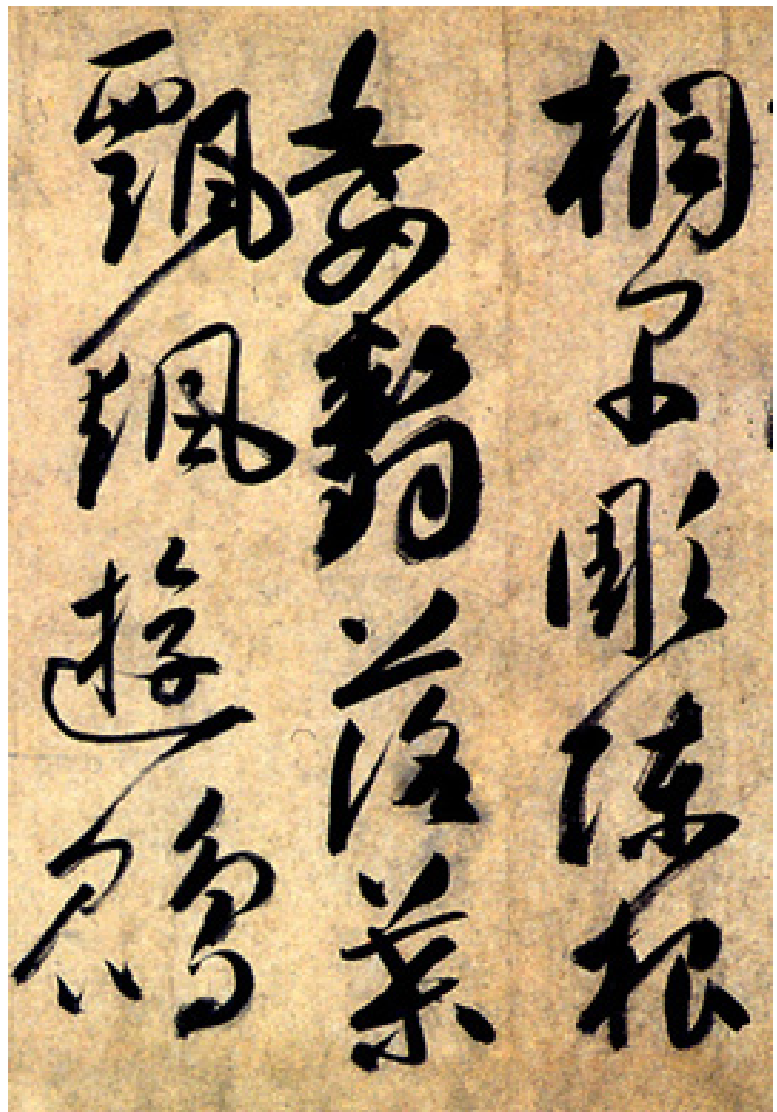
Why do you think well known texts were considered good sources for calligraphy practice? Might the content of the Thousand character classic have been an important factor in its selection for calligraphy practice? Why or why not?

Do you think that these calligraphic examples might be close reproductions of an original, or do you think the writers are demonstrating their own personal style?



Thousand character essay (Sui or early Tang) in alternating lines of regular and running script, detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 1, p. 3. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.



Gaoxian (Tang), Thousand character essay in cursive script, detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 82, p. 176. Collection of the Shanghai Fine Art Museum.

ANSWER: These are both examples of individual calligraphers using a relatively simple text to demonstrate their mastery of different script types.

Although the Tang period is closely associated with the standard script as a result of its being adopted by the court, other types continued to be in use.

Look at the example at the right, which is done in a script most common in Han times.

Do you think this type of writing may have seemed old fashioned when compared with the regular script examples of the early Tang court calligraphy shown above?

What do you think might have made this style of writing attractive or necessary in this later time period?



Shi Weize, *Memorial inscription*, 736 AD, detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 55, p. 124. Collection of the Beijing Library.

Move on to [Religious Writings](#)

Religious Writings

Religious calligraphy continued to be of great importance during the Tang. Until the widespread use of printing in China after the Tang dynasty, religious texts were copied by hand. Buddhist texts in particular were copied in great numbers by monks or by individuals. Copies of the entire Buddhist canon were undertaken by imperial decree, and often the work of many individual calligraphers went into the completion of various sutra texts, which could be quite long. When sutra texts were commissioned, it was common practice to have the most talented calligraphers do the first and last scrolls, with the work parceled out to other scribes in between.

How could making or commissioning a handwritten copy of a Buddhist sutra benefit an individual?

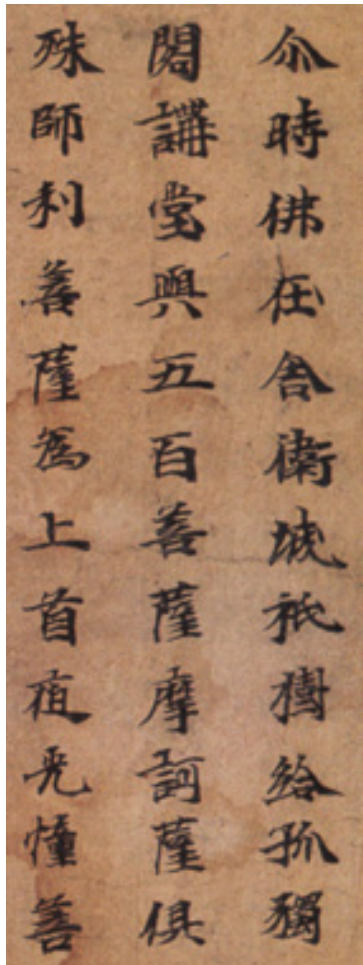
ANSWER: Copying a text by hand, or commissioning a copy to be made, were common ways for an individual to gain karmic merit.

What special requirements do you think the copying of a religious text would demand?

MORE: The most important requirement for a sutra text was that of legibility because of its didactic nature and the ultimate purpose of the text. Copyists in general were anonymous scribes who were strictly examined with regard to penmanship, character construction, and their ability to make rapid, distinct, and firm copies of a given text.

The brush used for sutra copying was different in shape from a regular calligraphy brush, with a much shorter tip.

Do you notice a difference in the overall shape of the characters when compared with the secular writings in this unit? What do you think might account for this difference?



Cao Fashou, with others. Northern Wei sutra copy of the *Avatamsaka sutra*, detail

SOURCE: Cao Fashou, et al, *Huayan Jing in Wang Jingxian, ed., Zhongguo meishu quanji, shufa zhuanke bian, 2: Weijin nanbei chao shufa* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 110, p. 203. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

Decorative refinements, such as the use of specially made papers and gold or silver inks, were employed in the copying of religious texts, but rarely occur in secular examples.

What attitudes toward different types of writings might account for this difference?

Who do you think might have commissioned this sutra copy?

HINT: Try to identify the ultimate function and audience for this kind of text.



Tang dynasty *Sutra*, in gold ink on blue paper

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 100, p. 220 Collection of the Suzhou Art Museum.



Shi

Weize, *Da zhi zhan shi memorial*

(736 AD), detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke pian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 55, p. 124 (detail) Collection of the Beijing Library.



Tang dynasty
Sutra copy,
detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke pian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 100, p. 220 Collection of the Suzhou Art Museum.

Compare the two examples of calligraphy above. The sample on the left is a secular memorial inscription and is executed in the clerical script.

Do you see any similarities in style or shape of characters? If so, what do you think might account for the similarities?

ANSWER: The sutra style makes use of an exaggeration of the breaking wave stroke which is a remnant of the clerical script. The sutra style can be considered a derivation of this earlier script type; sutra texts are also characterized by greater uniformity in the way individual characters are constructed, resulting in highly regularized, orthodox forms for some of the characters.

Move on to [Individual Styles](#)

Individualist Styles

Individualism became an important strain in painting, calligraphy, and poetry during the middle to later years of the Tang dynasty. As the central political sphere declined, there was an upsurge in localized unorthodox creative activity which seemed to stand outside all previous traditions. Daoist painters got drunk and painted with their hair or dragged each other across the paper's surface, and their Chan counterparts sought similar release from societal constraints in calligraphy through the use of a new style of writing aptly named "wild cursive." The moral and civic value attached to modeling oneself on the great early Tang masters of the standard script from Taizong's court was still recognized, but the new emphasis on individuality, the spontaneous, and the uninhibited marked a profound shift in calligraphic practice from an ultimately conservative tradition to one that favored self-expression and change.

As court calligraphers throughout the Tang period were engaged in setting and maintaining a standard for elegant writing in the Wang tradition, the actual forms of calligraphy championed by the court became increasingly conventionalized and stagnant. Wild cursive, a radically modified version of the draft cursive script of the Han dynasty, can be seen as a reaction against the atrophied writing styles of later Wang tradition calligraphers.

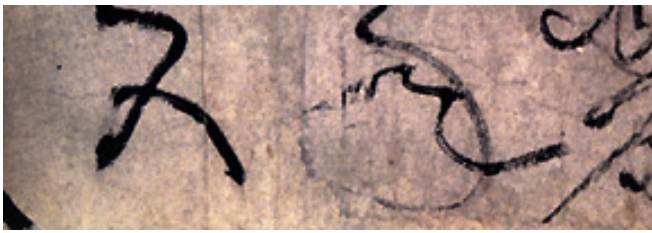


Zhang Xu (active 710-750 AD) was said to be the originator of the wild cursive script. He enjoyed considerable fame in his own day, and is counted among the Tang poet Du Fu's "Eight Drunken Immortals."

Although wild cursive seems to break radically from all past traditions, Zhang Xu did base his writing style on one of the more prominent earlier calligraphers. It is believed that he was further influenced by the Daoist practice of automatic writing in sand.

Zhang Xu's calligraphic style is widely praised, especially by later scholars, yet one of the by-products of his style is a pronounced deformation of word structures.

Of the calligraphers presented in this unit, whom do you think Zhang Xu took as his primary model? What seems to be a salient feature of this writing style, judging from the small sample at left?



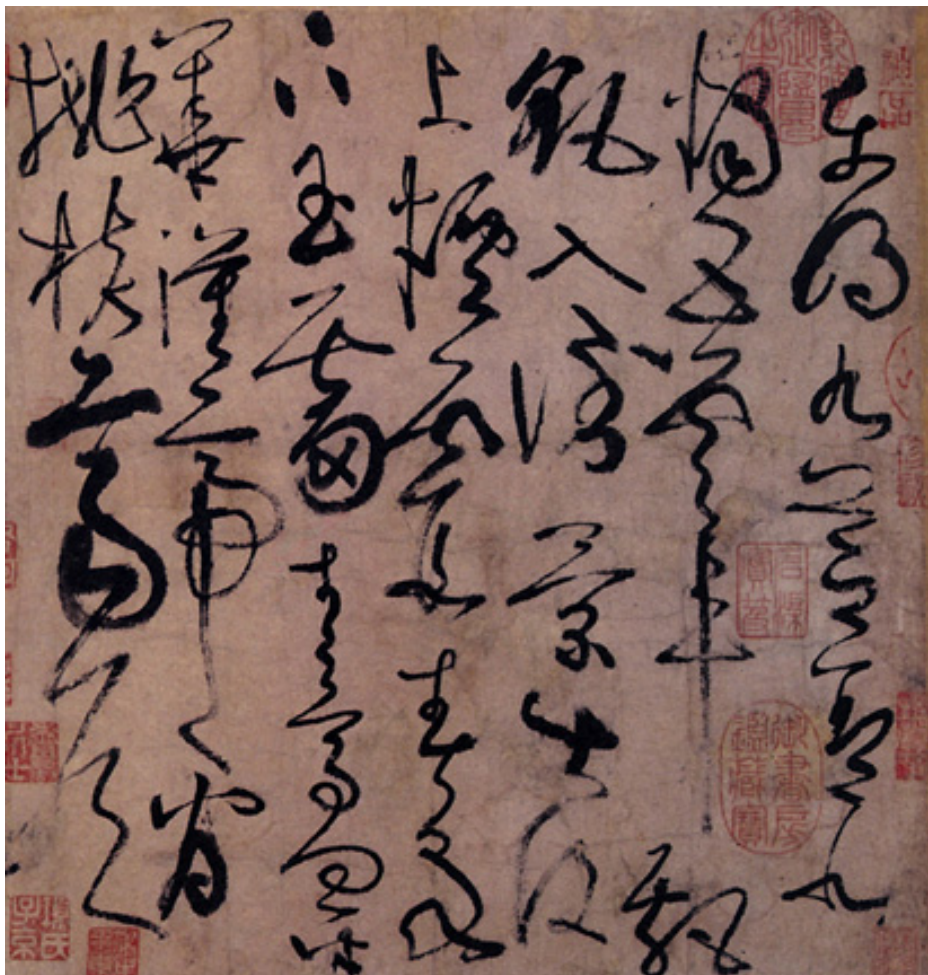
Zhang Xu (active 710-750), *Four Letters on ancient poems*, written in wild cursive script, detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 52, p. 118. Collection of the Liaoning Provincial Museum.

What philosophical traditions in China might have valued extreme unconventionality more than placing oneself clearly within an established tradition or school?

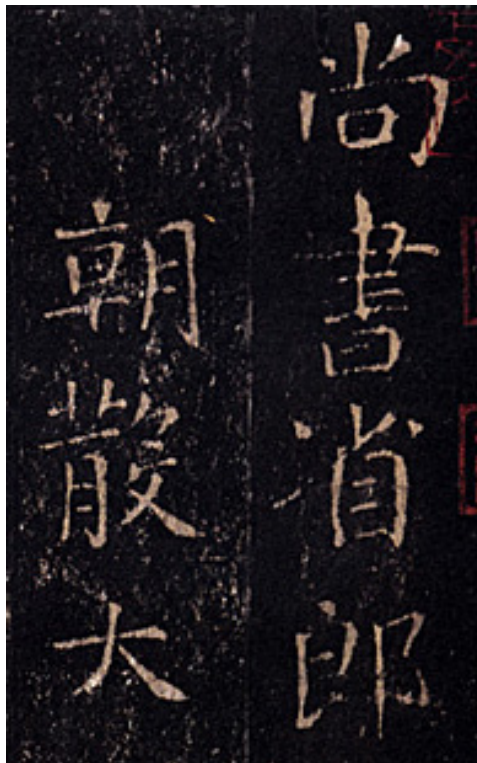
MORE: Zhang Xu introduced spontaneity and deformation of the written character as a means of expressing the inner self; this distortion repudiates normative or accepted forms. Wild cursive encourages the outward display of raw energy, often at the expense of the time-honored ideals of balance and containment. Is this attitude closer to Confucian or Daoist philosophical ideas?

Below is a larger section of the detail of the letter shown above. **Can you recognize characters that you've seen before? Can you tell where the brush must have changed speed or received great pressure? How many people do you think would be able to read this letter?**



Zhang Xu (active 710-750), *Four Letters on ancient poems*, written in wild cursive script, detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke pian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 52, p. 112. Collection of the Liaoning Provincial Museum.



The example at left is also Zhang Xu's calligraphy. Compare this sample with the two of Zhang Xu's wild cursive shown above.

MORE: Zhang Xu's cursive script calligraphy is spontaneously wild, with emotional resonance that moves from column to column. We should be cautious, however, in equating this "personality" with that displayed in all of his writing, as this standard script example indicates he also had a strong orthodox foundation to draw from in his calligraphic practice.

In what script type is this written? Does it resemble the style of any of the early Tang court calligraphers?

How do you think each of these two writing samples was executed? What factors do think account for the differences in appearance?

Zhang Xu, *Preface to the Lang guan shi ji* (641 AD), detail

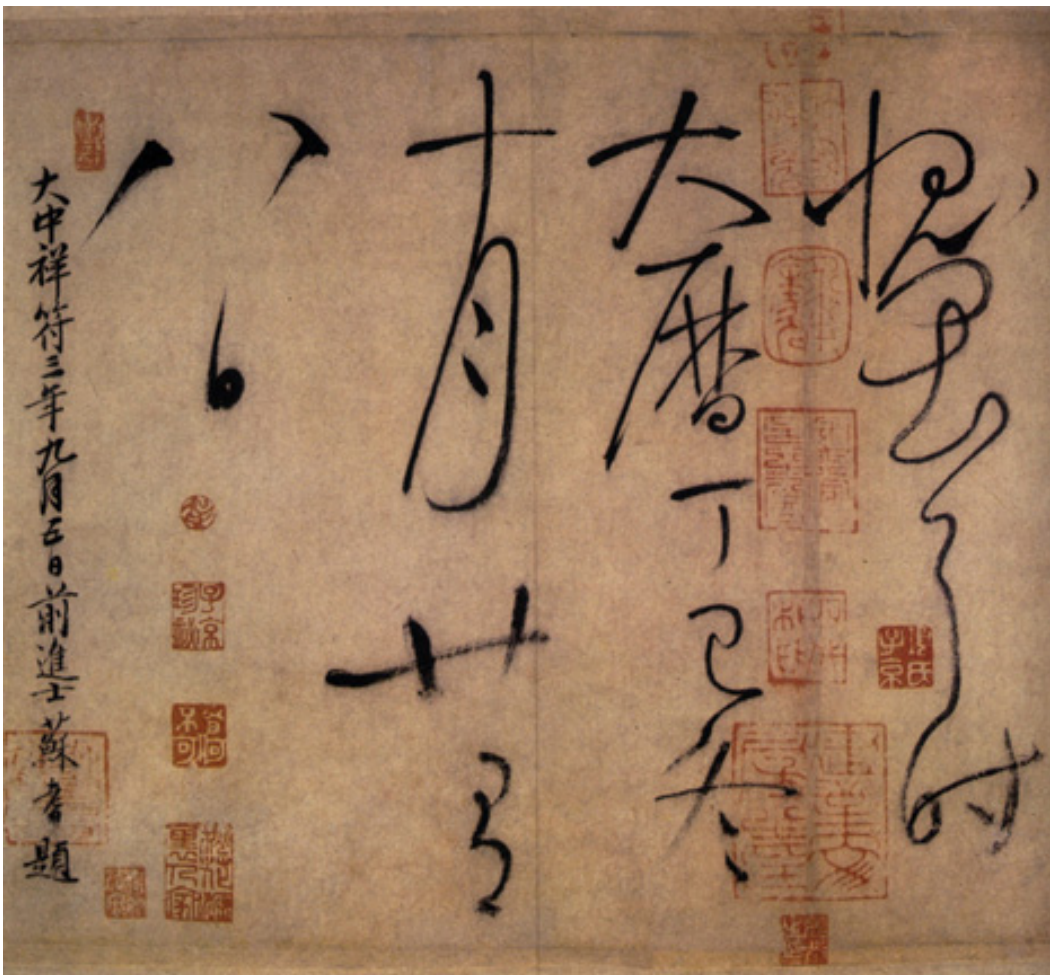
SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 53, p. 120. Collection of the Shanghai Fine Art Museum.

What made the running and draft scripts more attractive for writers and collectors alike than standard script?

Zhang Xu was also the teacher/model of two calligraphers of the following generation who were revered for their unorthodox and highly individualistic styles. The monk Huaisu (735?-800? AD, example shown below) was a man of letters; also known as the “Drunken Monk,” he followed Zhang Xu’s wild cursive mode of writing. In one of the extant examples of his calligraphy, Huaisu complains about eating bitter bamboo shoots, and also admits his unbounded passion for liquor and fish. The sample of Huaisu’s writing below is an autobiographical essay that includes comments on his own study of calligraphy.

What kind of impression of the calligrapher’s personality or temperament does the example below give you? Is this a carefully composed piece of writing?

What religious or philosophical traditions do you think had the most formative impact on this mode of writing?



Huaisu (735? – 800? AD), *Autobiographical Essay*

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 76, p. 167. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Yan Zhenqing (709-785 AD) was a leading figure among loyalists to the Tang throne during the politically turbulent eighth century. He was a dedicated and brilliant military figure who suffered great personal loss at the hands of aspirants to the throne yet remained unwavering in his loyalty to the legitimate ruling house.

Because of his reputation as a staunchly moral and principled individual, Yan Zhenqing's forceful and majestic individual style assumed the heroic proportions of his own life. One of the requisite techniques of Chinese calligraphy is maintaining the brush's upright position in order to transfer more directly and powerfully the flow of energy from hand to paper. From Yan Zhenqing's time forward, saying someone wrote with an "upright brush" carried an especially strong tone of moral approbation. His calligraphy was particularly influential among literati of the Northern Song, including Su Dongpo and Huang Tingjian.

Evaluative writings on calligraphy often equate the structure ("architecture") and line quality of the written word with the physical human self. Some examples are criticized for being too "fleshy" while lacking in bone structure.

How do you think Yan Zhenqing's regular script calligraphy would be portrayed in these terms? Why do you think this type of analogy was considered appropriate?



Yan Zhenqing (709-785 AD), *Memorial inscription* (745 AD)

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 64, p. 145. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

Compare details from Yan Zhenqing's regular script inscriptions (examples below right) with two examples from the more orthodox court tradition that favored the elegance and ease of Wang Xizhi style calligraphy, represented by Chu Suiliang from the time of Taizong (below, top left) and Li Yong, the foremost Wang tradition calligrapher of the first half of the eighth century (below, bottom left).

Where can you identify similarities in the shape and angularity of brush strokes?

Which brush strokes seem to have been made with the most force or pressure?

Do you think a particular example stands out in terms of presenting a forceful or distinct personality? Why or why not?

MORE: Yan Zhenqing's innovation in calligraphic expression is influenced by his engagement with the northern tradition of monumental standard script styles (the northern votive steles and rock-cut sutras being often-claimed antecedents for his unique style), representing a balance between propriety and Zhang Xu's wildness. The sheer weight and lack of hesitation in his brushstrokes has long been associated with his physical and moral courage.

Is Yan Zhenqing's handwriting easily distinguishable from other examples you've looked at throughout this unit? What would you identify as its most distinctive quality?

MORE: Although many viewers see Yan Zhenqing's style as easily recognizable in its "muscular," expansively composed characters, a later calligrapher and poet of the Southern Tang dynasty, Li Yu, described it as being "like an uncouth farmer facing forward with arms folded and legs spread apart."



Chu Suiliang (596-658 AD), *Meng Fashi memorial inscription* (642 AD) detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 32, p. 67.



Yan Zhenqing (709-785 AD), *Encomium inscription* (771 AD) detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 66, p. 149. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.



Li Yong (678-747 AD), *Memorial to General Li Sixun (720 AD)*, detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), plate 57, p. 128. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.



Yan Zhenqing (709-785 AD), *Encomium inscription (771 AD)*, detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke bian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), plate 66, p. 149. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

Although the majority of calligraphers during the Tang period made their most distinctive contributions to the development of a mature standard or regular script, the cursive script type would in time be the most favored for its ability to express the individual calligrapher's aesthetic preferences and inner character.



Compare these two examples of cursive script, one by Huaisu (left) and the other by Yan Zhenqing (below).

Do either of these seem to be a more intentionally aesthetic object? Why or why not?

Huaisu (735? – 800? AD), *Autobiographical Essay*, detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke pian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 76, p. 167. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

MORE: Huaisu's *Autobiography* may betray a conscious effort to develop a script form from aesthetic motives; the Chan component of his calligraphy is also significant. Yan Zhenqing's *Lament for a Nephew* seems, on the other hand, to contain a genuine outpouring of emotion, especially where mistakes are left uncorrected or are blackened out in agitation. There is a clumsiness to Yan Zhenqing's writing that makes it seem more "natural" and less controlled, and so might be considered a truer description of the writer's spirit or mind.



The content of the letter written by Yan Zhenqing, left, recounts the political circumstances under which his nephew was executed.

Yan Zhenqing (709-785 AD), *Lament for a nephew* (letter), detail

SOURCE: Yang Renkai, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Shufa juanke pian 3: Sui Tang Wudai shufa* (Beijing: Renming meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 69, p. 154. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Although it is riddled with mistakes and corrections, this example of Yan Zhenqing's writing has been especially valued by connoisseurs.

What qualities do you think might make this more attractive than a polished, well-executed piece of calligraphy?

Move on to [Calligraphy in Modern China](#)

Calligraphy in Modern China

Calligraphy has remained a potent force in Chinese life up to the present. During the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, calligraphy continued to be a central art of the literati, closely associated both with painting and with the social and cultural life of the educated elite. The Chinese landscape came to reflect the appreciation of calligraphy, as stones inscribed with the calligraphy of admired artists were erected at famous sites. Calligraphy could also be seen on temple name plaques, on shop signs, and on couplets pasted by the doors of even very modest homes. Calligraphy, thus, formed an ever-present part of China's visual culture.



Painting of Mao Zedong wielding the brush to write the "large character poster" that launched the cultural revolution: "Bombard the Headquarters"

SOURCE: *China Reconstructs*, February 1968, cover

During the twentieth century, the social and political uses of calligraphy have been radically changed. Calligraphy is no longer an art associated primarily with the traditional scholarly elite. Not only has calligraphy been employed as a tool of revolution, but it has become a popular amateur art practiced by people of all walks of life, and artists have found ways to use it to challenge traditions rather than perpetuate them.

Under Mao, words were frequently seen on the street displayed on banners or signs with revolutionary slogans. Most of the time, the style used for revolutionary slogans was bold and block-like, with no resemblance to calligraphy produced through use of the brush.

At workplaces, as seen below, prominent signs urged workers to sustain their revolutionary ardor.

How do you think the common sight of slogans like these would shape how people looked on calligraphy done with a brush?



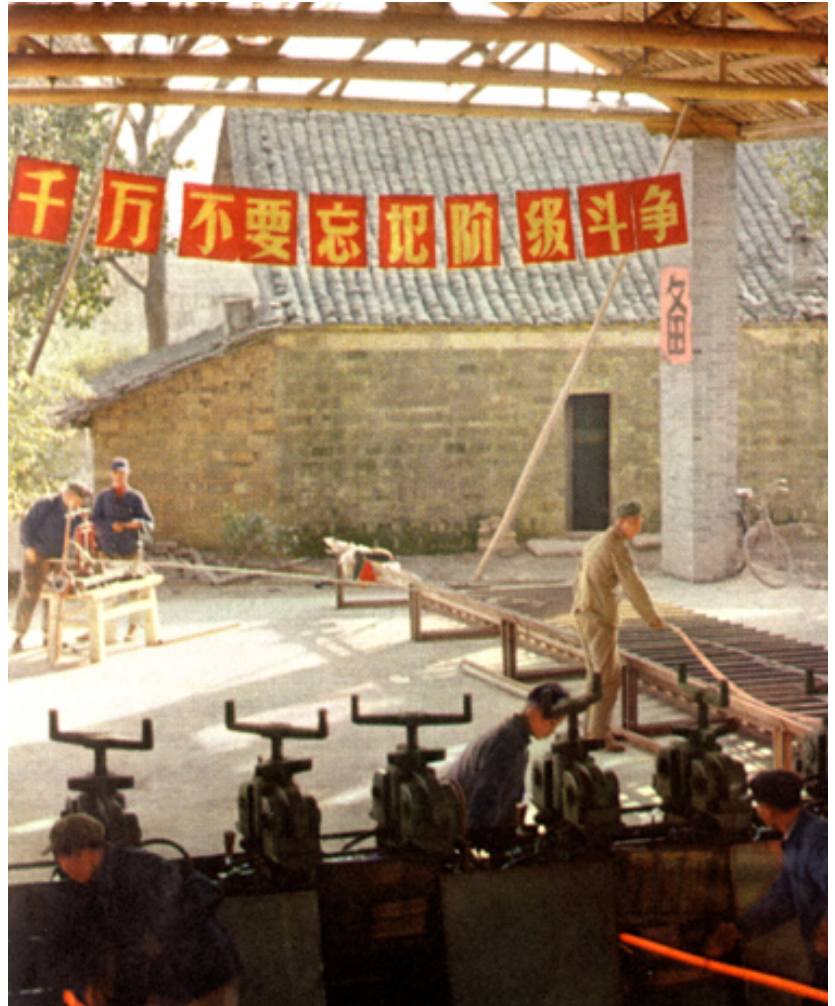
1969 rally urging resistance against American imperialism

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 11.269 (1970): back cover.



The characters on the wall of the Kirin Municipal Oil and Grease Plant urge "arduous struggle" in 1970

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 5.263 (1970): 5.
Original caption: "The distilling workshop. The oil and grease plant, which in the beginning made only one product, has been expanded so that it now puts out over 70 products of different varieties."



Workshop decorated with banner proclaiming "Under no conditions forget class struggle!"

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 2.260 (1970): 35.

Even if block-like calligraphy had revolutionary overtones, Mao and other leading revolutionaries wrote in styles much closer to traditional calligraphy. Moreover, even after most people took up writing with pencils and ball-point pens, leading party members continued to do calligraphy with traditional brushes. They would give away pieces of their calligraphy and allowed their calligraphy to be widely displayed.

Mao was not only a calligrapher, but also a poet. Below is the first part of a poem he wrote in response to a poem sent to him by the literary figure, Guo Moruo. The poem extols revolutionary action, but uses traditional poetic forms.



Mao's poem, "Reply to Guo Moruo, to the tune of Man jiang hong"

SOURCE: *China Reconstructs* 3 (1967): 3. Original caption: "A facsimile of Chairman Mao's poem 'Reply to Kuo Mo-jo to the Melody of Man Chiang Hung' in his own handwriting. This is only the first part of the piece."

For other political leaders' calligraphy, [click here](#) [given below in this Teacher's Guide].

The calligraphy below is by leading political figures of Mao's generation.

為創造更多的好
連隊而有斗
林彪

Calligraphy by Lin Biao from 1961

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 8.266 (1970): 2. Original caption: "Strive to train more 'four-good' companies. This brilliant inscription, resplendent with Chairman Mao's thinking on army building, was written by Vice-Chairman Lin Piao in 1961 for a PLA unit stationed in Kwangchow area."

學習雷鋒
做毛主席
的好戰士
朱德
一九六三年三月一日

Calligraphy by Zhu De from 1963, urging "learning from Lei Feng"

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 6.348 (1976): 11. Original caption: "Chairman Chu-Teh's inscription: 'Learn from Lei Feng and be good fighters of Chairman Mao.'"

What do you think of these four samples of calligraphy? Do you recognize any features of earlier calligraphic styles?

向雷鋒同志學習，
把毛主席開創的
無產階級革命事
業進行到底。

華國鋒

Calligraphy by Chairman Hua, "Learn from Comrade Lei Feng and carry through to the end the proletarian revolutionary cause pioneered by Chairman Mao."

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 6.348 (1976): 8.

毛主席教導中國人民
深挖洞，廣積糧，不祿壙。

周恩來

一九七五年七月五日

Calligraphy by Premier Zhou Enlai of Mao's words, "Chairman Mao has taught the Chinese people," from 1975

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 5 (1975): 12. Original caption: "This is the last inscription of Chairman Mao's quotation written by Premier Chou En-lai with a Chinese brush during his illness on July 5, 1975. It reads, 'Chairman Mao has taught the Chinese people: Dig tunnels deep, store grain everywhere, and never seek hegemony.'"

Mao Zedong's calligraphy was more widely displayed than that of any other leader. The poem shown above is used, at right, to decorate the memorial hall dedicated to Mao the year after his death.



Mao's calligraphy in the Mao Mausoleum

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 1977.12 (1977): 8.

Leaders, beginning with Mao, but continuing to the present, liked to be photographed doing calligraphy or making gifts of it.



Mao writing in the 1940s

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 1970.10 (1970): 14.

Original caption: "During the anti-Japanese war the great leader Chairman Mao wrote "On Protracted War" and many other brilliant works. In them, he creatively developed Marxism-Leninism further and laid down the theoretical foundation for victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan."



Hua Guofeng writing in the late 1970s

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 10.352 (1977): 5.

In 2001 China's premier Jiang Zemin had himself photographed conferring an inscription in his own calligraphy to a society he wanted to support.

What do you think a political leader has to gain from publication of a picture like this?



Jiang Zemin presenting his calligraphy to a society in 2001

SOURCE: *China Daily*, Feb. 28, 2001, front page. Original caption: "President Jiang Zemin explains the inscription he wrote for the Bo'ao Forum at its launch ceremony yesterday as two members of staff showed it to the audience."



One also can still see calligraphy by earlier political leaders in China today. This inscription proclaiming the Confucian virtue of broad love is in the hand of Sun Yat-sen.

Inscription by Sun Yat-sen in Shanxi province

Photo June 2001. Courtesy of Patricia Ebrey.

There is still work today for calligraphers and a substantial market for calligraphy scrolls produced in the traditional manner. Many art schools now have professors of calligraphy training calligrapher-artists. Considerably less well paid are calligraphers who produce calligraphy for signs and door frames. Nevertheless, this sort of calligraphy continues to form a significant part of everyday visual culture.



The entrance to this house has not only the character for "blessings" cut into the brick (visible behind the bicycle) and a four character phrase above the entrance but also two temporary paper strips on either side of the door. The phrase across the top reads "auspicious stars shine on high." The paper strip hanging down the right side reads "The two characters 'peace' and 'calm' are worth a thousand in gold." The one on the left reads "When harmony and obedience fill the home it adds a hundred blessings."

Do you think whoever put up these characters cared about their calligraphy? If the auspicious meanings were legibly represented, would that have been enough?

Doorway, Shanxi province, 2001

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Patricia Ebrey, 2001.

Stores, of course, also have signs announcing their names and products.

Do some of the characters on these store signs seem more calligraphic than others? What makes them different?



Cosmetics shop, Shanxi 2001

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Patricia Ebrey.

Calligraphy today is practiced by millions of Chinese. The great majority of practitioners are amateurs, who find pleasure or artistic fulfillment in perfecting their script. But the number of professional calligraphers or calligrapher-artists is also substantial.

Move on to [Calligraphy as an Amateur Art](#)

Amateur Calligraphy

Calligraphy is no longer practiced solely by those with a classical education. As literacy has increased with universal schooling, more people have learned to read and write. Even farmers, such as those below photographed in 1978, had opportunities to display their skill with the brush when called on to put up signs or posters during political campaigns.



Preparing a poster calling for the modernization of farming, 1978

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 1978.8: 27. Original caption: "Members of the Hsinchien brigade putting forth their views in posters on how to accomplish farm mechanization as called for by the representative assembly of the Hsiangszu committee."

The government has also promoted calligraphy as a "people's art," an art at which peasants and workers could excel. One model peasant-calligrapher was Wu Yukun, shown below farming.



Wu Yukun at work in the vegetable field

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 1978.4:45.

Described as too poor to have time for calligraphy before the founding of the PRC, as his life improved afterwards, Wu took up the brush. He would use a board as his paper, wiping it clean after each use. When out in the fields, he would write in the ground with his fingers. Besides copying traditional masters like Wang Xizhi and Yan Zhenqing, he spent a lot of time copying Mao Zedong's calligraphy.

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 1978.4:45.

Can you identify elements of Mao's style in Wu's calligraphy illustrated to the left?

Most amateur calligraphers, of course, are not peasants, but relatively well-educated individuals who find calligraphy an enjoyable pastime. Many join calligraphy clubs which give them opportunities to get advice and display their work. Many cities offer after-work calligraphy classes, often run by the local Workers' Cultural Palace. Amateurs also enter their calligraphy in competitions-- some competitions have attracted entrants by the tens or hundreds of thousands, only a fraction of whom pass the first hurdle and get their work exhibited. Many newspapers, including the *China Daily* and *China Youth Daily*, publish columns on calligraphy.



The members of this calligraphy club appear mostly of retirement age, but many young people also pursue calligraphy as a hobby. For copying practice, book stores carry hundreds of booklets reproducing the works of well-known calligraphers.

Why are most of these calligraphers standing to write?

Members of a calligraphy club discussing their work, 1985

SOURCE: *China Reconstructs* 35.7 (July 1985), p. 4. Original Caption: "Comparing notes at a calligraphy club." Photo: Wang Xinmin.

In 2001 a young man practiced calligraphy using only water at the highly public space of Tiananmen Square in Beijing.



SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Cynthia Cheung.

The calligrapher above may not be a simple amateur, but an aspiring young artist drawing from calligraphic traditions to challenge traditional understandings of form and meaning.

For a look at the work of artists who extend calligraphy in new ways, move on to

[Calligraphy as an Avant-garde Art](#)

Calligraphy as Avant Garde Art

With the liberalization of political control of the arts that occurred after the death of Mao in 1976, Chinese artists began experimenting with different media. Many were strongly influenced by modern art movements in the West. In 1985 a group of artists who identified themselves as modern calligraphers exhibited their work in Beijing, creating a considerable stir. Modern calligraphers abandon old rules of composition and brushwork to create works that seem more like modern paintings than traditional calligraphy.

Sun Boxiang (b. 1934) was born into a peasant family, never attended high school, and worked for years at a factory. Today he is a well-known professional calligrapher. Like many calligraphers in earlier centuries, he draws inspiration from ancient calligraphy styles.

The large character in the center of this piece is a reinterpretation of the character for "horse."



"Activity" 1995 by Sun Boxiang

SOURCE: Yiguo Zhang, *Brushed Voices: Calligraphy in Contemporary China* (New York: Columbia U, 1998), cat # 36, p. 74. Ink on tan paper, 89.0 x 68.1 cm



Wang Dongling (b. 1945), both a painter and a calligrapher, teaches at the Chinese Art Academy and has spent time in the US studying modern Western art.

The work to the left can be looked at as an abstract painting on top of which seal script characters have been written.

What do the archaic style characters add to this painting?

"Mysterious Door" by Wang Dongling (1997)

SOURCE: Yiguo Zhang, *Brushed Voices: Calligraphy in Contemporary China* (New York: Columbia U, 1998), cat #43, p. 86. Ink on paper, 78.5 x 68.5 cm

Luo Qi i (b. 1960), a professor at the Chinese Art Institute, is a proponent of the postmodern "Calligraphyism" movement. This aesthetic movement aims to develop calligraphy into an abstract art. Characters do not need to retain their traditional forms or be legible as words.

Can you see any traditional brushstrokes in the work at the right?

If Chinese viewers cannot recognize any characters, should it still be called calligraphy?



"Blackism" by Luo Qi (1990)

SOURCE: Yiguo Zhang, *Brushed Voices: Calligraphy in Contemporary China* (New York: Columbia U, 1998), cat # 23, p. 57. Ink and color on paper, 70 x 68.9 cm