Calligraphy script styles

As embodied images (ti xiang 體象) of ideas and things, Chinese writing developed on media ranging from pottery, bone, bronze, bamboo, and silk to paper. Technical differences aside, the purpose, propriety, and decorum appropriate for particular writings necessitated the evolution of numerous script styles (zi ti 字體), and this in turn led to an art of writing: written paradigms (shu fa 書法). The close relationship between brush-stroke, character, and text, forms an integral continuum in the creation of writing (shu 書), and the operative link between them is fa 法, meaning “method,” “paradigm,” or “rule—brush method (bi fa 筆法), written paradigms (shu fa), an literary rules (wen fa 文法). The difficulty in defining and translating the term fa reveals the inadequacy of the convenient of shu fa as “calligraphy.”

In the development of Chinese calligraphy, a reciprocating reaction emerged between public monumental scripts concerned with didactic legibility and orthodoxy, and private self-expressive styles believed to capture the spirit and character of the individual. In the development of Chinese calligraphy, the mutual influence among script styles, changing rules of decorum, and archaic revivalism have blurred the distinctions between script forms. Moreover, each style has evolved through the ages, some passing into obsolescence and some being reinvented and transformed.

Oracle-Bone Writing Oracle-bone writing (jiaguwen 甲骨文) is the earliest known writing system in China. Incised on animal bones and tortoise shells dating from the fourteenth to eleventh centuries B.C., oracle-bone writing demonstrates the pictographic and sacred origins of Chinese writing, and modern Chinese characters have inherited some features of the ancient script. The origin of this writing system is sometimes linked to markings suggestive of writing found on neolithic pottery dating from as early as 5000 B.C., although such interpretations are controversial. The sacred or divine aspect of Chinese writing and calligraphy is often cited as having origins from brushed and engraved inscriptions on Shang dynasty oracle bones recording royal divinations. It is believed that prepared oracle bones were drilled and burned from the back, producing prognostic cracks on the front. The pattern of the crack was read by the diviner and to supply answers to simple “yes/no” questions concerning state affairs, weather, agriculture, and warfare. A scribe would then often brush or incise the question and reply onto the bone. Although the human writing on the bone is not considered direct communication with divine spirits, the prognostic cracks on the bone’s surface have been interpreted as such.
[modified from Embodied Image (1999), p. xvi]

Seal Script

Derived from oracle-bone writing and emblematic designs, seal script (zhuanshu 轉書 or zhouwen 篆文) is also known as bronze writing (jinwen 金文) because it was primarily used for inscriptions cast on bronze ritual vessels. Showing greater regularity and abstract linear forms, seal-script inscriptions were used increasingly for commemorative documents and
narratives that reflect a growing awareness of human history. Traditionally, seal script can be divided into great-seal (dazhuan 大篆) and small-seal (xiaozhuan 小篆) scripts. The former, with many regional differences, is identified with bronze inscriptions of the Shang and Zhou dynasties (ca. 1600–256 B.C.). Small-seal script—characterized by thin wiry lines, regulated spacing, and stylized abstract forms—represents an effort by the First Emperor to standardize writing upon national unification under the Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.).

[modified from Embodied Image (1999), p. xvi]

Clerical Script
In the Qin and Han dynasties, clerical-script (lishu 隸書) writing developed from growing state demands for official records and histories. It first evolved as a draft form of seal script written quickly with brush and ink, originally on wood and bamboo slips, and later on silk and paper. Refined as an official script it came to mark orthodoxy for imperially sanctioned texts, which were often engraved on monumental stone stelae. In its developed form, clerical script featured modulated brush lines with sweeping horizontal strokes ending in sharp tips, and distinctive down-sweep strokes to the right. The transition to brush and ink opened new modes of artistic expression explored in later periods.

[modified from Embodied Image (1999), p. xvi]

Cursive Script
Cursive script (caoshu 草書) originated in the second century B.C. as an abbreviated form of clerical script known as draft clerical (caoli 草隸) or draft cursive (zhangcao 章草). It matured in the third and fourth centuries A.D., culminating in the calligraphy of Wang Xizhi (303–361). Begun as a shorthand form used for personal notes and letters, cursive script with its own stroke order and abbreviated forms, was by nature private and often legible only to the calligrapher or his friends. Taking full advantage of the artistic qualities afforded by the freedom of brush and ink, personal autographic styles developed as modes of individual expression that sometimes even transcended the contents of the written text. An extreme form of cursive script known as wild cursive (kuangcao 狂草) gained popularity in the Tang dynasty (618–907). Commonly performed while the writer was inebriated, wild cursive calligraphy was brushed in spontaneous fluid strokes in what might be described as a mad dance of joyous delirium.

[modified from Embodied Image (1999), pp. xvi-xvii]

Standard Script
Maturing in the second and fourth centuries, standard script (kaishu 楷書) began in the Han dynasty as a refinement of clerical script without the modulated sweeping strokes or the uniform wirelike corners of seal script. Instead, the inner brushwork and architectonic structure of the characters were developed in order to produce legible characters that replaced clerical script as the formal script used for official writing and monumental stelae. With imperial sponsorship, calligrapher-officials of the Tang dynasty adapted Period of Disunity (220–589) models to create a bold yet elegant standard-script style whose stable construction and inner brush movement can be said to capture a sense of dynamic equilib-
rium. Becoming the dominant formal script style in later periods, and the model of printing type, standard script can be distinguished by size and technique: large-standard (dakai 大楷) using the arm, medium-standard (zhongkai 中楷) using the wrist, and small-standard (xiaokai 小楷) using the fingers.

[modified from Embodied Image (1999), p. xvii]

Running Script
Essentially a freehand or daily writing style, running script (xingshu 行書) is believed to be a simplification of early standard script, but reached maturity before its model, combining the legibility of standard script with the speed and informal freedom of cursive script. Unlike cursive script, however, running-script only condensed but did not eliminate strokes within characters. In the Tang dynasty, strict standard and wild-cursive calligraphy represented the extremes of public monumentality versus private expression. In the Song dynasty (960–1279) running script became the preferred mode of individual self-expression and artistic freedom, as exemplified in the calligraphy of the Four Great Song Masters, including Huang Tingjian (1045–1105) and Mi Fu (1052–1107).

[modified from Embodied Image (1999), p. xvii]

References:

