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A study of the standardization of Chinese writing/

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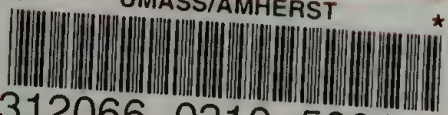*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

A STUDY OF THE STANDARDIZATION OF CHINESE WRITING

A Thesis Presented

by

YING WANG

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INTRODUCTION

A striking phenomenon in the history of Chinese writing compared to the writing systems in many other civilizations is the relatively frequent appearance of variants (异体字 *yitizi*, or allographs, 异形字 *yixingzi*) of the forms of its standard written characters. By "variants," I mean that, in addition to a commonly accepted or officially sanctione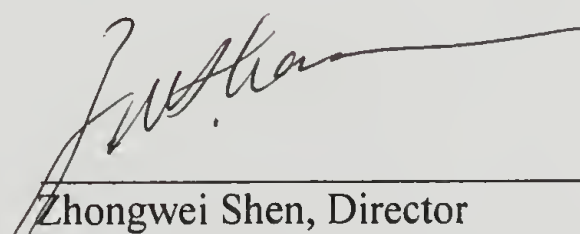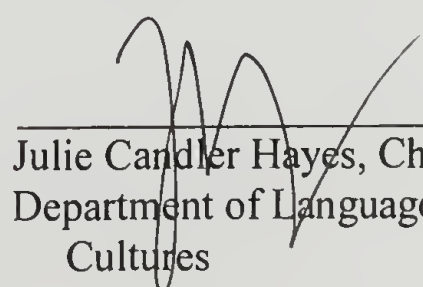d "standard" character representing a concept, there could exist several or even many variants of the standard form. While these variants and the standard form shared the same pronunciation and meaning, the variants differed in structural form from the standard character.

The basic principles of character creation were well established as early as the Zhou dynasty (771 BCE), and, despite changes in writing style, the most basic characters showed a strong tendency to preserve their original forms. In addition, variants of standard characters usually remained sufficiently similar to their "parent" forms to be easily understood. However, in some cases, the existence of numerous variants caused difficulties in comprehension, which disrupted communications and business activities. Since the confusion caused by multiple variants was never taken lightly, frequent attempts were made over time to arrive at and preserve a standard form for each character, especially during periods of significant formal evolution in the script. Only recently have such efforts been eased by technological improvements in printing and communication.

Related to these two phenomena are the two key questions addressed by this thesis: first, why do Chinese characters tend to spawn written variants so easily? Second, what efforts have Chinese governments and private individuals made to standardize writing?

This thesis consists of four chapters and an epilogue. Chapter One briefly reviews the history of Chinese writing. Throughout its long development, Chinese writing underwent a series of changes from simple inscriptions on oracle bones and turtle shells relying on a high proportion of pictographs to a fully mature, rather complex writing system whose character forms were essentially abstract. The first chapter's analysis will both assist readers in understanding the second chapter's discussion and will also show that characters developed in the early stages of the evolution of the written language may have become the source of later variants.

Chapter Two analyzes attributes of characters that helped generate variants. My argument begins with the point that, in contrast to phonetic written languages, Chinese characters are ideograms. This means that each character represents an object or idea whose meaning is directly represented by its graphic structure without reference to its sound. It is true that, as characters developed into increasingly abstract, non-pictographic symbols, they also acquired phonetic markers to become phonetic-semantic combinations. Nevertheless, Chinese never abandoned the fundamental importance of the ideograph over phonetics as the basis of character formation. But it is just because Chinese writing is ideographic rather than phonetic that variants were easily generated. The formation of written words in phonetic languages is disciplined by the requirement that word-forms adhere to their spoken sounds. Because a character may have different structures without affecting its pronunciation or meaning (that is, without affecting its usefulness), character structure was not preserved by the discipline of phonetics. Without the limiting factor of phonetics, characters were freer to vary in form. Ultimately, this meant that the designation of one of several character forms as standard was essentially arbitrary.

After analyzing why Chinese is prone to character variants in Chapter Two, Chapter Three will answer the second question: what efforts have successive Chinese governments and private individuals made to standardize writing? Both elements of society made repeated efforts over a long time to eliminate the confusion caused by multiple forms of the same character.

Chapter Four discusses an important and unusual factor in efforts to standardize writing: the role that played by the art of calligraphy. Since almost every member of the elite practiced calligraphy, it played an important role in society throughout Chinese history. A distinctive characteristic of Chinese calligraphy is that its practitioners used ancient masterpieces as style sources, and this tended to narrow the range of acceptable calligraphic forms. As one example of this, the Tang dynasty government promoted Wang Xizhi's calligraphy as the supreme model of writing. This established a canonical system of calligraphic forms centered on Wang's calligraphy, a model closely followed by the educated elite in their writing. This conservatism helped limit the diversity of character forms: if Wang Xizhi once wrote a character a certain way, then everyone in present times should follow him. This chapter will also briefly discuss the special role played by the civil service examination's calligraphy requirements in reducing the trend toward variant character forms.

My thesis will conclude with an epilogue that briefly discusses the profound impacts on character standardization of two technical developments: the invention of printing technology in the Song dynasty and the prevalence of digital publishing in the late twentieth century.

CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF CHINESE WRITING

A writing system (文字 *wenzi*) in the narrowest sense is a set of symbols used to record spoken language in permanent form. The Chinese writing system is a unique carrier of the language of a richly ancient civilization that has helped bind the Chinese people together throughout their history.[1] The inventiveness and continuity of Chinese writing has been an essential element in sustaining Chinese culture and tradition until the present day. Written Chinese is the only contemporary writing system with unique characters and a documented history extending back to the late second millennium B.C.E. (the late Shang dynasty).[2] Thus, its existence now represents a historical continuum of more than three thousand years.[3] Although many different local dialects were spoken within China's geographical area, characters have been the only tool used for communicating and governing in writing throughout its history. "Even in the periods of political disunity at various times in the past, the idea of a single, culturally unified Chinese empire has never been forgotten. The Chinese language, especially in its written form, has always been one of the most powerful symbols of this cultural unity."[4]

Spoken and written languages both exist in many human societies (certainly not all, some societies only have spoken languages). The spoken language uses sound to represent verbal meaning, while the written sector uses graphic marks to record what has been said. In phonetic language systems, each spoken word uses one or more syllables to

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[1] Tsien, *Written on Bamboo & Silk,* p. 2.
[2] Norman, *Chinese,* p. ix.
[3] Qiu, *Chinese Writing,* p. 44.
[4] Norman, *Chinese,* p. 1.

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present a meaning, while the written language uses a sign or the combination of signs (letters or other symbols) to record the spoken word. Therefore, in phonetic systems, sound and meaning are tightly related, but the written sector reflecting only the sound of a word, usually has little to do with its meaning. As we know, in spoken languages, morphemes are the smallest linguistically distinctive units of sound (that is, syllables), whereas morphemes in written languages are the smallest graphic units associated with the meaning of that graph. In Chinese, the graphic morpheme that corresponds to the sound of one syllable is almost always a complete character. For example, those earliest Chinese writings that developed from pictographic symbols, such as 魚 (魚 *yu*, fish), 山 (山 *shan*, mountain), 木 (木 *mu*, wood), etc., their graph (形 *xing*), sound (音 *yin*), and meaning (义 *yi*) were all presented by the graph, which is the character. From such origins, the early Chinese writing system developed into an essentially morphemic language in which most graphic morphemes and their corresponding spoken morphemes constitute a single graph.[5] Based on this notion, when written Chinese was used to record a spoken language, in contrast to phonetic language systems, the early Chinese script was an ideographic writing system. This means that fundamentally each ideograph or character represents an object or idea whose meaning is directly represented by its graphic structure without reference to its sound. Later, some characters established their sound and started being used as phonetic marks (声符 *shengfu*). As characters developed into increasingly abstract, non-pictographic symbols, they also acquired phonetic markers to become phonetic-semantic combinations. Nevertheless, characters never abandoned the fundamental importance of the ideograph over phonetics in character formation.

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[5] Norman, *Chinese*, p. 58.

One implication of the Chinese ideographic character is that it may be pronounced in different ways yet still carry the same meaning. This means that characters can be read by every literate Chinese despite changes in pronunciation over time and the emergence of regional and local dialects. As the basic carriers of traditional Chinese culture, characters have played an important role throughout the history of China, for they have served as a strong tie that has tightly bound together the Chinese people. One may well argue that, without characters, Chinese culture would not have achieved nearly as much as it has; indeed, China might have split into separate countries long ago.

Besides its long history, the Chinese writing system has other special characteristics. The earliest forms of recognizable Chinese characters are usually pictographic signs, or they contain pictographic elements. The oracle bone inscriptions of the late Shang period (approximately 1200-1045 B.C.E.) appeared as an advanced developing writing system with unmistakable traces of its pictographic origins.[6] A certain number of early characters (and even their modern forms, such as 山 (*shan*, mountain), 水 (*shui*, water), 木 (*mu*, wood), 牛 (*niu*, bull/cow), 虎 (*hu*, tiger), 日 (*ri*, sun), 月 (*yue*, moon), etc., are clear depictions of the things they named. These characters are termed 象形字 *xiangxingzi* (plate 1.1).

Gradually, human societies developed increasingly complex social structures that could be sustained only by making greater demands on language. Especially, complex societies require two things of language: more complex verbal forms capable of conveying increasingly nuanced meanings; and permanent, standardized forms for

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[6] Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System.* p. 31.

recording language. The latter are particularly essential to supporting the functions of record keeping and communication that are essential to sustaining complex societies. The pictographs used in early writing are severely restricted in their capacity to express meaning. They are best suited, for example, to conveying the meanings of concrete objects expressible through pictures. However, pictographs are less able to express the meaning of abstract nouns such as "justice" or "peace" or to satisfy a growing need for prepositions, verbs, and other relatively non-pictorial parts of speech. Thus, even in its early days, the Chinese language began to acquire new words capable of expressing increasingly complex and abstract meanings. Late in the period when pictographic content was a significant factor in character formation (that is, toward the end of the Western Zhou dynasty in 771 B.C.E.), the writing system gradually came to employ mainly semantic and phonetic symbols while pictographic content waned.

Besides the original method (象形 *xiangxing*) of creating characters, which, as noted above, employed forms that resembled the objects they stood for, several other methods have been used to create new characters. A second technique is the use of abstract forms to represent abstract words (指事 *zhishi*). For example, 上 (*shang*) represents "up" or "top"; 下 (*xia*) stands for "down" or "under"; 中 (*zhong*) means "middle" or "center"; 大 (*da*) represent "big," and 小 (*xiao*) stands for "small."

A third approach combines two or more semantic radicals that contribute to a singular meaning borrowed from both (会意 *huiyi*). For example, 好 *hao* is a combination of characters meaning "woman" 女 (*nu*) and "man" or "son" 子 (*zi*) to represent "good" (a woman carrying a son is good); 休 (*xiu*) combines the character for "person" 亻 (*ren*) with the character for "wood" 木 (*mu*) to indicate "rest" (a person

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resting next to a tree); and 男 (*nan*) combines the character 田 (*tian*) for "field" with the character 力 (*li*) for "tool/strength" to correspond to "male" (a person carrying a tool to work in the fields); 尖 (*jian*) surmounts the character 小 (*xiao*, small) on 大 (*da*, big) to indicate a sharp object, that is, an object large at one end and small at the other.

The fourth and most important technique for constructing characters is to combine a semantic radical indicating the semantic class of that character with a phonetic radical designating its pronunciation (形声 *xingsheng*). For example, the characters 铜，筒，峒，桐，侗，恫，狪，稦，鲖，酮，粡，烔，胴 and 垌 all include the phonetic radical 同 (*tong*) to indicate their similar sound, while their individual meanings are distinguished by their semantic radicals: 钅 (metal), 竹 (bamboo), 山 (mountain), 木 (wood), 亻 (person), 忄 (heart), 犭 (animal), 禾 (grain), 鱼 (fish), 酉 (wine), 米 (rice), 火 (fire), 目 (eyes) and 土 (earth) (figure 1.1). The 形声 *xingsheng* method has been the most used: over 90% of characters were created by it.

Examples of the Four Major Formation Types of Chinese Character									
Pictographic Characters 象形字	口	目	耳	山	水	日	月	田	虎
Ideographic Characters 指事字	上	下	中	卡	北	比	大	小	旦
Associative Characters 会意字	好	休	男	林	从	坐	活	尖	尜
Semantic-Phonetic Combinations 形声字	铜	筒	峒	桐	侗	恫	狪	垌	鲖

Figure 1.1 Examples of the Four Major Formation Types of Chinese Character

As in all fully developed writing systems, the pronunciation of written elements must be taken into account. To do so, the early Chinese writing inventers created a *rebus* principle, which is to employ a pictograph or other non-phonetic representational graph for its sound value alone.[7] For example, since it was difficult to represent the concept of "come" with pictographic forms, the pictograph 來, which originally meant "wheat" and had the same pronunciation as "come," was borrowed to represent not only the sound but also the meaning of "come." Other hard-to-represent concepts like the grammatical elements of speech were created based on this "phonetic borrowing" principle (同音假借 *tongyin jiajie*).

Characters may be classified not only by their types of formation but also by their types of component. We have already noted two component types, semantographic symbols (意符 *yifu* or 形符 *xingfu*) and phonetic symbols (音符 *yinfu*). However, among early characters, a small number of graphs apparently were arbitrary signs bearing neither representational nor phonetic relationships to the words depicted; for example, 五 (*wu* five) and 七 (*qi* seven), etc.[8] This type of character became the basis of the writing system's third type of character component, the sign (记号 *jihao*). Signs were symbols that could be either freestanding characters or parts of characters (figure 1.2). Today, among current characters, only five percent still preserve a relationship to their original pictographs, while the remainders are combinations of phonetic radicals, semantic radicals, and signs.

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[7] Norman, *Chinese,* p. 59.
[8] Norman, *Chinese,* p. 60.

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Sampling of the Three Major Component Types of Chinese Character									
Semantic symbols 意符/形符	口	亻	女	氵	扌	忄	礻	饣	牜
Phonetic symbols 音符	子	里	马	我	巴	门	才	旦	兆
Sign symbols 记号	彡	勹	匚	冖	廾	又	夂	五	匕

Figure 1.2 Sampling of the Three Major Component Types of Chinese Character

The continuous use of Chinese writing as a living medium of communication has maintained the ideas and aspirations of the Chinese and perpetuated the memory of their traditions for over three thousand years. Nevertheless, in the course of their long history, characters have inevitably been subject to change. If we compare the earliest written forms of characters with their present forms, extensive changes become obvious. In some periods, Chinese writing appears to have undergone rapid and dramatic changes; in other periods, its forms have been relatively stable. Evolution is a natural development of both language and society, and gradual change over time is easily assimilated. Rapid change, however, is disruptive of both vertical or diachronic communication (from past to future) and horizontal or synchronic communication (within an era). Surviving records demonstrate how writing has evolved from ancient to modern times, and although the general principles of character construction have remained remarkably stable, variations over time in the number, shape, and position of the strokes that comprise characters have resulted in the formation of a series of distinctive script types.[9]

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[9] Tsien, *Written on Bamboo & Silk*, p. 203.

Examining character forms over time, we find they have undergone a number of important changes. Here, we will focus on the two most important types of change: change in the structural relationships of character components, including strokes and radicals (字形结构的变化 *zixing jiegou de bianhua*), and change in the style in which characters were written – also referred to as script type (字体书写的变化 *ziti shuxie de bianhua*).

Of these two types of change, the more obvious is changes in the style in which characters are written. Major differences in script type (writing style) are sometimes named after the materials on which these scripts were commonly inscribed, such as "shell and bone script" (甲骨文 *jiaguwen*), after the tortoise shells or oracle bones on which this script type was carved; and "bronze script" (金文 *jinwen*), after the bronzes on which this script type was found. Other distinctions among script types are named after the function of a script, such as "seal script" (篆书 *zhuanshu*), so named because it is currently used mostly on seals, and "clerical script" (隶书 *lishu*), which derives its name from its apparent invention and use by government clerks. "Running script" (行书 *xingshu*) and "cursive script" (草书 *caoshu*) reflect the increasing speed (and the correspondingly greater structural abbreviation) with which they are written. "Regular or standard script" (楷书 *kaishu*) is so called because it is the most formal of script types. Most of these script types were introduced before the fourth century C.E. (the Eastern Jin dynasty), when the regular style was established as the universal formal script, a status it enjoys today.[10] After the Song dynasty (960-1279 C.E.) saw the development and wide use of

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[10] Tsien, *Written on Bamboo & Silk*, p. 203.

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printing technology, a new style was introduced in printed materials – "printed or Song style" (印刷体 *yinshuati* or 宋体 *songti*). In recent times, several types of specially designed "artistic styles" (美术体 *meishuti*) have also come into wide use (plate 1.2).

Compared to the stylistic changes in scripts that distinguished script types, changes in the structural relationships of a character's components were far more complicated and were directly related to the development of the entire society. The earliest known graphic shapes of many characters or character components originally had strong pictographic qualities, but this characteristic gradually diminished in ancient times. This is borne out by examination of various ancient script types that were prevalent from the earliest known writing to the Qin dynasty (221 B.C.E.), including shell and bone script, bronze script, and seal script. All of these ancient scripts showed a continuous dwindling of pictographic content. Scripts carved on shells, bones, and bronze vessels apparently were not used for daily communication, for only a small elite had mastered writing skills in earliest times. Not till the time between the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period (around 475 B.C.E.) did widespread social reform cause societal changes that made education available to a wider public and the rapid development of society demanded more communication via writing.

Seal script was the most common form of writing before the First Emperor of Qin (秦始皇帝 *Qin shihuangdi*, 221-206 B.C.E.) unified China. Unlike the feudal states of the Zhou dynasty, the unified empire Qin was founded on a central bureaucratic system, and paperwork was a necessity of the governing machine. Growing bureaucratic complexity demanded more efficiency in record keeping and communication among the branches of government. To write seal script was a slow and ponderous business, and it made

recording long or numerous documents a time-consuming process. For the sake of convenience and efficiency in writing, a new script gradually evolved, probably at the hands of government clerks, which today is called clerical script (隶书 *lishu*). This script transformed writing from a careful process of brushing the symmetrically structured and curvilinear seal script (qualities that lent it a more pictographic character) into characters written with straight lines and square corners. This metamorphosis, which has been referred as "linearization" (线条化 *xiantiaohua*), made clerical characters at once more abstract (less pictographic) and significantly faster to write.[11] Thus, from one perspective, clerical script is essentially abbreviated seal script, a method for writing seal script in a more efficient and usefully workaday manner.[12] The formation and routine use of clerical script during the Qin dynasty and the following Han dynasty can be viewed as the principal landmark in the development of modern characters.[13]

Another significant change closely followed the development of linearization, whereby most characters lost their pictorial features and became symbols comprised of several types of dots and strokes. This later process is referred to as the "segmentation of graphs into strokes" (笔划化 *bihuahua*).[14] As a result of linearization, the proportion of pictograph characters declined from a relatively high level in shell and bone script (甲骨文 *jiaguwen*) to a much-reduced level in small seal script (小篆 *xiaozhuan,* the standardized script created by Qin's minister 李斯 *Li Si*). Despite this trend, however, the pictographic principles underlying the composition of characters were never abandoned.

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[11] Qiu, *Chinese Writing,* p. 45.
[12] Moore, *Chinese,* p. 59.
[13] Qiu, *Chinese Writing,* p. 22.
[14] Qiu, *Chinese Writing,* p. 45.

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Thus, through "linearization" and "segmentation of graphs into strokes," clerical script abandoned pictographic forms as it changed the sinuous lines of the ancient script into straight, rectilinear strokes to facilitate writing. Take the character *ma* 馬 (horse) as an example. In seal script, the character for "horse" is written with several curving lines that resemble the head, four legs, and tail of a horse, characteristics that show the lingering influence of a yet earlier pictograph for "horse." By contrast, in the clerical script character for "horse," lines are straight and rearranged into several horizontal and vertical strokes and four dots, changes that make the character an abstract sign with little resemblance to a horse (figure 1.3).

| Seal script 馬 | Clerical script 馬 |
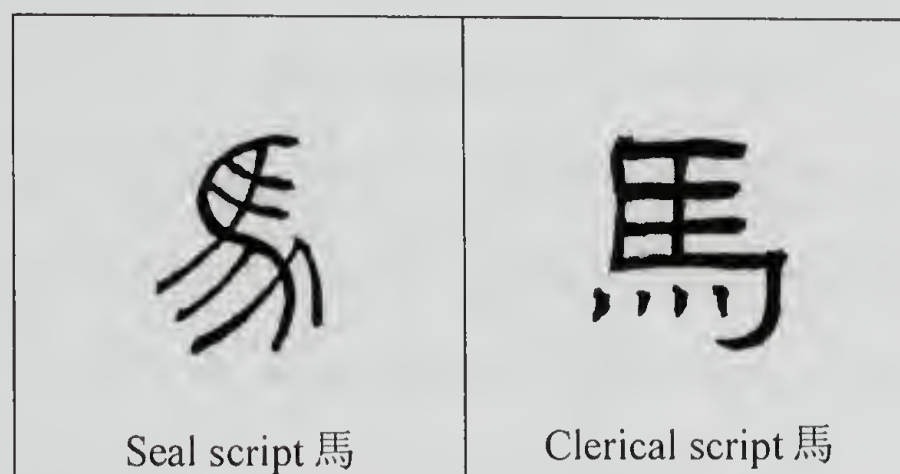
Figure 1.3 Example of "Segmentation of Graphs into Strokes" in 馬 (*Ma*, Horse)

The period between the late Qin and the Eastern Jin dynasty (ca. 206 B.C.E. – 420 C.E.) witnessed the most momentous change in the history of Chinese writing: the transition from the ancient scripts (隶变 *libian*) with which writing began to the scripts of the present day. This distinction allows us to divide the history of Chinese writing into two periods: the period of ancient scripts (古文字阶段 *guwenzi jieduan*) and the period of present scripts (今文字阶段 *jinwenzi jieduan*) – also called "the period of clerical and

standard scripts" (隶楷阶段 *likai jieduan*).[15] After this transformation, the graphic appearances (字形 *zixing*) of characters were firmly established, and the history of Chinese writing turned a page. However, since changes in the structures of characters and in their calligraphic styles (书体 *shuti*) are often interconnected, these two features are not easy to separate, and it can be difficult at times to describe one without mentioning the other.

Generally speaking, the evolution of Chinese writing moved in one direction – making communication easier and more effective. Rectilinear characters eventually replaced ancient characters whose curved lines and complicated forms still preserved much of the pictorial features of the earliest pictograms. Although the road of change was not straight, we can see that the trend was always toward writing forms that satisfied functional demands. The transition from ancient scripts to clerical and regular scripts appears to have been the largest step in pushing the Chinese writing system in the direction of making communication easier and more effective.

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[15] Qiu, *Chinese Writing*, p. 45.

CHAPTER 2

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE CHARACTERS AND THE CAUSE OF VARIANTS

Throughout the history of its development, written Chinese has undergone a long evolution. It developed from simple, pictorial drawings carved on oracle bones and turtle shells to a fully mature, rather complex writing system of over fifty thousand characters (of which only five thousand are used in daily life). This was a long process with several important stages. Compared to alphabetic systems, an obvious phenomenon in Chinese writing is the existence of variants (异体字 *yitizi,* also called allographs, 异形字 *yixingzi*). Determining the cause of variants is a challenge, for it is deeply involved in the histories of geography, politics, economics, culture, society, tradition, religion, literature, regional dialects, etc. To different degrees, changes in all these factors contributed to the formation, evolution, and development of writing.

The graphic forms of Chinese characters (汉字 *hanzi*) have several special characteristics. Two important qualities of a character are its graphic appearance (字形 *zixing*) and its internal structure – the arrangement of strokes (结构 *jiegou*). Together, these two aspects of a character are often referred to jointly as *zixing jiegou* (字形结构). In general, "graphic appearance" and the "internal structure" are so tightly interrelated that they are difficult to distinguish. However, 结构 *jiegou* may be said to refer only to the internal structure of a character, that is, the arrangement of strokes; while 字形 *zixing* mainly refers to the appearance of a character, that is, to its shape.

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The first important characteristic of characters is that they are commonly termed "square-shaped writing" (方块字 *fangkuaizi*), that is, each character may be seen as fitting inside a conceptual square. In the history of the evolution of characters, regardless of how various may have been characters' external appearances and internal structures, or how much their calligraphic styles have changed, their overall configuration has always been conceived in square shapes. During the shell-and-bone script stage of development, the square configuration of characters was already apparent (plate 2.1).[16] At an early stage of bronze script, simple characters with fewer strokes tended to be written in less space than were more complicated characters with many strokes; nevertheless, the tendency for characters to be written in square shapes increased, even if the squares were not of uniform size (plate 2.2).

A second characteristic that developed among characters is that, in the same text, conceptual squares are of equal size no matter how simple or complex are the characters they enclose. During the later bronze script period, the Chinese writing system was already highly developed. Not only was its characteristic square shape well established, but a second aspect of characters – that each character square should be the same size – had also made its appearance. Thereafter, the characteristic uniform square was retained throughout the history of Chinese writing. For example, the simplest character 一 (*yi*, one) has only one stroke; in contrast, a rather complex character 鬱 (*yu*, depressed) has 27 strokes. But in a given text, both characters occupy equal spaces despite their great difference in complexity. We can see this characteristic by comparing the following examples, in which the characters are labeled with the number of their strokes (figure 2.1).

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[16] Gao Gengsheng, *Xianxing hanzi guifan wenti*, pp. 22-23.

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一	丁	大	木	正	共	巫	明
1 strokes	2 strokes	3 strokes	4 strokes	5 strokes	6 strokes	7 strokes	8 strokes
韭	剝	爽	曾	剷	辣	僻	雕
9 strokes	10 strokes	11 strokes	12 strokes	13 strokes	14 strokes	15 strokes	16 strokes
儡	翻	蹶	黔	爛	囊	攫	蠹
17 strokes	18 strokes	19 strokes	20 strokes	21 strokes	22 strokes	23 strokes	24 strokes
戀	驥	飝	鸛	鑾	爨	麤	齉
25 strokes	26 strokes	27 strokes	28 strokes	29 strokes	30 strokes	33 strokes	36 strokes

Figure 2.1 Unequal Characters are Allotted Equal Space

Third, each character's elements or radicals are centered on the crossing point of the horizontal and vertical axes of its conceptual square, forming a two-dimensional plane (直立平面 *zhili pingmian*). Speaking of a character's elements, if a character is composed of an assemblage of individual stokes (笔划 *bihua*), it constitutes a simple "non-composite graph (独体字 *dutizi*)." But if a character is composed of two or more elements (部件 *bujian*), that is, radicals and signs, it is called a more complex "composite graph (合体字 *hetizi*)." The two-dimensional plane of Chinese characters distinguishes them from most other types of writing system, most notably alphabetic writing systems, in which letters extend in only two directions: left and right in a one-dimensional line. In alphabetic systems, a word is made more complex by adding letters at either end (in the form of suffixes and prefixes) or by combining two or more words. For example,

in English, inter (prefix) + nation (core word) + al (suffix) = international (new word); likewise, black + board = blackboard (new word).

But in Chinese writing, no matter how many graphic components constitute a character, each conforms to a conceptual square, and its configuration extends along two axes rather than one. For example, the character 露 (*lu*, morning dew) has 21 strokes. However, these strokes can be divided horizontally into the character's two chief parts: the semantic element 雨 (*yu*, rain) and the phonetic element 路 (*lu*, road). Then, the phonetic element 路 may be divided vertically into two more parts: the semantic element 足 (*zu*, foot) and the phonetic element 各 (*ge*, individual). Furthermore, 各 may also be divided horizontally into two smaller parts: 夊 and 口. Thus, the parts of this character extend both vertically and horizontally from the center of its implied square (figure 2.2).
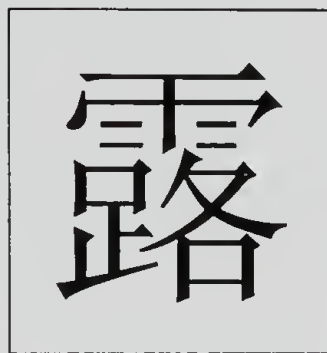
Figure 2.2 Character 露

A major rule governing this two-dimensional arrangement is that a character's elements cannot be located randomly within its square. They must be oriented concentrically toward the center of their square. For this reason, beginning language students were often taught to write a character within a box crossed by two or four lines from its opposite edges and corners, and the character must be written on the center part of the grid. Boxes crossed by two lines from their opposite edges are 田字格 (*tianzige*,

a box resembling the character 田 *tian*, field); and the term for boxes crossed by four lines is 米字格 (*mizige*, a box resembling the character 米 *mi*, rice) (figure 2.3).
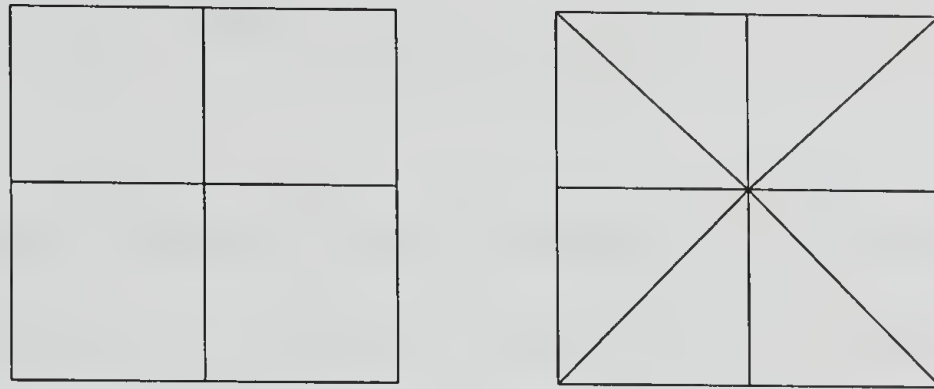
Figure 2.3 田字格 and 米字格

However, no matter how many components and strokes a character may have, all must fit within a square that occupies the same space as a simple character such as 一 (*yi*, one). The character 齉 (*nang*) has 36 strokes, making it one of the most complicated characters, yet it is made to occupy the same space as the simplest character, 一. Fortunately, most characters are far less complicated than this exceptional example – they have fewer elements, fewer strokes, or both. But this extreme case illustrates the rule that, in a given text, all characters, no matter how complex or simple, must occupy equal conceptual squares. The fact is that most Chinese characters have fewer than 15 strokes (even in ancient times, when character complexity was greater, the majority of characters had 7 to 14 strokes); in present times, few commonly used characters have more than 20 strokes.

Fourth, beside the "non-composite" characters (独体字 *dutizi*) that are only a small potion of the entire characters, among the "composite graph" characters (合体字 *hetizi*), their structures may be divided into several categories. There are several types of character structure based on how their elements are configured. They may have a

horizontal configuration, such as 仁, 到, 树; a vertical configuration, such as 早, 尘, 等; an entirely enclosed configuration, such as 回, 国, 围; a three-quarter enclosed configuration, such as 冈, 区, 凶; or a half-open configuration, such as 句, 边, 房, etc. (plate 2.3).

In short, Chinese characters are centrally disposed in a square with their components (strokes and radicals) arranged vertically as well as horizontally. Because they are constructed on a two-dimensional plane, they have greater spatial flexibility than writing systems formed on a one-dimensional line (many alphabets). These aspects of character structure allow for a range of possibilities in distributing a character's components within its square. That is, characters may vary in the number and arrangement of their stokes and components. This leads to allographs or variants (异体字 *yitizi*).

As an aside, I note that we must distinguish between "incorrectly written characters," 错字 *cuozi*, that is, mistakes in writing characters, and "variants," 异体字 *yitizi*, although sometimes these two concepts are easily confused or conflated, as in the phrase "错别字" *cuobiezi*. For example, if one writes the character 师 (*shi*, teacher) as 帅 (*shuai*, general or handsome), one is writing the wrong character; but if one writes 师 as 師, one is writing a variant. Unlike random mistakes, variants have a degree of common currency among the public.

In alphabetic systems with standardized spelling, misplaced letters are considered errors, not variants. Of course, there are a few exceptions in English. For example, "center" can be written as "centre," yet the switch of two letters is not deemed as a

mistake. But cases like this are extremely rare; they do not form what I deemed a "variant phenomenon." By contrast, the variants of many Chinese characters are not considered incorrect but are easily understood and widely used. With many characters, their traditional forms and their modern simplified forms are variants; for example, 回 (*hui*, back, simplified form) and 囘 (traditional form) both are widely used and recognized. Also, 窗 (*chuang*), 窻, and 牕 all mean "window." Some characters have over a hundred accepted variants. For instance, 寿 (*shou*, long life) has acquired at least that many variants, partly because it is often imaginatively configured in decorative contexts (plate 2.4).

Thus far, I have noted that the inherent nature of Chinese writing easily generates variant forms of characters. However, there are at least four specific reasons for these variants, which I will outline below.

First is the long evolutionary history of writing. As discussed in Chapter one, earlier script forms evolved into later dominant scripts over time. In this process, character forms from an old script type sometimes continued into the period of use of the new script, thus becoming variant forms of the new script's characters.

Second, the political division of China into separate political regions created diverse character forms. Over her long history, China was politically disunited for periods of up to half a millennium. This led to increased diversity among local cultures, including their written languages. This phenomenon is clearly demonstrated by China's two major periods of disunity, the Warring States period (403-221 B.C.E.) and the Six Dynasties period (220-581). Both eras were characterized by competing states and cultural isolation. These conditions allowed the evolution of many variant character forms in

everyday writing. As part of the political unification that followed these periods of disunion, the government usually established a standard form for each character, unifying the language as they had the country.

The third factor was socio-economic, for character forms often differed by social background. Let again consider the example of the Six Dynasties period. Many inscriptions on epitaph stones (墓志 *muzhi*) and Buddhist pictorial steles (造像碑 *zaoxiang bei*) of this period bear character forms that differ from those used by members of the cultural elite. That these inscriptions were written by people of lower educational background and social status indicates that the use of variant character forms was influenced by social class. Compared to character forms the elite considered standard, some of these variant forms may have first resulted from mistakes; repeated over time, they became fixed in common usage. Other variants may have been invented to make characters easier to write and remember. In the early twentieth century, numerous scrolls, including many Buddhist sutra scrolls from the fourth to eleventh centuries, were found in Buddhist cave temples in Dunhuang 敦煌, northwestern China. As with many non-Buddhist scrolls written from the Six Dynasties Period to the Tang Dynasty, they contain large amount of vulgarism (俗字 *suzi*, or so called "popular characters") that differ from standard character forms.[17] The existence of vulgarism in the writing of professional Buddhist scribes and in other scrolls of that time suggests that these forms circulated in the context of groups defined by social and geographic factors.

A fourth factor spawning variant character forms was the pursuit of aesthetics. As mentioned above, during periods when one script type replaced another in common use,

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[17] Zhang Yongquan, *Hanyu suzi yanjiu.*

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many old character forms died out as they were gradually replaced by the character forms of the new script. The archaic character forms, however, were often preserved in dictionaries after they fell into disuse. In later times, literati used these dictionaries as a source of archaic variants. Adding these unusual character forms to their writings demonstrated their erudition and knowledge of ancient culture as they challenged their peers' knowledge of old characters in what was a kind of literary game.[18] Because this literary game was played only in small circles among the elite, and because the game only made sense to players with prior knowledge of standard forms, literary games had little impact on standard writing. Thus, character variants born from literary games were rare and usually did not see continued use.

In other cases, literati would sometimes add strokes to a character or change its configuration to make it more aesthetically attractive. Yan Zhitui (颜之推, 531-after 590), a scholar of the Northern Qi period (550-577), complained of the confusion in communications caused by inventive scholars in his time.[19]

While many variants would not have been used if not understood, some variants can still be sources of confusion in communication and raise the level of difficulty in learning, memorizing, and using characters (plate 2.5). Furthermore, since characters by nature tend to generate large numbers of variants, variants are capable of multiplying indefinitely if not restrained by movements toward standardization. For these reasons, concern with the standardization of characters has been frequent during the history of Chinese writing, and standardization often has been adopted as a government policy by China's rulers.

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[18] For a thorough discussion of this literary game, see Qianshen Bai, *Fu Shan's World*, pp. 57-68.
[19] Yan Zhitui, *Yanshi jiaxun*, pp. 574-575.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL REVIEW OF EFFORTS TO STANDARDIZE CHINESE WRITING

It was argued in the previous chapter that structural characteristics inherent in the

Chinese writing system combined with external politics, economics, society, culture, and

differences in regional dialects ensured that many characters acquired variants over time.

The existence of these variants has been a continuing source of confusion in written

communications. Keenly aware of this phenomenon and the problems it might cause,

successive governments have expended considerable effort to preserve relatively standard

versions of characters. Scholars, too, have long studied variants and reflected on methods

of reducing them to manageable numbers. The level of standardization activity usually

rose and fell with the speed of evolution in writing as governments and scholars

attempted to limit the growth of variants.

Efforts to standardize writing have derived mainly from two sources – the

political authority of the government and the expertise of the scholarly class. Sometimes,

these two factors acted independently; more often, however, they worked in concert. To

accomplish the goal of limiting variants, the government typically employed

administrative means, carrying out its policies on character standardization via the

political apparatus. Also, a government would publicly declare a script as "standard" for

its time and require it be taught in government-run schools for the elite class, and later, in

slightly more democratic times, in schools catering to non-aristocrats studying for the

imperial examination. This two-pronged approach was mutually supportive:

incorporating standard character forms into the educational process substantially

increased the effectiveness of government directives; efforts made by individual scholars usually involved teaching students in private schools and publishing teaching manuals, compile character books or dictionaries that adhered to model characters.

The historical review of governments' efforts:

Let us first examine the government efforts to standardize character forms. The earliest text mentioning a central government effort to standardize writing was *The Rituals of Zhou* (周礼 *Zhouli*) of the Western Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–9 C.E.). A passage describing the duties of the External Secretary (外史 *Waishi*) reads:

> The External Secretary is in charge of writing external directives; he is in charge of the annals of the four quarters of the empire; he is in charge of the records of the Three August Ones and the Five Emperors; he is in charge of propagating the written scripts throughout the entire empire. 外史掌外令，掌四方之志，掌三皇五帝之书，掌达书名于四方。[20]

The last duty of the External Secretary deserves more explanation because it unmistakably relates to the involvement of the Western Zhou central government (eleventh century – 771 B.C.E.) in unifying scripts. In this passage, 名 (*ming*) refers to 字 (*zi*), characters. The Tang dynasty scholar Jia Gongyan (贾公彦, 650-655), who held the position of Erudite of the National University (太学博士 *taixue boshi*), explained the quotation above in his *Notes and Commentaries on the Rituals of Zhou* (周礼注疏 *Zhouli zhushu*): "During ancient times, the number of written forms of scripts were fewer, thus people directly called scripts '*ming*'; later, the number of scripts increased, so people

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[20] Qiu, *Chinese Writing*, p. 403.

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called scripts 'zi.' 古者之文字少，直曰名；后代文字多，则曰字。"[21] Given this explanation of 名 (*ming*), "Propagating the written scripts throughout the entire empire (掌达书名于四方)" refers to the administrative duty of unifying character structures throughout the country.

The Zhou court declined significantly during the Warring States period as political power became diffused among a number of competing states that formerly comprised a unified China. The impact on writing of this fractionation of political control was dramatic. The written script not only took on different styles in separate states, but each state developed its own proliferation of character variants.[22] This situation is described in *The History of Former Han* (汉书 *Hanshu*) in the chapter, *Section on Arts and Literature* (艺文志 *Yiwenzhi*):

> In ancient times [i.e., in the Zhou dynasty], the writing system was unified. If there were characters that people did not know, they left empty spaces and asked older scholars who knew the standardized forms to fill them in. In the troubled era [i.e., the Warring States period], no standard script was established to judge right from wrong, so people invented their own. 古制书必同文，不知则阙，问诸故老。至于衰世，是非无正，人用其私。[23]

That writing systems varied by region caused major problems in interstate communications. There gradually arose a serious need for a unified writing system, a goal that became possible when the First Emperor of Qin (秦始皇 *Qinshihuang*,

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[21] Qiu, *Chinese Writing*, p. 403.
[22] See He Linyi, comp., *Zhanguo guwen zidian*, 1998.
[23] Ban Gu, *Hanshu*, p. 1721.

r. 221-206 B.C.E.) unified China. Along with policies that standardized many aspects of society, including weights, measures, and coinage, the Qin court effectuated a reform policy of creating a "unified script" (书同文 *shu tong wen*). This effort was accompanied by the abolition of scripts once used in the six states (六国文字 *liuguo wenzi*) conquered by the Qin Empire. Li Si (李斯, d. 208 B.C.E.), Counselor-in-chief of the Qin dynasty, created a new script called "small seal script" (小篆 *xiaozhuan*) (plate 3.1) that was based on the "greater seal script" (大篆 *dazhuan*) (plate 3.2) used in the Qin state before it had unified China. Throughout the Qin dynasty, small seal script was used not only for inscriptions on stones and formal engravings but was made mandatory throughout the empire under the threat of harsh penalties. Scripts formerly used by other states were banned. The short-lived Qin dynasty lasted barely fifteen years, but its policy of "standardizing writing" was a great success. Not only did the new unified script rapidly supplant the multiple scripts of the Warring States period, but standardization also greatly increased the degree of uniformity among characters (汉字系统化 *hanzi xitonghua*).

It should be pointed out that, while small seal script was used for the most formal occasions at the time, a new, more cursive and simplified writing named clerical script (隶书 *lishu*) was developed for everyday communication, including government interoffice paperwork, because it was much faster to write than seal script. This newly developed script type eventually replaced the older seal script to become the dominant formal script of the Han dynasty. Because of its relatively recent development, therefore, at the beginning stage, the clerical scripts had many characters whose structures remained unfixed, spawning numerous variants. Since the Qin dynasty was short-lived, and because no written records regarding the standardization of clerical script have survived,

we are unsure of what government efforts were made to stabilize the new script. However, because the new and powerful Qin central government rapidly expanded its control over whole empire of China and enforced a series of changes including government structure reorganization and other political and economical reforms at the same time, thus even the government pursued policies to standardize writing, the continuing instability of clerical character structures leaves open the question of how effective and extensive these policies may have been.

Regardless of how successful policies may have been with respect to stabilizing character structures during the Qin, evidence remains that its successor government in the Western Han was much concerned with standardizing character structures. At the beginning of the Western Han, the government put enormous effort into standardizing its script (which most likely was clerical script), including formulating standard character structures as a matter of law. *The History of the Former Han* (汉书 *Hanshu*) includes the following passage:

> At the beginning of the Han, Xiao He [? –193 B.C.E.] drafted the law and included rules [for punishing writers of incorrect characters]. ... When officials and commoners submitted their memos to the court, those who did not use correct characters were impeached and punished. 汉兴，萧何草律，亦著其法。... 吏民上书，字或不正，辄举劾。[24]

Although this passage does not speak directly to the government policy of standardization, the implication is clear: the government had dictated standard structures for characters, and those who violated those standards were punished.

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[24] Ban Gu, *Hanshu*, pp. 1720-1721.

During the Western Han, sometimes even emperors became involved in standardizing script. The *"Biography of Shi Fen"* (石奋传 *Shi Fen zhuan*) in *Records of the Grand Historian* (史记 *Shiji*) includes this account:

> [Shi] Jian, who served as Chamberlain for Attendants, once wrote a report to the Emperor on his duties. After the Emperor returned the report to him, Shi read it and cried: "I have written the character 馬 (*ma*, horse) incorrectly! The bottom of this character should have five strokes, with four strokes representing the horse's four hooves and one its tail, but I only wrote four – a stroke was missing. The Emperor noticed this mistake and condemned me. I will soon be dead!" He was extremely terrified. [石] 建为郎中令，奏书事。事下，建读之，曰："误书！'馬'字与尾当五，今乃四，不足一。上谴。死矣！"其惶恐。[25]

As a government official, Shi Jian was terrified by one missing stroke and thought his mistake was serious enough to cause severe punishment. Although this account may exaggerate the severity of possible punishments, it makes it clear that even emperors treated the correct writing of characters with great seriousness.

In examining the efforts of various dynastic governments to standardize character forms, we can also see that they frequently employed several major methods to do this. We will outline each of these here.

The Education System and the National Examinations:

In ancient China, government-sponsored schools were more effective in standardizing writing than was the occasional use of imperial punishments noted above. Government schools taught their students the standard writing of their time, and their

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[25] See Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 9, p. 2766.

graduates influenced other members of their communities. In the Zhou dynasty, a school in the capital run by the central government recruited young boys from the ruling families of its constituent states. Its curriculum included the so-called Six Arts (六艺 *liuyi*): rites (礼 *li*), music (乐 *yue*), archery (射 *she*), charioteering (御 *yu*), calligraphy or writing (书 *shu*), and mathematics (数 *shu*). Writing education required every student to write standard characters correctly and beautifully. Once those students graduated, they became models for local populations in their home states.

During the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods of the Eastern Zhou, the Zhou court slowly lost its grasp on political authority. As the education system sponsored by the Zhou court also declined, private schools in neighboring states became relatively more important, making education available on a broader social basis. Many of these private schools, such as the one established by Confucius, continued the Zhou emphasis on the Six Arts as central components of their curriculum. Beginning with the rise of private schools in the Eastern Zhou, the education system became divided into two sectors: government-founded schools (官学 *guanxue*) and private education (私学 *sixue*). This dual tradition survived through the short-lived Qin dynasty, and, from the Han dynasty on, government-funded schools, in supplementing the array of private schools, kept it alive. Especially, government schools played an important role in training government officials at every level, for only those who could read and write the regulation scripts could hold office.

Established during the Sui (隋, 581-618) and Tang (唐, 618-907) dynasties, the civil service examination survived another thirteen hundred years. Before the system was introduced, most appointments in the Imperial bureaucracy were based on

recommendations from prominent and existing officials, and it was commonly accepted that recommended individuals must be of aristocratic rank. After the Sui and Tang, under the new civil service examination system, any male adult regardless of his wealth or social status could theoretically become a high-ranking government official by passing the imperial examination. Not only was this system used for selecting the political elite, but it also had profound impacts on writing.

In the Tang dynasty, the examination tested several categories of knowledge. For instance, the category 明经科 (*Mingjingke*) tested candidates on their knowledge of Confucian classics, while the 明法科 (*Mingfake*) tested them on legal matters. The examination category most relevant to our discussion is the 明字科 (*Mingzike*), which tested not only the literary ability but also the graphic quality of the candidates' writing, including correct character forms and elegance of styling. Since the examination was the most important ladder for social advancement, it encouraged those who were interested in seeking official positions to follow the government-sanctioned writing forms and styles when preparing for the examinations. Those lucky enough to pass the examination and become 进士 (*jinshi*) degree holders would then be appointed to government posts, where they continued to play a role in helping the government to standardize writing. Those who failed the examinations could return to their hometowns to teach at local schools, where they continued to teach young males the standard writing that was a necessary skill in order to perform well in the civil service examinations in future. It is safe to conclude that the education and civil service examination systems were the most important institutional foundations in standardizing the writing of traditional China and it proved by the history as a very practical and efficient method.

Textbooks of Standard Characters:

To standardize the forms of writing, the governments of successive dynasties provided their subjects with textbooks that illustrated how standard writing should look. In ancient times, these textbooks (字书 *zishu*) often consisted of lists of characters – essentially, they were dictionaries of characters. One of earliest works of this kind was the *Shizhoupian* (史籀篇), which was compiled by a courtier in the reign of King Xuanwang (周宣王, r. 827–782 B.C.E.) of the Western Zhou dynasty.[26] This compilation, as Cong Wenjun (丛文俊, a contemporary scholar specializing in the evolution of Chinese script) points out, "is the first work in Chinese history to treat the study of standard characters systematically." After that, "dictionaries of characters became the models for learning both reading and writing."[27]

Following the Zhou, the government of the Qin continued compiling dictionaries of characters. Under Li Si's administration, the Qin government published three books of characters, the *Cangjiepian* (仓颉篇), the *Yuanlipian* (爰历篇), and the *Boxuepian* (博学篇), which were used as textbooks in government-funded schools.

The official script of the government of the Han was clerical script, which had replaced the small seal script of the Qin. Nevertheless, the short, 15-year duration of the Qin left the Han in close contact with the seal script (篆书 *zhuanshu*) of both the Zhou and Qin dynasties. Also during the Han, the scripts of the Six States (other than the State of Qin) that flourished during the Warring States Period (六国文字 *liuguo wenzi*) could still be seen in classical works recovered by archaeological discoveries. Scholars studied

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[26] For a scholarly discussion of this work, see Cong Wenjun, "Zhouwen kaoshu," in Cong Wenjun, comp., *Zhongguo shufa quanji (2): Shang-Zhou jinwen*, pp. 38-42.
[27] Cong Wenjun, *Zhongguo shufashi: XianQin, Qindai juan*, pp. 410-411.

these scripts, used them in private, and even taught them as classical scripts at government-funded schools. Like the most modern writing of the times, these scripts had begun to undergo the so-called "transformation from seal to clerical script (隶变 *libian*)," that is, they were no longer were entirely true to their earlier forms. Nevertheless, they retained a large number of variants that reflected something of those earlier forms. For this reason, scholars of the Han dynasty continued to compile textbooks such as the *Shizhoupian* (史籀篇), which preserved the various types of large seal script prevalent in the Zhou dynasty, and the *Cangjiepian* (仓颉篇), which did the same for the Qin dynasty's small seal script. Unfortunately, both works are now lost. These and similar works continued to circulate among scholars and the lay population even though their ancient scripts were no longer in common usage.

The most commonly used formal script in the Han dynasty was clerical script (隶书 *lishu*), but because both the *Shizhoupian* (史籀篇) and the *Cangjiepian* (仓颉篇) were collections of relatively ancient characters, even Han scholars had difficulty reading them. To encourage use of the new clerical script that had become standard in the Han, the court appointed scholars to write new textbooks. The bibliographical chapter *Treatise on Arts and Literature* (艺文志 *Yiwenzhi*) of the *History of the Former Han* (汉书 *Hanshu*) comments on three of these volumes as follows:

During the reign of Emperor Wudi of the Han [r. 156–87 B.C.E.], Sima Xiangru [179–117 B.C.E.] compiled the *Fanjiangpian*, writing its text without duplicating a character. During the reign of Emperor Yuandi [r. 75–33 B.C.E.], the Director of Eunuch Attendants Shi You compiled the *Jijiupian*. During the reign of Emperor Chengdi [r. 52–7 B.C.E.], the Chamberlain for the Palace Buildings Li Chang

complied the *Yuanshangpian*. Every character in this text is one of the standard characters in the *Cangjiepian*. 武帝时，司马相如作《凡将篇》，无复字。元帝时，黄门令史游作《急就篇》。成帝时将作大匠李长作《元尚篇》。皆《仓颉》中正字也。[28]

The last sentence of this quotation is vague and needs explanation. We know that the *Cangjiepian* (仓颉篇) was a textbook of seal script. But does "every character in this text" mean that all three of the cited source books compiled by scholars and officials of the Han time were universally in seal script? This seems not to be the case. From other textual resources and surviving Han copies of the *Jijiupian* (急就篇), we know that its subject is the correct writing of clerical script. Also, I believe that Sima Xiangru's *Fanjiangpian* (凡将篇) is an early attempt to standardize the writing of the Han dynasty, which implies that its subject was also clerical script. As to Li Chang's *Yuanshangpian* (元尚篇), since the present quotation reports that "every character" in this work was taken from the *Cangjiepian*, whose subject was small seal script, it seems likely that it was also written in that script. Overall, I believe that, among the three textbooks mentioned in the passage quoted above, the first two were devoted to clerical script, while the last work, *Yuanshangpian*, may have dealt with seal script. These textbooks on standard writing (正字课本 *Zhengzi keben*) were endorsed by the Han for two purposes, educating the literate population and avoiding proliferations of variant character forms.

Stone Classics:

During the Han dynasty, a new approach to standardizing script was employed by the government. Standardized character forms were carved into steles, which were then

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[28] Ban Gu, *Hanshu*, p. 1721.

publicly displayed as the correct forms of writing. From the beginning of the Eastern Han dynasty (220 B.C.E.–25 C.E.) up to a century into the Western Han, there were increasing demands to standardize the script. During the fourth year of the Xiping reign (熹平, 175) of the Eastern Han, the Emperor Lingdi (灵帝, r. 168–189), accepting the suggestion of a group of scholar-officials led by Cai Yong (蔡邕, 132–192), had the Confucian Classics carved into stone tablets using standard clerical script, a huge project that continued for eight years. These steles were then erected before the National University (太学 *Taixue*) as the authoritative texts of the Confucian Classics. They also served the nation as exemplars of correct character forms for scholars and students. These steles were given the name *Classics Carved in Stone during the Xiping Reign* (熹平石经 *Xiping shijing*), or the *Stone Classics*, for short (plate 3.3).[29] It is said that, immediately after the *Stone Classics* were erected, over a thousand chariots from over the empire came each day to the capital city Luoyang (洛阳) carrying scholars and students to see and copy the texts of these steles, crowding the streets with their traffic.[30] Clearly, the *Stone Classics* functioned as a special means of standardizing writing in the Han.

Carving the Confucian Classics in stone became an established convention up to the Song, when printing technology became capable of producing printed versions of the Classics. For example, about sixty years after the erection of the *Classics Carved in Stone during the Xiping Reign*, another project was commissioned in the second year of the Zhengshi (正始) reign (241) of the Cao Wei dynasty by its Emperor, Cao Fang (曹芳, r. 240–254). This project had the *Book of Documents* (尚书 *Shangshu*), *Spring and Autumn*

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[29] For excellent scholarship on the history of the *Stone Classics*, see Ma Heng, *Fanjiangzhai jinshi conggao*, pp. 199-260.
[30] See the biography of Cai Yong in Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), p. 1990.

Annals (春秋 *Chunqiu*), and *Annals Compiled by Zuo Qiuming* (左传 *Zuozhuan*)

engraved on stones that once again were erected before the National University. This set

of stone classics fulfilled the same function as its predecessor: providing society with

correct versions of the Confucian Classics written in standardized character forms. One

difference between these two efforts was that the *Classics Carved on Stones in the Xiping*

Reign (熹平石经) were presented in only one script (standardized clerical script), while

the Stone Classics carved in the Zhengshi reign were written in three scripts: ancient

script (古文 *guwen*), the small seal script of the Qin dynasty (秦篆 *Qinzhuan*), and

clerical script (隶书 *lishu*).[31] The latter carvings were therefore named *Classics Carved in*

Stone in Three Scripts (三体石经 *Santi shijing*, also known as 正始石经 *Zhengshi*

shijing) (plate 3.4). Today, only a few fragments of the Stone Classics from the Cao Wei

dynasty survive in Luoyang, once the capital city of Wei.[32] A similar effort to standardize

texts and scripts using stone inscriptions also occurred in the Kaicheng reign of the Tang

dynasty (836-840) 开成石经 *Kaicheng shijing*.

However, we should not exaggerate the role played by the Stone Classics in

standardizing the forms of writing, since they were erected before the National University

in Luoyang, the number of people able to study these carvings was limited to those who

could travel to the capital city. Also, the main purpose of setting these stone classics

might argue was to standardize the contents of the Classics rather than writings.

Nevertheless, these carvings not only standardized writing forms but also sent a clear

message that these forms were defined and sanctioned by the government.

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[31] Here, *guwen* refers to a pre-Qin script form that evolved in areas influenced by Qi culture during the
Warring States period (480-222 B.C.E.).
[32] Gao, *Zhongguo guwenzixue tonglun*, p. 12.

The Efforts of Individual Scholars:

Equal in importance to the efforts of the government and the emperor to standardize writing were the efforts of famous scholars, who, individually or in groups, wrote commentaries and did research to pursue their goals. To start, let us review how scholars viewed the phenomenon of variants.

As early as at the end of the Western Zhou dynasty and during the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Periods (eleventh century to 221 B.C.E.) many variants already existed, and they were causing problems. The most significant progress was when the Qin unified China, Li Si (李斯, d. 208 B.C.E.), the Grand Councilor of the Qin Dynasty, used administrative means, led the Qin dynasty movement to standardize script.

After the short-lived Qin, Chinese scripts underwent several major evolutions, gradually developing into a fully matured writing system. But this path was not straight. Wang Yaochen (王尧臣, 1003–1058, a Song dynasty scholar) wrote:

> Writing evolved with changes in society. It tended to become simpler and easier, and thus, after long periods of evolution, we no longer know the original forms of many characters. … Since the Qin and Han dynasties, scholars have done their best to [research the origins of characters], and thus there developed the phenomenon of character dictionaries. 文字之兴，随世转易，务趋便省，久后乃或亡其本。· · · 秦汉以来，学者务极其能，于是有字书之学。[33]

Compiled by individual scholars in different dynasties, character dictionaries made a huge contribution to standardizing the written language. Among the earliest of these works, the most famous is *Analysis of Characters as an Explanation of Writing*

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[33] Wang Yaochen, comp., *Chongshu zongmu, Xiaoxuelei yuanxu*, in *Chongshu jicheng chubiann*, vol. 21, p. 41.

(说文解字 *Shuowen jiezi*) compiled by the Eastern Han scholar Xu Shen (许慎, 58? –

147?) (plate 3.5). This work attained a high standard of scholarship and became a

fundamental resource for later scholars in the field.

From the Three Kingdoms period (220–265) through the Sui dynasty (581–618),

a new type of script called regular script (楷书 *kaishu*) evolved from clerical to become

the dominant formal script of post-Han China. Coincident with the critical evolution of

clerical into regular script, China underwent a turbulent period of political disunion, a

geographic disintegration that caused regular script to develop numerous variant

character forms in different regions.[34] Heir to this chaotic situation was the Tang dynasty,

whose government, partly in the interests of unifying its empire, made a considerable

effort to rectify the character forms of regular script. A major venue employed by the

Tang to standardize writing was the national civil service examinations, which were used

to select officials to staff the upper echelons of its government. Requiring standardized

character forms in the examinations became instrumental in unifying the writing used by

the scholar-bureaucrats who made up the scholarly class and filled the upper ranks of the

government.

The standardization of script was also an important issue in scholarship. During

the era of Emperor Tang Taizong (唐太宗, 599–649), the scholar Kong Yingda (孔颖达,

574–648) compiled his *Correct Interpretations of the Five Classics* (五经正义 *Wujing*

zhengyi) to provide a unified approach to understanding the classics. Before the Tang

dynasty, the Confucian *Five Classics* had been written in clerical script, but the adoption

of regular script as the nation's mainstay script meant that clerical was no longer in

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[34] Yan Qingxiang, *Zhongguo Kaishu dazidian.*

everyday use. For this reason, Yan Shigu (颜师古, 581–645), a distinguished scholar of scripts, transcribed the *Five Classics* into regular script in a work entitled *Standard Written Version of the Five Classics* (五经定本 *Wujing dingben*). For candidates preparing for the civil service examinations, this work provided both standard interpretations of the classics as well as officially approved forms for writing characters.

After the *Standard Written Version of the Five Classics* (五经定本 *Wujing dingben*), another important "book of model writing" (字样 *ziyang*) aimed at standardizing regular script was compiled by Yan Shigu's grandnephew, Yan Yuansun (颜元孙, ?–714), which he titled *Lexicon for Seeking an Official Post* (干禄字书 *Ganlu zishu*) (plate 3.6).[35] In his *Lexicon*, "Yan Yuansun divided his selection of characters into three categories, which he called 'vulgar' (俗 *su*), 'common' (通 *tong*), and 'correct' (正 *zheng*). Pairs of characters designated as 'vulgar' or 'common' are compared to a character considered 'correct.'"[36] In his introduction, Yan claims that: "You should always use 'correct' forms in the 进士 (*jinshi*) examination [highest level of the civil service examination]."[37] Later, Yan Yuansun's nephew, Yan Zhenqing (颜真卿, 709–784), who became one of the greatest calligraphers in Chinese history, wrote out his uncle's book in his personal hand and had this version engraved in stone. Subsequently, rubbings of this stone made this work ever more popular, helping turn Yan Zhenqing's hand into the standard calligraphic style (标准字体 *biaozhun ziti*) for anyone studying for the civil service examinations from the Tang through the later Qing dynasties.

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[35] Gao Ming, *Zhongguo guwenzixue tonglun*, p. 12. For additional detailed studies of the *Ganlu zishu* and related cultural phenomena, see Liu Zhongfu, *Ganlu zishu zilei yanjiu*; and Amy McNair, "Public Values in Calligraphy and Orthography in the Tang Dynasty," pp. 263-278.
[36] Ibid., p. 264.
[37] Ibid.

After the Six Dynasties period, many scholars followed in the footsteps of Xu Shen and compiled dictionaries of characters, but in regular script rather than seal script. Moreover, the scholarly creation of new dictionaries continued throughout imperial China. Among notable examples of this genre are *The Forest of Characters* (字林 *Zilin*, now lost) compiled by Lu Chen (吕忱) in the Jin dynasty, the *Jade Book* (玉篇 *Yupian*) compiled by Gu Yewang (顾野王, 519–581) in the Northern and Southern dynasties, *The Category Book* (类篇 *Leipian*) compiled by Wang Zhu (王洙, 997–1057) and other scholars in the Song, the *Collection of Characters* (字汇 *Zihui*), compiled by Mei Yingzuo (梅膺祚) in the Ming dynasty, *The Complete Book of Standard Characters* (正字通 *Zhengzitong*) compiled by Zhang Zhenglie (张正烈), also in the Ming, etc. Like the *Lexicon for Seeking an Official Post*, dictionaries of this kind often contain not only the variants of character forms but also their so-called correct forms. By including correct forms, they played a role in standardizing writing.

Beginning with the Song dynasty (960–1279), the rigid requirements of a developing printing industry and the strict orthography required by the imperial examinations increasingly stabilized the graphic forms of characters. By the modern era, further developments in the printing industry and the rise and spread of educational institutions made this tendency even more pronounced.[38] But over time, new problems always arose and new variants continuously appeared, demanding continuing attention to the standardization of the script — to some extent, even to the present day.

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[38] Qiu, *Chinese Writing*, p. 404.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE ART OF CALLIGRAPHY
IN STANDARDIZING WRITING

In this chapter, I will discuss a phenomenon unique to standardizing Chinese writing: the role played by canonical styles in calligraphy that were promoted by a succession of dynastic governments.

As discussed in previous chapters, an important change in the Chinese writing system took place during the Qin and Han dynasties: the transformation of seal script into clerical (隶变 *libian*), an event in which the pictorial elements of the earlier script almost disappeared as most characters were converted into abstract symbols. This event was critical to the development of calligraphy as an art form. The decline of pictorial elements was accompanied by, and partly caused, the gradual unfolding of brushwork types that were freer in both method and spirit. Seal script is written in strokes of constant width, an artifact of having been created by hard and inflexible writing instruments (styluses, chisels, etc.). But as the ductile writing brush became the dominant writing instrument, the steady pressure required for brushing the curved, even strokes of seal script with a flexible brush made writing laborious and technically demanding. In contrast, the newly-developed scripts that followed the seal and clerical scripts — running script (行书 *xingshu*), cursive script (草书 *caoshu*), regular script (楷书 *kaishu*), and draft cursive script (章草 *zhangcao*) — used press-and-lift and pause-and-turn techniques to increase

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the graphic vivacity and enrich the visual vocabulary of calligraphy by producing what is the natural expression of a soft, yielding brush: strokes of constantly varying width.[39]

In this environment of enhanced techniques and expressive potential, calligraphers increasingly turned to developing individual styles. From the first century, there emerged many accomplished calligraphers who excelled in individualistic interpretations of the basic script types. Since this time, calligraphy has been firmly established as the art of the political and cultural elite, an art that has been viewed for more than two thousand years as the highest achievement of Chinese visual arts.

It was also in the first century that calligraphic works first became collectable. It is said that Liu Mu (刘睦, active first century), a cousin of Emperor Mingdi of the Han (汉明帝, r. 57-75), "was good at calligraphy; his contemporaries took him as a standard and followed his model. On his deathbed, the emperor sent an express courier by horse to ask him to write ten letters in draft cursive script." [睦] 善史书，当世以为楷则。及寝病，帝驿马令作草书尺牍十首。[40] This shows that good calligraphy was worth pursuing in the first century, even to the point of disturbing a dying artist. Liu Mu's calligraphies evidently were not only sought as desirable objects by the elite, including the emperor, but these works also served Liu's contemporaries as an important aesthetic standard in the practice of calligraphy.

Since Liu's time at least, copying previous masters' works has been essential to learning calligraphy. The importance of copying derived from a characteristic inherent in the practice of writing. As Lothar Ledderose writes:

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[39] Qianshen Bai, "Some Research Notes on the Calligraphy of Wu Dynasty Bamboo Slips from Zoumalou, Changsha," p. 571.

[40] Fan Ye, *Hou Han shu*, vol. 2, *juan* 14, p. 557. Translation adapted from Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy*, p. 30.

By its very nature calligraphy entails copying. Every writer has to follow a "prescribed" form. In this regard the situation of a calligrapher is quite different from that of a painter, who represents objects of an outside world. Of course, a painter is conditioned in what he sees and paints by the pictorial tradition of which he himself is a member, and in that sense he copies earlier artists. But the phenomena of the outside world provide him with a constant check against the pictorial tradition and with stimulation for new artistic explorations. A calligrapher, by contrast, has to operate within a closed system of forms. He has nothing to compare his creations with except the works of former artists.[41] Although copying may take various forms, the chief and usual technique is to imitate an example of a master calligrapher's work in a manner that is freehanded yet as faithful to the model as the student can achieve. Through this process, a student learns not only a master's brush techniques but also how he structured his characters.

From an early stage in the development of calligraphy, governments promoted specific models of calligraphy. For instance, during the Three Kingdoms period, the Wei Kingdom took senior official Zhong You's (钟繇, 151-230) calligraphy as the model style for the Palace Library staff and for teaching boys.[42] Many examples may be cited, but historically, the classic case is the promotion of Wang Xizhi's (王羲之, ca. 303-ca. 361) calligraphy by the early Tang government.

Born into an aristocratic family of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420) many of whose members were distinguished calligraphers, Wang Xizhi established himself as one

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[41] Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy*, p. 33. In his book, Ledderose discusses in detail the various modes of copying in early Chinese calligraphy. See in particular, pp. 33-44.
[42] See Qianshen Bai, "Some Research Notes on the Calligraphy of Wu Dynasty Bamboo Slips from Zoumalou, Changsha," p. 580.

of the great masters of his time. Nevertheless, his work did not achieve supreme canonical position as the chief model for calligraphy until the seventh century. In 626 in the early Tang, Li Shimin (李世民, 599-649), who eventually acquired the posthumous name Tang Taizong (唐太宗, Emperor Tai of the Tang), accepted the abdication of his father Li Yuan (李渊, 566-635) and ascended the throne as the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty. The following year, Taizong gave his rule the reign title of Zhenguan (贞观, 627-650). The Zhenguan reign proved to be one of the most economically prosperous and politically powerful periods in history. But it was the establishment of Wang Xizhi's dominant position in the creation, evaluation, and transmission of calligraphy for the next thousand years that made it extremely influential in the history of calligraphy. As a result, Wang Xizhi was dubbed the Sage of Calligraphy, and his canonical works became the model for the most dominant style in the subsequent history of calligraphy.

The canonization of Wang Xizhi and his works involved a series of activities. Taizong played a crucial role in this process. By collecting and distributing Wang Xizhi's works and promoting his style as the chief model for correct writing, he successfully established Wang's supreme position in the history of calligraphy.

The period from the Eastern Jin to the Sui Dynasty saw frequent warfare that caused the loss or destruction of many of Wang Xizhi's works. Thus, in the canonization of Wang as Calligraphy Sage, the collection and evaluation of his remaining works was a first and essential step. At the beginning of his Zhenguan reign, Taizong issued an imperial edict ordering that the budget of the interior court be used to buy as many of Wang Xizhi's works as possible, a project he pursued until the thirteenth year of the

Zhenguan reign (639).[43] A short notice by Zhang Huaiguan (张怀瓘, active 735-760), a famous calligraphy critic at court, reads:

In the thirteenth year of Zhenguan [639], [Taizong] announced an imperial edict ordering Wang Xizhi's calligraphy to be bought at high prices. As a result, all his masterpieces came into [the imperial household collection] from everywhere. [Taizong] ordered the Imperial Diarist Chu Suiliang (褚遂良, 596-659), the Editor of the Imperial Diary Wang Zhijing (王知敬), and others to come together to ... judge these works in comparison to Wang's works already in the imperial household collection. Afterwards, the Supervisor of Rites Wang Xingzhen (王行真) was put in charge of mounting these works... The entire collection of Wang Xizhi's work was about two thousand two hundred ninety pieces. They were compiled into one hundred twenty-eight volumes and put into thirteen cases. Regular script works were fifty pieces, eight in each case by height. Two hundred forty pieces in running script were mounted into forty volumes in four cases; the length of each volume was four *chi*. Two thousand cursive works were compiled into eighty volumes in eight cases; each volume was one *zhang* and eight *chi* long. These works were mounted on golden fabrics, silk, and other valuable materials. An impression of the small "Zhenguan" seal was pressed on the join between each sheet of paper. 贞观十三年敕购求右军书并贵价酬之，四方妙迹，靡不毕至。敕起居郎褚遂良校书郎王知敬等…，内出右军书共相参校，令典仪王行真装之。…右军书大凡二千二百九十纸装为十三帙一百二十八

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[43] See Wu Pingyi, "Xushi fashu ji," in Zhang Yanyuan, *Fashu yaolu*, Lu Fusheng et al., comps., *Zhongguo shuhua quanshu*, vol. 1, p. 54.

卷，真书五十纸一帙八纸随本长短为度，行书二百四十纸四帙四十卷四尺为

度，草书二千纸八帙八十卷以一丈二尺为度，并金缕杂宝装轴织成帙。其书

每缝皆用小印印之，其文曰贞观。[44]

In other words, as a result of the imperial edict, Wang Xizhi's works were bought at high prices, authenticated by first-class connoisseurs, given mountings of splendid quality, and authorized with the imperial collection seal. They were also carefully cataloged.[45] In his search for Wang Xizhi's work, Taizong had also enormously increased his reputation.

In his enthusiasm for Wang's calligraphy, Taizong's second step in promoting Wang Xizhi was to impose his work on the nation as the model for calligraphic instruction, part of an effort to enshrine it as the leading calligraphic model among the political and cultural elite. The Emperor filled several positions in the Institute for the Advancement of Literature (弘文馆 Hongwenguan) with the best available copyists, who were charged with replicating Wang's works. Later, these copies were distributed to the crown prince, princes, and top government officials.[46]

To expand Wang Xizhi's influence over contemporary calligraphy, Taizong established a calligraphy education system that took Wang's works as models for learning. As early as the first year of the Zhenguan reign, Taizong announced that every capable and interested official above the fifth rank, whether civil official or military officer, was permitted to enter the Institute for the Advancement of Literature to be educated in Wang Xizhi's calligraphy. Ouyang Xun (欧阳询, 557-641) and Yu Shinan

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[44] Zhang Huaiguan, "Er Wang deng shulu," in Zhang Yanyuan, *Fashu yaolu*, Lu Fusheng et al., comps., *Zhongguo shuhua quanshu*, vol. 1, p. 61.

[45] See Chu Suiliang, "Jin Youjun Wang Xizhi shumu," in Zhang Yanyuan, *Fashu yaolu*, Lu Fusheng et al., comps., *Zhongguo shuhua quanshu*, vol. 1, pp. 48-51.

[46] See He Yanzhi, "Lanting ji," in Zhang Yanyuan, *Fashu yaolu*, Lu Fusheng et al., comps., *Zhongguo shuhua quanshu*, vol. 1, p. 58; and Chu Xuiliang, "Chu Henan taben Yue Yi ji," in ibid., vol. 1, p. 58.

(虞世南, 558-638), two of the most preeminent early Tang calligraphers in the Wang tradition, were appointed teachers at the Institute to further the use of Wang's style.[47] Later, the children of senior officials were also allowed to enter the Institute, where they had access to the imperial household collection.[48] Furthermore, calligraphy was to be one of the fields of study in the School of the Sons of the State (国子学 *Guozixue* or 国子监 *Guozijian*), an educational institution for the sons of the officials. Its faculty included two members specializing in calligraphy who taught thirty students at a time.[49]

As a result of Taizong's efforts, Wang Xizhi's style quickly prevailed in the early Tang. Sun Guoting (孙过庭, active around 680), a famous calligraphic critic of the early Tang, saw Wang's calligraphy as a great synthesis of the work of previous masters. Sun writes: "Now Wang Xizhi's calligraphy has been extensively praised and studied by every generation; it can well serve as an exemplary model to help students find their own way, for it not only integrates the best of past and present but also shows deep feeling and harmony."[50] As a result of admiration like this, the Tang dynasty saw the start of over a thousand years of profound influence on the calligraphic art by "the Sage of Calligraphy."

A few examples show the extent of Wang Xizhi's popularity in the Tang dynasty. In the early twentieth century, numerous ancient documents were discovered in the library of a Buddhist monastery at Dunhuang (敦煌) on the northwest border of the Tang dynasty, among which were three copies of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy. To find copies of Wang's calligraphy in an area so far from the cultural center of the capital at Chang'an

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[47] *Songben Da Tang Liudian, juan* 8, pp. 161-162.

[48] Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tangshu, juan* 37, vol. 20, p. 1209.

[49] Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tangshu, juan* 34, vol. 20, pp. 159-160.

[50] Chang Chung-ho and Hans H. Frankel, *Two Chinese Treaties on Calligraphy*, p. 10.

(长安) is not only testimony to the popularity of Wang Xizhi's work but also to the successful implementation of imperial cultural policies.

What interests us too is that, in addition to copies of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy, scholars also found in Dunhuang three rubbings of calligraphy by the Tang political elite. Two are of calligraphy by two individuals mentioned above: Taizong and his courtier Ouyang Xun. Both were taken from inscriptions on stone steles. The rubbing of Taizong's work, which bears Wang Xizhi's stylistic features, was made in 653, only five years after the stele from which it was taken was erected in Chang'an. This demonstrates that calligraphy traveled from the political center to peripheral areas with extreme rapidity. The third rubbing is of a stele bearing the text of the Buddhist "Diamond Sutra" written out by the famous Tang court calligrapher Liu Gongquan (柳公权, 778-865), whose calligraphy was one of the principal style models of calligraphy from the Tang dynasty onward.[51]

These examples show that reproduction played an important role in disseminating and promoting the calligraphic tastes favored by the political elite, a technique in unifying calligraphic styling that continued long afterward.[52] Reproductions of early calligraphy also proliferated during the Song dynasty. For example, in the year 992 at the command of Taizong, Emperor of the Song (宋太宗, r. 976-97), the courtier Wang Zhu (王著, d. 990) compiled some four hundred and nineteen works of calligraphy by some one hundred writers into ten volumes. He had them engraved on wooden blocks, and

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[51] Mao Qiujin, "Dunhuang ben *Qishutie* kao," pp. 259, 268.
[52] For scholarly publications on various techniques used to replicate calligraphy, see Shen C. Y. Fu et al., *Traces of the Brush*, pp. 1-40; Amy McNair, "Engraved Calligraphy in China: Recension and Reception," pp. 106-114; Qianshen Bai, "The Artistic and Intellectual Aspects of Chinese Calligraphy Rubbings: Some Examples from the Collection of Robert Hatfield Ellsworth," pp. 82-88.

rubbings taken from the engravings were distributed by the emperor as imperial favors to his senior officials. This project became known as *Chunhuage tie* (淳化阁帖 *Model-book from the imperial archives of the Chunhua reign period*). The items in the *Chunhuage tie* are predominantly letters, especially personal letters; the remaining works are ancient classics, poems, critiques of and colophons to calligraphic works, and even sections of stele inscriptions. Letters by Wang Xizhi and his son Wang Xianzhi (王献之, 344-386) comprise a significant part of this model-book (plate 4.1).

Following the example of the imperial court, Song dynasty literati also were enthusiastic about engraving model-books.[53] Model-books engraved on wooden plates remained a conventional method for reproducing calligraphy until the advent of photography and modern printing. Numerous model-books were produced in the Song and succeeding dynasties.[54] The dissemination of these model-books made reproductions of ancient calligraphic masterpieces, including a significant number by Wang Xizhi, widely available among the literati.

We have discussed examples of how imperial courts in different dynasties promoted certain calligraphers through collecting and reproducing their works and designating their styles as educational models. This activity went beyond spreading and determining calligraphic taste, however; it was also an important mechanism in governance. Because good calligraphy was regarded as demonstrative of a high level of self-cultivation and cultural achievement, and since these traits were implicit requirements for employment in high government positions, calligraphy was always an

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[53] For a thorough discussion of model-book production in the Song dynasty, see Amy McNair, "The Engraved Model-Letters Compendia of The Sung Dynasty," pp. 209-225.
[54] For information on model-books produced in imperial China, see Rong Geng, *Congtie mu.*

indispensable part of the civil service examinations. While no separate portion of the civil service examinations was designed to test calligraphy, this only demonstrates how much calligraphy was taken for granted. If the calligraphy used by a candidate in answering the examinations was not skillful, he might be poorly evaluated by the examiners, especially in the palace examination held under the aegis of the emperor, the highest-level examination.[55] Skill in calligraphy was thus intricately linked to the civil service examinations, the most important factor in determining membership in the political elite. Hence, the examination system was the most important socio-political institution in which the art of calligraphy played a major role.

Regular script, required for the civil service examinations, is much more strictly fixed in its forms than are running or cursive, whose greater degrees of graphic freedom enhance opportunities for developing individual styles. Wise candidates practicing calligraphy for the examinations would select models favored by the government. Besides Wang Xizhi's regular-script calligraphy as found in such writings as the *Yellow Court Classic* (黄庭经 *Huang Tingjing*) (plate 4.2) and the *Eulogy for Yue Yi* (乐毅论 *Yue Yi lun*) (plate 4.3), the most important and popular models of regular script included the styles of Ouyang Xun (plate 4.4), Yu Shinan (plate 4.5), Chu Suiliang (plate 4.6), Yan Zhenqing (plate 4.7), and Liu Gongquan (plate 4.8). Derived from Wang Xizhi's elegant art, these and other models of calligraphy constituted the stylistic canons of calligraphy. Significantly, the artists listed here were all senior government officials. Despite occasional minor variations in character forms, these calligraphers were the models of "standard writing" for the educated elite.

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[55]For a discussion of the importance of calligraphy in the civil service examinations, see Chung-li Chang, *Chinese Gentry*, pp. 177-178.

Above, we have discussed a number of efforts to ensure that regular script characters were written in standardized forms. However, this leaves open the question of whether there was also an interest in controlling the character-forms of running script (行书 *xingshu*), an informal longhand that significantly increased writing speed. Because it was speedy, running script has been widely used in everyday writing since its invention and development during the Six Dynasties and Tang. Unlike cursive script, whose character forms were often dramatically different from those of regular script (compare, for example, the cursive and regular character-forms for *li*, 麗 beauty), running script derives directly from the character forms of regular script, and for this reason, the two scripts bear many structural similarities (plate 4. 9). Because of the close relationship between regular and running script, when the Tang court and its scholars standardized regular script writing, they had already, to a great extent, laid a foundation for standardizing running script characters. But even then, the Tang court was concerned that the forms of this informal writing might become too wild, and so it separately promoted the standardization of both scripts.

When Emperor Taizong vigorously promoted Wang Xizhi's calligraphy, he collected many of Wang Xizhi's running script calligraphies, had them copied by court copyists, and distributed these copies to members of the imperial family and senior officials. Among the works copied and distributed, the *Lanting xu*, or *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering* (蘭亭序 *Lanting xu*), is the most famous. Even today, several tracing and free hand copies of the *Preface* survive from the Tang, testimony to this work's popularity. The Shenlong version of this masterpiece is a tracing copy by the famous copyist Feng Chengsu (冯承素) at the Institute for the Advancement of Literature

(plate 4.10). The other two copies were made by senior officials, who were also Taizong's calligraphy consultants, Yu Shinan and Chu Suiliang (褚遂良, 596-659) (plates 4.11, 4.12). This masterpiece was also engraved in stone to create what is known as the *Dingwu* version of the *Preface*, and frequent rubbings were made of it (plate 4.13). Later, additional engravings based on ink copies or rubbings of the *Dingwu* 定武 version were made, and rubbings were taken from these, as well. By the time of the Qing dynasty, the scholar-collector Wu Yun (吴云, 1811–1883) could name his studio "The Studio of Two Hundred Copies of the *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering*" because that was the number of reproductions of this famous work in his collection. Such prolific reproduction reinforced the senior canonical position of the *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering* in Chinese calligraphy. Those who practiced calligraphy inevitably encountered this work in their training and copied it as a means of practicing running script; all the educated elite followed this model to learn running script.

To promote Wang Xizhi's running script calligraphy, Emperor Taizong of the Tang ordered a new text in running script. In the early Tang, the famous Buddhist monk Xuanzhuang (玄奘, 602-664) returned to China after studying Buddhism in India for years. In the nineteenth year of the Zhenguan reign (645), under an imperial edict, Xuanzhuang began to translate Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Chinese at the Hongfu Monastery (弘福寺 *Hongfu si*). As part of this effort, the emperor contributed a "Preface to the Great Tang Buddhist Canon" (圣教序 *Shengjiao xu*). The emperor also ordered another monk at the monastery, Huairen (怀仁), to engrave the imperial preface on a stele, stipulating that each of its characters be styled after a character in the running calligraphy of Wang Xizhi. Huairen took more than twenty years to complete this project

(plate 4.14), so that, when the stele was erected in 672, Emperor Taizong had died. His son, Emperor Gaozong (唐高宗, r. 650–683), continued to promote the spread of his father's preface in Huairen's hand, and he wrote a colophon for it that was also engraved on the original stele. Because Huairen selected the best characters from among Wang Xizhi's letters, Taizong's preface became one of the foremost canons of running script calligraphy and is practiced even today. Like the *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering*, it also was an important tool in standardizing the writing of running script.

In discussing the role played by calligraphy in standardizing writing, I should mention an important primer for elementary education, the *Thousand Character Essay* (千字文 *Qianziwen*). This ancient text consists of 250 lines of four characters each. Its rhymed lines helped it serve a role similar to that of the "alphabet song" with respect to the West's Latin alphabet: allowing children to memorize the elements of language. It is said that Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty (梁武帝, r. 502-549) asked Yin Tieshi (殷铁石) to select one thousand different characters from Wang Xizhi's calligraphy. He then had Zhou Xingsi (周兴嗣, 470—521) arrange these characters into a rhymed text that his sons could use in practicing calligraphy.

Literarily beautiful and with a content that ranges from the universe and agriculture to history and morality, the text of the *Thousand Character Essay* quickly became one of the most influential primers in the elementary curriculum. The original version modeled on Wang Xizhi's calligraphy has not survived, but many subsequent calligraphers, including Monk Zhiyong (智永和尚, act. ca. late sixth-seventh century), Zhao Mengfu (赵孟頫, 1254-1322), Wen Zhengming (文徵明, 1470-1559), and Fu Shan (傅山, 1607-1682), have used it as a text when writing calligraphy. It has been especially

valued as a calligraphy text because its wide range of characters makes it a good model both for practicing calligraphy and demonstrating skill in this art.

The most famous example among numerous calligraphers who have transcribed this text is Monk Zhiyong, who lived in the Sui and early Tang dynasties. A seventh generation grandson of Wang Xizhi, Monk Zhiyong was also an eminent calligrapher. He is most noted for spending about thirty years making eight hundred copies of the *Thousand Character Essay*, each written in two scripts, regular and cursive. These he distributed among Buddhist monasteries. Some copies survived to be deemed masterpieces of calligraphy (plate 4.15), and rubbings have made them widely accessible in reproduction. Although there are thousands of characters, mastering four to six thousand characters is sufficient to obtain the "functional" writing needed in ordinary life. Thus, copying Monk Zhiyong's *Thousand Character Essay* allowed an educated citizen in traditional China to master a significant proportion of everyday vocabulary in "correct" style. As a result of this socially and politically enforced adherence to the stabilizing process of copying model calligraphies, a high degree of standardization was achieved in the writing of literate Chinese over almost endless generations.

EPILOGUE

I have discussed in the foregoing chapters the phenomenon of variant characters in the history of Chinese writing, including its causes as well as government policies and efforts by private scholars to promote the standardization of characters. My discussion focused mainly on the period from the pre-Qin era to the Tang dynasty, although I have also mentioned subsequent contributions of scholars to the medium of published scholarly books and dictionaries.

Limited by space, I have not discussed a critical moment in the history of character standardization in the post-Tang period: the invention of printing during the Song Dynasty. Here, I would like to briefly discuss this turning point in the history of Chinese writing and its relationship to the subsequent history of the character standardization movement.

In recent decades, studies in print culture in both East and West have received considerable scholarly attention, a growing interest that has resulted in an increase in scholarly publications on this topic.[56] Before the invention of printing, books were hand-copied in both East and West. In China, there were several methods of copying. First, poor scholars who could not afford to purchase books would borrow them from friends, and then transcribe them by hand. Accounts of this manner of replication are legion. However, the accuracy of these transcriptions varied significantly with the scholarship, attention to detail, and clarity of handwriting of individual scholars. Second, the relatively well-to-do had books copied by assistants. But these assistants also had varying degrees of education and writing skills, and the quality of their products varied

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[56] For a recent discussion of Chinese print culture, see Lucille Chia, *The Commercial Publishers of Jianyang, Fujian (11th-17th Centuries)*.

proportionately. Third, professional scribes copied books for sale. Of these three approaches to copying, the products of professional scribes were the most stable and consistently accurate. Inadequate data makes it difficult to cite examples of the comparative accuracy of bound books copied by professional scribes, but the somewhat parallel case of copies of Buddhist sutra scrolls found in Dunhuang shows that copies of the same text made during a given period exhibit great textual consistency. This demonstrates the strict training and proficiency of Buddhist scribes and shows that great accuracy was achievable under optimum conditions.

Even so, hand-copied books were more prone to mistakes than Buddhist scrolls. But the invention of printing significantly changed this situation for the better. European scholars have used the term "fixity" to describe the transformation of book culture caused by the use of printing. As transmitters of knowledge, printed texts could be duplicated in a great quantity while preserving textual accuracy. This greatly increased the speed and accuracy with which information and knowledge were spread.[57]

To print a text using early printing techniques, hardwood boards, or printing blocks, were prepared. The publisher would commission a professional scribe to write out a text and then had their work engraved into the blocks. Then, the blocks were inked and pressed on paper to print a text. A special font created to increase legibility was later known as Song Font (宋体 *Songti*). This font was derived from characters written in the regular script popular in the Tang dynasty. It has several prominent characteristics: thin horizontal strokes, thicker vertical strokes, and relatively squared-off character structures (plate 5.1). From the perspective of printing, these characteristics gave the Song Font

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[57] See Lai Guolong, "Lun Zhanguo, Qin-Han xieben wenhua zhong wenben de liudong yu guding," p. 519.

three advantages. First, this font is easy to engrave, hastening the production process. Second, it is easy to read. Third, the compactness of its square forms allows texts to be carved using fewer printing blocks and less paper. For these reasons, it continues in use today for small publishing runs. Besides the Song Font, other character styles also came into use in several ways. Scholars who study Chinese print culture have pointed out that scribes often adopted the calligraphic styles of leading calligraphers of their times. For instance, from the Yuan dynasty to the early Qing period, Zhao Mengfu's style of calligraphy was popular among book engravers.[58]

In the Song dynasty, notably in the Southern Song, printed and hand-copied books co-existed. By the Ming dynasty, printed books had become the dominant mode for making books. Although printing significantly increased the productivity of book making, the number of books created by woodblock printing was still limited compared to modern times. Press runs varied from 200 to 1,000 copies, depending on the economic support of a book's commissioner, the demand for the book, and the quality of the wooden blocks used to print it.

There are several problems with woodblock printing compared to using more modern printing techniques. These include the relatively high cost and low durability of the printing block. When a block was used to print more than 1,000 copies, the edges of its engraved characters would begin to show wear, and recarving the block for additional editions considerably increased the cost of printing.

Printing, however, had a major impact on the accuracy of transmitting texts. Scribes made mistakes, but careful proofreading of the printing block could reduce errors

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[58] See Frederick W. Mote and Hung-lam Chu, *Calligraphy and the East Asian Book*, pp. 111-132. This volume contains the most important research in English on the relationship between book printing and calligraphy in imperial China.

to a minimum. Once a meticulous proofing was completed, the block was considered fixed, and a printer could proceed without much worry about mistakes. Because most scribes used standard script in writing texts for printing blocks, books made from these blocks played an important role in standardizing the forms of characters. In addition, when a good scribe wrote out text for numerous books, his writing style circulated among a wide reading public, and sometimes it became an important stylistic reference for the calligraphy and printing of his time. This was another route by which new fonts were introduced into print culture.

If woodblock printing produced only limited numbers of books, the situation changed in the twentieth century as modern printing technology was introduced. Characters cast in moveable lead slugs enabled the production of thousands of identical copies of books and newspapers with no perceptible decline in the quality of impression, and, furthermore, lead characters could themselves be reproduced in quantity at low cost. This meant that, for some decades, the entire country used the same font for printing, although several new fonts have been introduced since 1949. This uniformity of font meant that Chinese readers encountered the same style of writing every day and everywhere (plate 5.2). This has meant that printed materials have played a central role in standardizing writing in modern China. While individuals continue to use variant forms of characters and to make mistakes in their personal writing, character variants have become unusual in such printed materials as books, magazines, and newspapers.

Aided by the application of modern technology to printing, the Chinese government continued the official efforts of past governments to standardize writing. In the 1950s, to make writing easier to learn and execute, the government adopted

simplified characters nationwide. It published charts of simplified characters and made the use of these characters compulsory, decreeing their exclusive use in school textbooks, newspapers, and all other printed materials. The government also organized scholars to compile dictionaries. Among them, the most important and most commonly used is the *New Chinese Dictionary* (新华字典 *Xinhua zidian*), which is the official basis for unifying the character forms used in printing. This effort, combined with the tendency of printing toward uniform products, has made the modern effort to standardize writing the most effective in Chinese history.

Since the 1980s, computers have rapidly increased the efficiency of conveying the written word. Today, computers are used widely in printing and increasingly for everyday writing. There are several programs that can be used in writing Chinese — Microsoft's Quanpin program 微软全拼, Ziguang 紫光, Sogo 搜狗中文, TwinBridge 双桥, etc. Although these programs vary in functional details, the structures of the most frequently used characters used in these programs are identical. Some programs include character variants, but even these are intended for reproducing texts in ancient scripts and so are not used in everyday writing.

In conclusion, there have been radical changes in the millennia-long effort to ensure that written Chinese remains an effective and uniform means of communication among its users. These changes center on the inherent tendency of technology towards standardization. Beginning with early book printing in the Song and continuing with improvements in accuracy brought about first by modern mechanical printing and then by digital publishing, the historic need for tireless effort to eliminate character variants from the Chinese written language has been virtually eliminated.

APPENDIX: PLATES
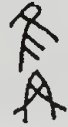
Plate 1.1 Pictographic signs and early characters

Script type	Character 虎 (*hu*, tiger)
Ancient Graph 原始图形 About 2000 B.C	
Shell and bone script 甲骨文 About 1400 - 1200 B.C	
Bronze script (Great seal script) 金文 (大篆) About 1100 – 300 B.C	
Seal script (Small seal script) 篆书 (小篆) About 221 - 207 B.C	
Clerical script 隶书 About 200 B.C – 200 A.D	
Regular script (Standard script) 楷书 About 200 A.D – present	
Running script 行书 About 200 A.D – present	
Cursive script 草书 About 200 A.D – present	
Song printed style 宋体 (印刷体) About 900 A.D – present	
Artistic style 美术体 Present time	

Plate 1.2 Evolution of Chinese character

Plate 2.1 Cattle scapula with oracle inscription

Plate 2.2 Inscription on the Shanshi Basin (散氏盘) shows a more organized composition of writings

Basic Chinese Character Structures

Structure Type	Structure Picture	Sample Characters					
Non-composite graph 独体字		wǒ 我 me	shēng 生 person	wáng 王 king	yǒu 友 friend	tiān 天 heaven	bù/bú 不 no/not
Composite graph 合体字		nǐ 你 you	hǎo 好 good	jiào 叫 to call	míng 明 bright	rèn 认 to know	dǎ 打 to hit
Horizontal Structures		hé 和 and	nào 那 that	qī 期 cycle	kè 刻 quarter	gāng 刚 just	shū 舒 comfortable
		zuò 做 to do	xiè 谢 thanks	shúi 谁 who	hòu 候 time	nǎ 哪 which	liáo 聊 to chat
Vertical Structures		shì 是 is/yes	bà 爸 father	gùi 贵 expensive	zì 字 character	sùi 岁 year	hào 号 number
		zǎo 早 early	míng 名 name	měi 美 beautiful	zěn 怎 how	qù 去 to go	sī 思 to think
		yì 意 meaning	cháng 常 often	kè 客 quest	suàn 算 to count	chá 茶 tea	láng 蓝 blue
Enclosed Structure		guó 国 country	yīn 因 reason	tú 图 picture	húi 回 go back	yuán 园 garden	qiú 囚 prisoner

Plate 2.3a   Basic Chinese Character Structures (1)

Structure Type	Structure Picture	Sample Characters					
Horizontal + Vertical Structures		qǐng 请, to invite	méi 没, no/not	shī 识, to know	chàng 唱, to sing	cuò 错, wrong	dé 得 to get
		dōu 都, all	yǐng 影, shadow	gē 歌, song	bié 别, other	fēng 封, to seal	xīn 新 new
Vertical + Horizontal Structures		zhòng 众, crowd	jīng 晶, shine	sēn 森, forest	lěi 磊, frank	miǎo 淼, lot of water	sù 宿 dorm
		ní 您, you	zhào 照, to shine	xiǎng 想, to think	rè 热, hot	bāng 帮, to help	huò 货 merchandise
Three-quarters Enclosed Structures		yī 医, medical	jiàng 匠, worker	qū 区, section	pǒ 叵, unknown	fěi 匪, robber	jiù 巨 huge
		wèn 问, to ask	yuè 月, month	tóng 同, same	zhōu 周, edge	mèn 闷, lonely	wǎng 网 net
		xiong 凶, fearful	hán 函, insider	yōu 幽, quiet	záo 凿, to carve	huàn 画, picture	dàng 凼 pond
Half-open Structures		tīng 厅, hall	cè 厕, toilet	chuáng 床, bed	má 麻, numb	jū 居, to live	fáng 房 house
		bāo 包, to wrap	jù 句, sentence	gōu 勾, hook	sháo 勺, spoon	wù 勿, don't	cōng 匆 in hurry
		zhè 这, this	hái 还, also	jìng 进, to enter	tí 题, question	qǐ 起, to get up	qiàn 建 to build

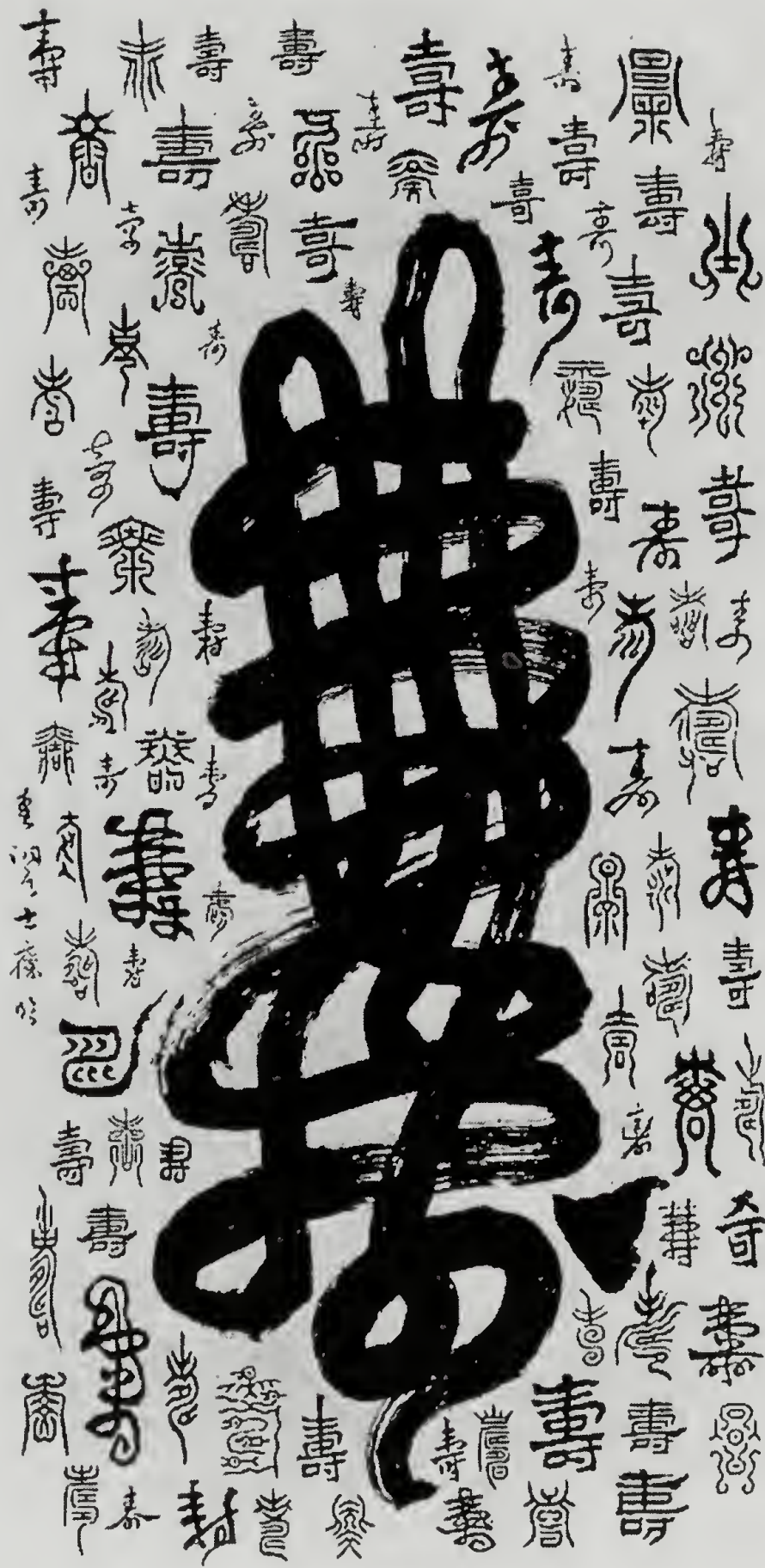Plate 2.3b   Basic Chinese Character Structures (2)

Plate 2.4 Nishigawa Shundu (西川春洞, 1847－1915), one hundred ways of writing 寿 *shou*, a calligraphic work written for celebrating someone's birthday

處　規

Plate 2.5 Charater 處 (*chu*, place) and 規 (*gui*, rule) and their variants

Plate 3.1 Greater Seal Script: Inscription on the Shi Qiang Basin (史墙盘)
Western Zhou period

Plate 3.2 Small Seal Script: Stone Inscription on Mount Tai (泰山)
Qin Dynasty

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Plate 3.3 *Classics Carved in Stone during the Xinping Reign* (熹平石经 *Xiping shijing*)

Plate 3.4 Classics Carved on Stone in Three Scripts (三体石经 *Santi shijing*, also known as 正始石经 *Zhengshi shijing*)

Plate 3.5 Xu Shen (许慎, 58? –147?), *Shuowen jiezi* (说文解字)

Plate 3.6 Yan Zhenqing (颜真卿, 709–784), copy of *Ganlu zishu* (干禄字书)
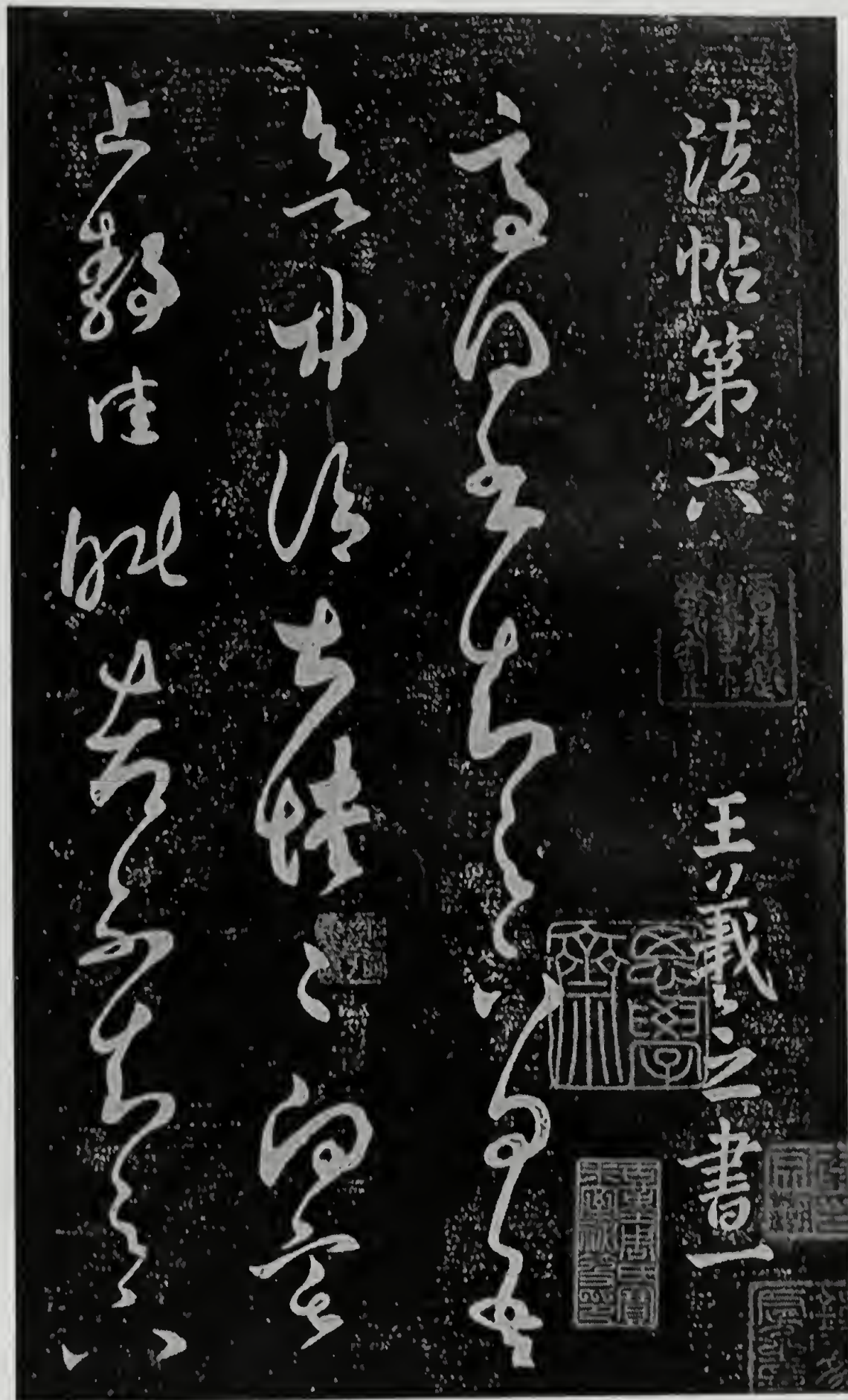
Plate 4.1 *Model-book from the imperial archives of the Chunhua reign period* (淳化阁帖, *Chunhuage tie*)

Plate 4.2 Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (ca. 303-361), *Yellow Court Classic* (黄庭经 *Huang Tingjing*)

Plate 4.3 Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (ca. 303-361), *Eulogy for Yue Yi* (乐毅论 *Yue Yi lun*)
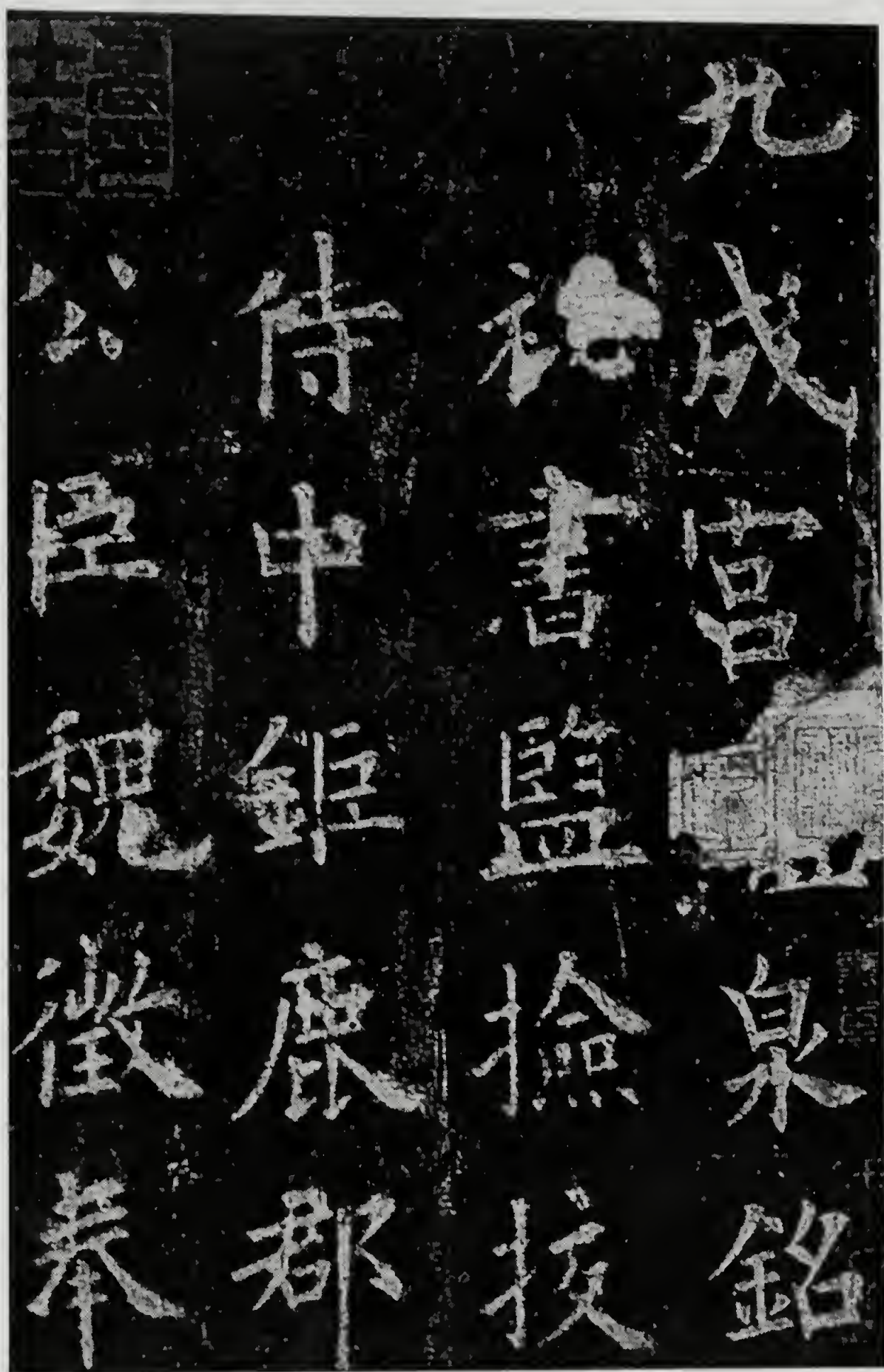
Plate 4.4 Ouyang Xun (欧阳询, 557-641), *Stele of Jiucheng Palace* (九成宫醴泉铭 *Jiuchenggong liquan ming*), erected in 632

Plate 4.5 Yu Shinan (虞世南, 558-638), *Stele of Confucius Temple* (夫子庙堂碑
Fuzi miaotang bei), erected in 633

大唐
太宗文皇

帝製三藏聖教序

盖聞二儀有象顯

覆載以含生四時

Plate 4.6 Chu Suiliang (褚遂良, 596-659), *Stele of the "Preface to the Great Tang Buddhist Canon"* (圣教序碑 *Shengjiaoxu bei*)

81
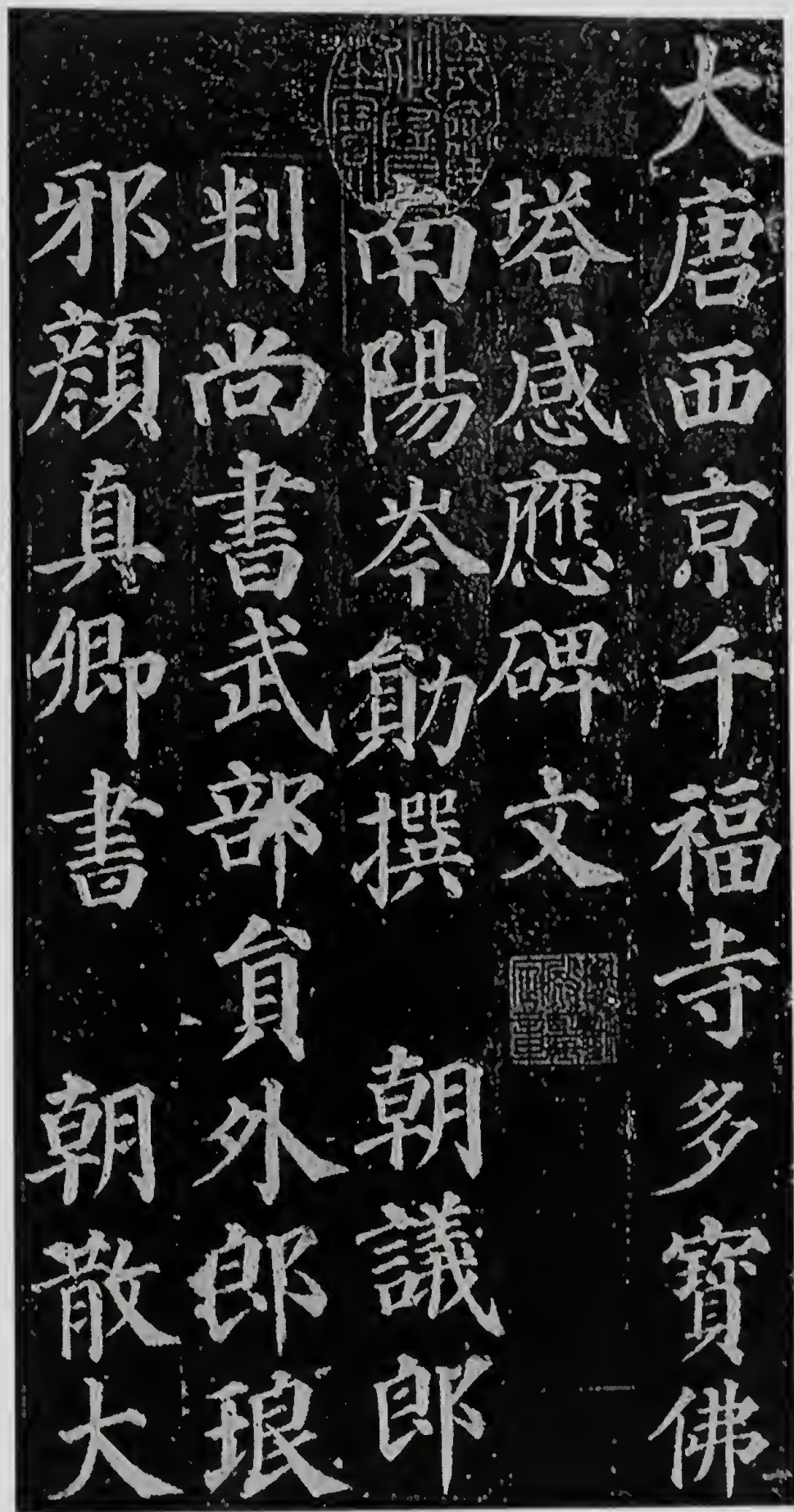
Plate 4.7 Yan Zhenqing (颜真卿, 709-785), *Prabhutaratna Pagoda Stele Inscription*
(多宝塔感应碑 *Duobaota ganyingbei*) dated 752

Plate 4.8 Liu Gongquan (柳公权, 778 - 865), *Stele of Xuanmi ta* (玄秘塔碑 *Xuanmita bei*), erected in 841
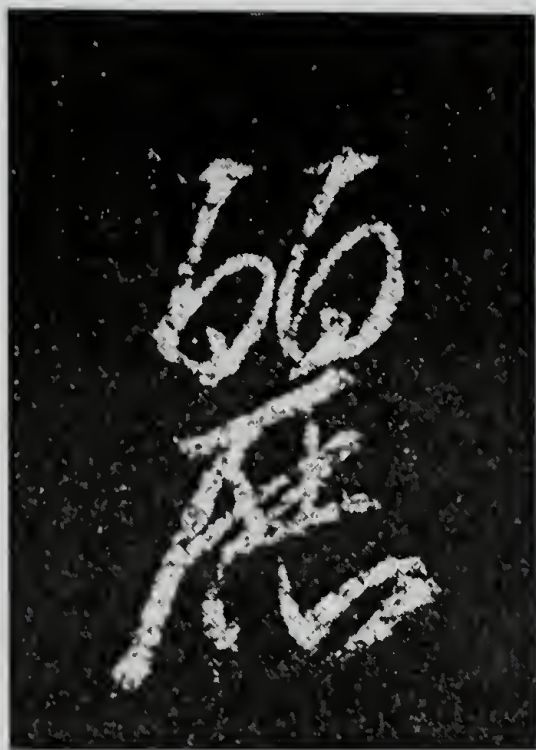
麗 written
by Wang Xizhi (王羲之, ca. 303-361)

麗 written
by Ouyang Xun (欧阳询, 557-641)

Plate 4.9 Compare the character 麗 (*li*, beautiful) in running script and regular script

Plate 4.10 Tang tracing copy of *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering*
(神龙本兰亭序 *Shenlong* version *Lanting xu*)

Plate 4.11 Tang copy of *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering*
(attribute to Chu Suiliang 虞世南 558-638)

Plate 4.12 Tang tracing copy of *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering*
(attribute to Chu Suiliang 褚遂良, 596-659)

Plate 4.13 Rubbing of *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering*
(定武本 *Dingwu* version)

大唐三藏聖教序

大宗文皇帝製

弘福寺沙門懷仁集晉

右將軍王羲之書

蓋聞二儀有像顯覆載
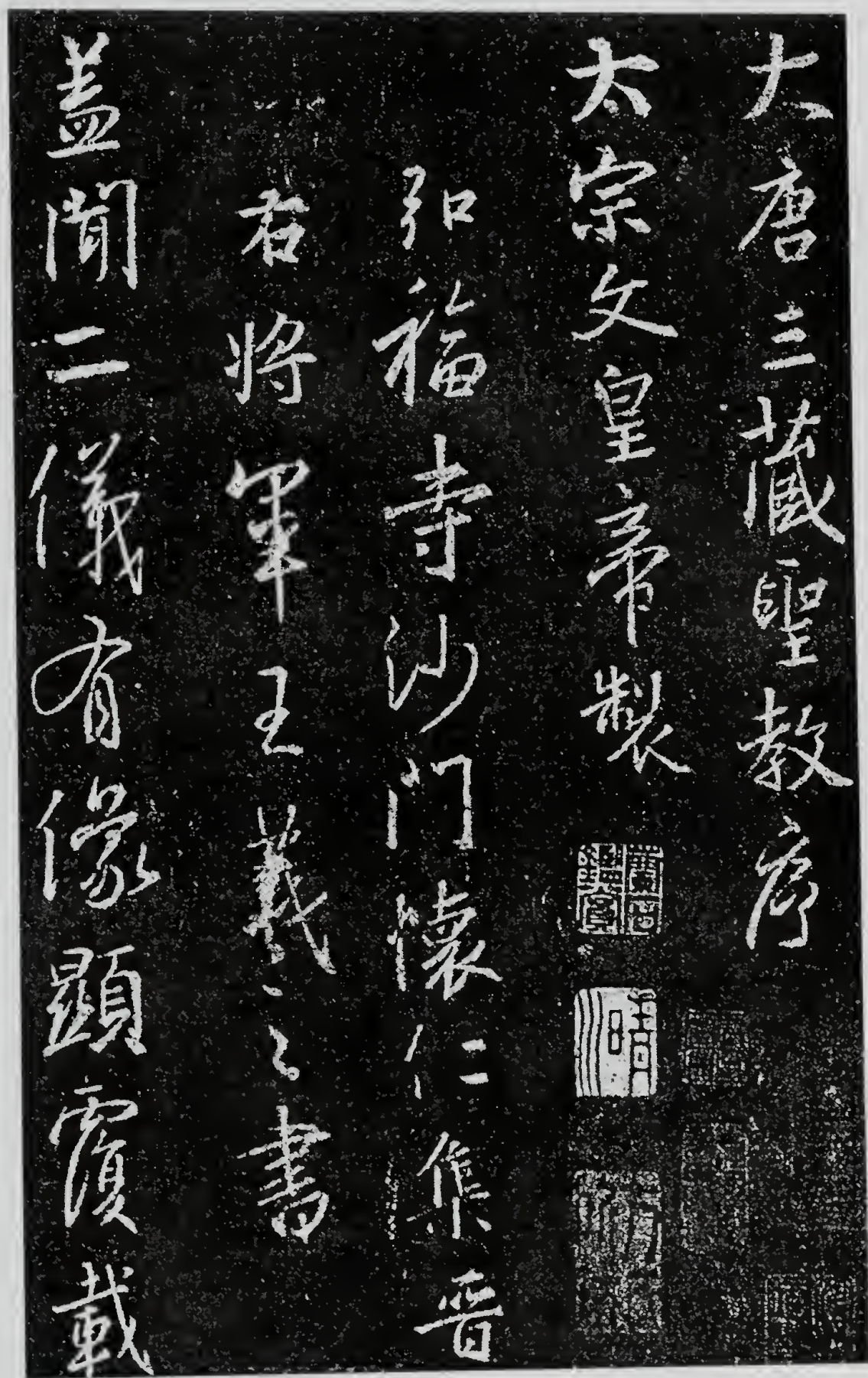
Plate 4.14 *Stele of the Preface to the Great Tang Buddhist Canon in Running Script* (大唐三藏圣教序) compiled by Monk Huairen (怀仁和尚)

天地玄黃宇宙洪荒日月盈昃辰宿列張寒來暑往秋收冬藏閏餘成歲律召調陽雲騰致雨露結為霜金生麗水玉出崑崗劍號巨闕珠稱夜光

Plate 4.15 Zhiyong (智永, act. ca. late sixth–seventh century), *Thousand Character Essay* (真草千字文, *Zhencao Qianziwen*)

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集韻卷之二

勑撰□兼□□學□覽校定其音韻緝□□以同□□集一□□□□韻校勘官□□□□三□親□□□賀　虞等奉

敕修定

平聲二

虞第十　元俱切　與模通
模第十一　切　蒙晡
齊第十二　前西切　獨用
佳第十三　居膎切　與皆通
皆第十四　居諧切
灰第十五　呼回切　與咍通
咍第十六　呼來切
眞第十七　之人切　與臻
諄第十八　朱倫切
臻第十九　緇詵切　諄臻通說
文第二十　無分切　與欣通
欣第二十一　許斤切
元第二十二　愚袁切　與痕通
痕第二十三　胡恩切

Plate 5.1 *Jiyun* (集韵) printed in the Song dynasty

各种所有制有了新内涵

【背景】据全国经济普查数据，2004 年国有工业企业实收资本中，国有资本占 77%，集体资本占 0.3%，法人资本占 22.1%，个人和外商资本占 0.7%；而规模以上私营工业企业实收资本中，个人资本占 72.6%，国有资本占 0.1%，集体资本占 1.1%，法人资本占 25.4%，外商资本占 0.6%。

观点：当前国有经济、集体经济等公有制经济和个体、私营、外资等私有制经济，已经与过去人们所理解的公有制和私有制有相当大的区别，被赋予了新内涵、新形式。

陈永杰：当前，各种所有制经济的内涵发生巨变，首先，相当部分的国有经济已经变为国有控股的混合所有制经济。其次，农村和城镇集体企业大都改为私营企业或股份合作制企业。第三，大中型私营企业，已大多成为私营有限责任公司和股份有限公司，发展成一种混合所有制经济。第四，新兴经济社会组织构成了新型的社会经济和公众经济，比如目前全国有 50 多家基金管理公司，管理着 300 多支基金，基金投资人达 8000 多万，基金投资的市值总规模超过 3 万亿元，已经成为中国证券市场最大的社会投资主体，这些公司多数产权或最终产权是多元的、公众的，管理经营是社会的、独立的、自主的，具有很大的公有制性质。

赵振华：的确如此，我们绝不能再用传统的公有、私有划分的观念来看待当今的中国经济，必须树立全新的所有制经济观念。特别是公有制，其内涵正在不断变化，一方面，一些社会所有制企业不断出现，比如，在浙江、上海等地出现了从大中型私营企业转化成的各种有限责任公司和股份有限公司，股

Plate 5.2 *People's Daily* (人民日报海外版 *Renming ribap haiwaiban*, March 21, 2008). The printing fonts here are used by other newspapers nationwide.

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