Calligraphy at the Close of the Chinese Empire

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The latter half of the Qing dynasty saw crucial developments in the history of Chinese painting; changes in calligraphy were at least as radical and revolutionary as those in painting. The period before the close of the empire was one of the most decisive epochs in the entire history of calligraphy in China . In order to introduce some of the salient changes in calligraphy during this period we will raise three questions: What happened? Why did it happen? What was achieved?

What happened?

A comparison of two representative pieces of calligraphy can give a first impression of what occurred . Figure 1 shows the beginning of a handscroll written in 1796 by Liu Yong (1719-1804).[1] A highly placed educational administrator, Liu Yong was one of the elite officials in the empire; he was also a nationally renowned calligrapher . His work is full of references to the orthodox tradition and the text is a commentaryon the works of thefounders of this tradition, WangXizhi (303-361) and his son Wang Xianzhi (344-388). It was composed by Su Shi (1037-1101) in response to a poem by Mi Fu (1052-1107), both major masters of the orthodox tradition. Liu Yong emulates the style of Su Shi.The characters are written in a slightly cursive regular type *(kaishu),* as was typical for Song dynasty calligraphy; the strokes are supple and the compositions self-contained.

At the very moment that this piece was written, an enormous change in the practice of calligraphy had already begun to take place, exemplified by thework shown in Figure 2. Itwas written in1810 by Yi Bingshou (1754-1815), after he had retired from his career as a prefectural magistrate.[2]

The startling Figure 2 begins with two large characters, *guxiang* (fragrance of antiquity).They are written in the *guli* (old clerical) script and seem to hang down from the upper edge. The forceful ring in the first character looks like forged iron. Eight lines then

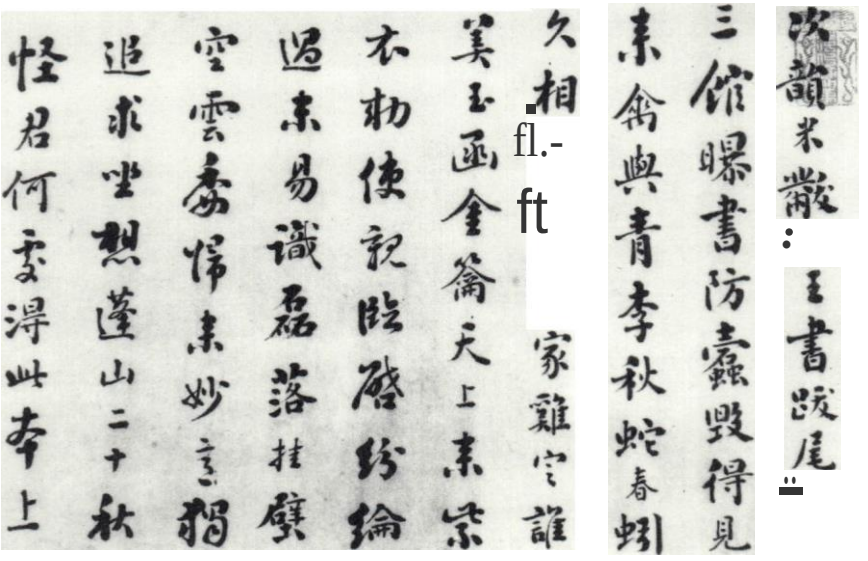

Figure 1. Liu Yong (1719-1804),
Colophon to the Calligraphy of the Two Wangs.
Handscroll, dated 1796.

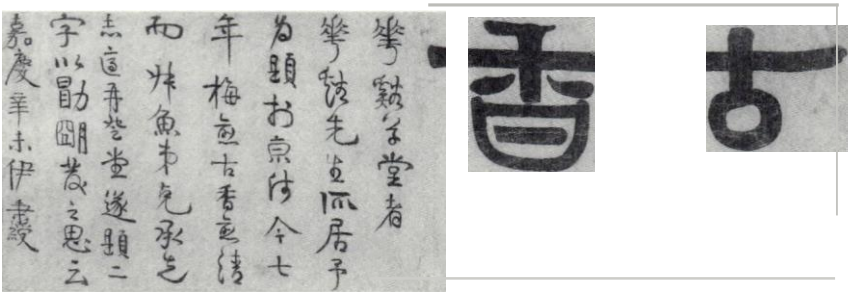

Figure 2. Yi Bingshou (1754-1815), *The Fragrance of Antiquity.*
Handscroll, dated 18n. The Art Museum, Princeton University.
Gift of Jeanette Shambaugh Elliott Collection.

follow in a brittle yet stately running script. It is full of features that challenge the well-known traditional rules. Most glaring is the odd mixture of script types. Although most of the characters are written in a running script, some exhibit a very formal, regular shape (fourth line, first character) while others display elements of the clerical type (last line, third character). Some look deliberately awkward (third line, fourth character). Although this calligraphy does not on the whole look quite as strange as some other examples, nonetheless it would have made Wang Xizhi turn in his grave. However, Yi Bingshou's calligraphy actually is neither weird nor childish; on the contrary it is most sophisticated. His intention was to imbue the movements of his brush with the 'fragrance of antiquity,' and if you look long enough you may decide that he succeeded.

The orthodox tradition to which Liu Yong belonged reigned supreme from the fourth century for almost a millennium and a half. It was only seriously challenged in the middle of the eighteenth century when a revolutionary school arose. It called itself *beixue,* the school of stelae, because its masters such as Yi Bingshou took writings on stone stelae as their models. The new school in a somewhat derogatory spirit labelled the orthodox school, *tiexue,* school of handwritten pieces. Though they initiated new styles, this new crop of calligraphers would not have been Chinese had they not legitimized their changes by recalling antiquity, arguing that the ultimate aim of their revolutionary thrust was to preserve ancient values.

The differences between the two schools were brought about and sanctioned by a change in the canon of the pieces that the respective schools held to be masterpieces, and which their adherents studied as models. Figures 3 - 6 illustrate examples from these two canons. In the eighteenth century Emperor Qianlong made great efforts to reestablish a canon for the orthodox tradition. In his palace he brought together thousands of calligraphic pieces. From them he selected three which he cherished as his and his empire's supreme treasures.' He kept them in his private studio, called Sanxi Tang (Hall of the Three Treasures). A few dozen other selected pieces, also considered exceptional masterworks and models worthy to be handed down for study by further generations, were engraved into stone by order of the Emperor in 1747- The stones are preserved in a pavilion in Beihai Park west of the Palace. The collection of rubbings taken from these stones was called the *Sanxi Tang Fatie,* 'Model writings in the Hall of the Three

Treasures.' The rubbings were distributed as models at court and throughout the empire.Theyformed a canon, embodying the stylistic and aesthetic standards of the *tiexue.*

In this canonWangXizhi and members of his family weresupreme. Except for one piece, the first fifteen pieces in the first volume of the collection are all by him, by his son Wang Xianzhi, and by another member of the Wang family. So were the 'Three Treasures' in Qianlong 's private studio. Subsequent volumes contain pieces by later masters of the orthodox tradition. The last four volumes consist exclusively of writings by Dong Qichang (1555-1636), the last great heir of this school.

Figure 3 is one piece byWangXizhi that was cut into stone in this collection. It is a letter called *XingrangTie,* now in the Art Museum of Princeton University, the only early copy of a work byWang Xizhi in a Western collection .' It displays supple brush stro kes, harmonious character composition, and easily flowing lines. Figure 4 illustrates a rubbing from the stone-cut. The piece is embedded in colophons, especially by Emperor Qianlong and Dong Qichang. One of Qianlong's colophons is visible on the left side of Figure 3. As an homage, the colophon writers copied and paraphrased Wang Xizhi's style.

The canon of pieces which the *beixue* masters considered worthy of study looked quite different. In their search for new models they went beyond the fourth century AD, when the Wang Xizhi tradition had started, back into remote antiquity. They studied stone stelae of the Han dynasty and the even earlier stelae of the First Emperor of Qin.They also turned to inscriptions on bronzes, which were considerably older still. Moreover , the *beixue* masters studied those stone inscriptions which in the crucial period between the Han and Tang dynasties had developed in the North, parallel to but without contact with the Wang Xizhi tradition in the south.The content of these northern inscriptions was primarily Buddhist.

Figures 5 and 6 are examples from the *beixue* canon .The group of stelae in Figure 5 are from the Buddhist monasteryYunjusi in Fang shan county near Beijing. Although these stones are not very old, dating from the Tang to the Qing dynasty, the y convey an idea of what such stone stelae looked like and where they stood. Figure 6 shows a section of a rubbing from the *Yishan Bei,* the Stele on Mount Yi, one of the stones which the First Emperor of Qin erected to commemorate the unification of the realm.' The original stelaeare all lost.The*Yishan*

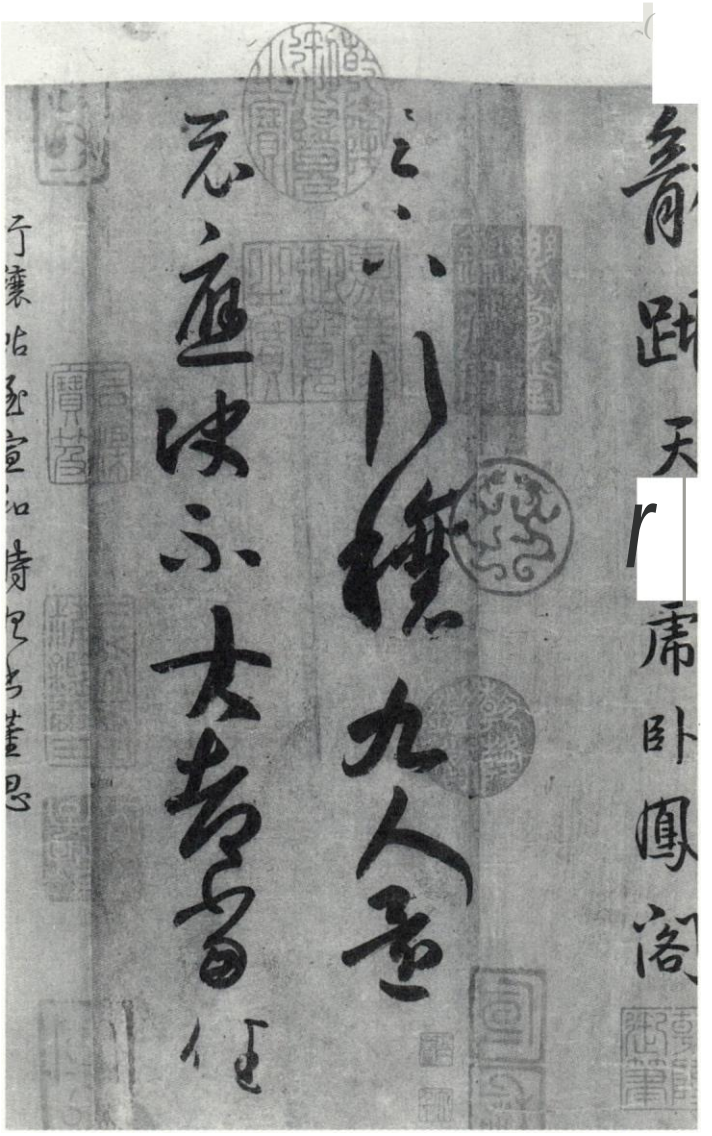

Figure 3. *Xin grangTie,*Tang dynasty copy afterWang Xizhi (303-361). Handscroll.The Art Museum , Princeton University. Anonymous loan. Photo by Bruce M.W hite.

Figure 4 . *XingrangTie.* Rubbing from *San.xi Tang Fatie,* dated 1747.

Bei , however, is transmitted in a famous recut done in AD 993, and today preserved in the 'Stele Forest at Xi' an' (Xi' *an Beilin).*The script is called small seal script *(xi aozhuan).*

In addition to differing in their historical range , the canons of the two schools distinguish themselves in still other respects. There is a difference with regard to the preferences of the script types. The orthodox canon emphasizes the regular *(kaishu)* type but even more the cursive *(xin gshu)* and draft scripts *(caoshu).* In the canon of the stele school one also finds regular script but only rar ely cursive types. Instead, archaic scripts gained pro minence , such as clerical script *(lishu),* seal script *(z huanshu),* and finally the script on oracle bones *(jiagu wen).*There is also a difference in writing materials.The canonical pieces of the *tiexue* are usually written with brush and ink on silk or paper.The canonical pieces of the *beixue* , by contra st, are engraved on durable materials such as stone, bronze, or bricks.

From this follows a crucial difference in the mode of tran smission. Many masterpieces of the *tiexue,* especially the earlier ones, are only transmitted as copies. Not a single work by Wang Xizhi's own hand, for example, is believed to have come down to us. Yet thousands

Figure 5. Inscribed stone stelae, Tang to Qing dynasties.
Yunjusi, Fangshan county.

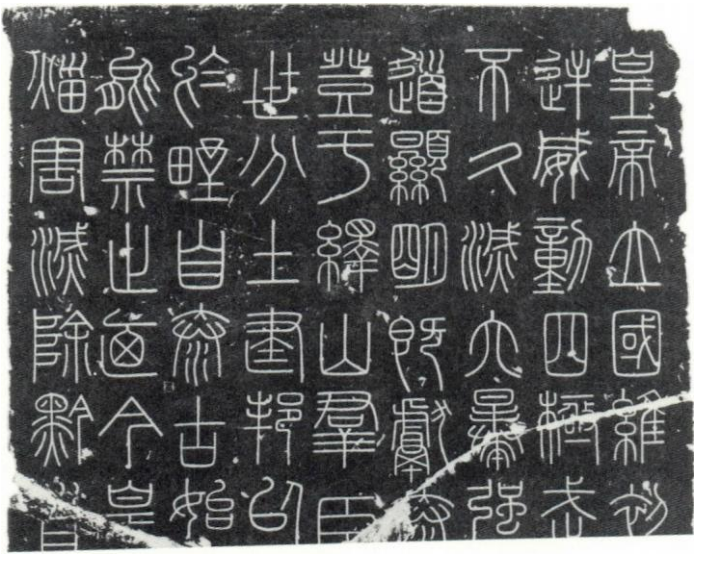

Figure 6. *Yishan Bei*, detail of rubbing. Recur of AD 993, detail.

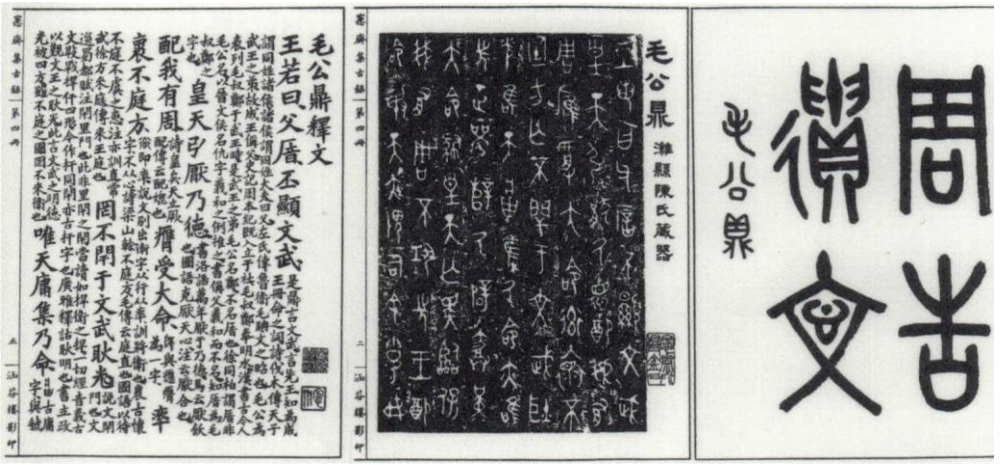

Figure 7. Inscription in *Maogong Ding*, from *Kezhai Jigu Lu*, chapter 4, dated 1886.

of inscriptions on stones and bronzes still exist and new ones come to light all the time. Furthermore, there are major social differences. The calligraphers who created the works that the *tiexue* masters took as their models were on the whole members of the literati class, many of them prominent officials and politidans. The calligraphers who wrote on bronze and stone, however, were often anonymous. We would call many of them artisans or even workers.

As far as content is concerned, works of the *tiexue* are also mostly typical products of the literati class. There are many poems and personal letters. The texts of the canonical *beixue* works, by contrast , contain much information of public interest, often of historical significance, and sometimes of immense political importance. There are also many religious texts.

Finally there are major differences in the aesthetic standards embodied in the two canons. The *tiexue* works strive to be elegant, fluent, polished, refined, whereas pieces of the *beixue* tend to look archaic, tectonic, rustic, forceful, and unrefined.

Why did it happen?

If we now ask why those changes in the canon came about, we have first to look at intellectual history in general and then at archaeology in particular. The dominant current of intellectual history from the eighteenth century was *hanxue*, that movement which propagated pragmatic and critical scholarship based on empirical investigation.

As for many centuries, classical Confucian texts were the center of *hanxue* studies. But new methods were used. In an attempt to establish authentic versions of the classical texts, the *hanxue* scholars embarked on systematic philological, philological, etymological, palaeographical, and historical studies. Thus they came close to scientific debate and thinking in the modern sense. While searching empirically for authentic material the *hanxue* scholars collected and investigated all kinds of ancient inscriptions. This branch of knowledge was called *jinshi xue*, 'study of [inscriptions on] metal (mostly bronze) and stone.' We would translate it as 'epigraphy.' For our argument it is important to note that the interest of the epigraphists was not a purely philological one only directed at the content of the inscriptions. They were also studying the shapes of the characters. The epigraphical material was collected in compendia, some of them very voluminous. An early example is the *Xiqing Gujian* in forty volumes, the catalog of the bronzes in the imperial collection. The compilation began at Qianlong's order in 1749. It made use of a refined technique of copperplate engraving that had recently been introduced from the West. The compendia often contained reproductions of rubbings of the inscriptions. Thus, they were important means for disseminating knowledge about the archaic character shapes.

Figure 7 shows pages from the *compendium Kezhai Jigulu*, completed in 1886 by the great epigraphist Wu Dacheng (1835-1902). It is the beginning of the inscription in the famous bronze cauldron *Maogong Ding* from the late Western Zhou period. With its 497 characters it is even today the longest bronze inscription known. Wu Dacheng transcribes the text into *kaishu*, and inserts his commentary in two small parallel lines. Yet he first reproduces a rubbing which allows the reader to see the shapes of all the characters.

Figure 8 is a page from *the Jinshi Suo*, a collection of bronzes and other antiques edited by the two brothers Feng Yunpeng and Feng Yunyuan in 1821. The lock for a crossbow is, like all those objects, primarily interesting because of its inscription. The text is reproduced

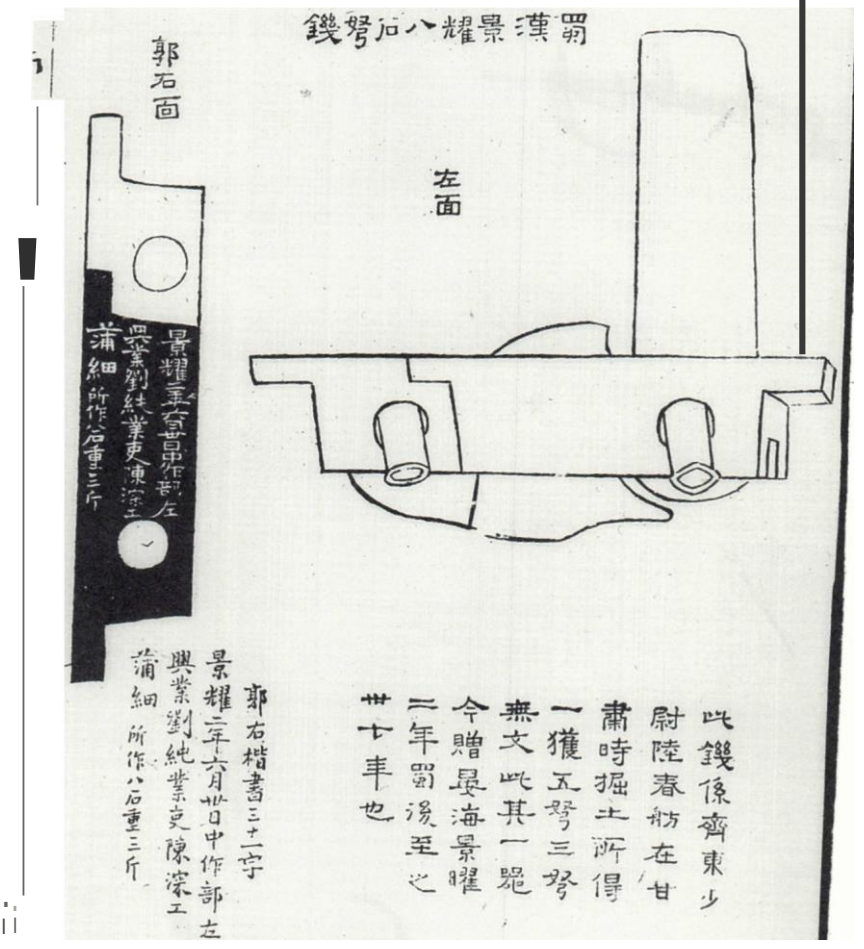

Figure 8. Lock of crossbow, *fromjinshi Suo*, chapter 2, dated 1821.

and transcribed .Yet *the]inshi Suo* also provides a drawing of the piece. Indeed, the level of information reached in these compendia is similar to that in a modern catalog with photographs. We have noticed that Qing dynasty epigraphists were not pure philologists but studied the shapes of characters on their objects, too. Nowwe see that, in addition, they were concerned with the object itself.That means they were archa:ologists . At the period in question there were many major archa:ological discoveries. In fact, those discoveries may have prompted the interest in epigraphy in the first place. Many of the inscriptions which the *beixue* masters used as models only became known through archa:ological finds. The above-mentioned *Maogong Ding* is one of many bronzes excavated in Shaanxi in the Daoguang period (1821-1850).Another famous bronze from Shaanxi whose true value was only discovered in this period is the *GuoJi ZiBo Pan* from the lateWestern Zhou period. It had been used for a while as water basin in a horse stable.[6]

Among the many stone inscriptions that were archa:ologically discovered in this period, the tombstone for Diao Zun, dated 517, was found in Hebei in the Yongzheng period (1723-1735).[7] The tomb stone for Gao Zhan dated 539, was excavated in Shandong in1749, when part of the embankment of the Grand Canal broke down.[8] Both inscriptions were heralded as prime examples of the calligraphic style of the Northern dynasties.

One can argue that modern Chinese archa:ologystarted in the latter half of the Qing dynasty and that present-day archa:ologists are still indebted to, even under the spell of, their eighteenth and nineteenth-century foreru nners : they place heavy emphasis on inscriptions and use them to correct traditional textual auth ority; the y stress that the pieces were produced by anonymous ar tisans; and th ey use archa:-ological discoveries to bolster national self-esteem.

Whatwas achieved?

One of the earliest and one of the greatest masters of the *beixue* was Deng Shiru (1743-1805). Indeed , he may be called the greatest calligrapher of the Qing Dynasty. A comprehensive modern study of him quotes eighty-nine enthusiastic appraisals of his calligraphy, written from his lifetime until the present: Probably no other Qing dynasty calligrapher has had such good press. Figu re 9 is a section from an early hanging scroll by Deng Shiru , dated 178r.[10] The ultimate model

in this case was the small seal script of the stone inscriptions of the First Emperor of Qin. Yet Deng Shim did not study those alone. The charming geometry in his characters proves that he must also have known later versions of this type of script, such as the works by Li Yangbing (eighth century AD),[11] the tenth century recut of the *YishanBei* (see figure 6) or the *Thousand Character Essay* by Meng Ying[12] from the same period. In any case, Deng conformed to the regularity of his models. He used a pure grid pattern with straight vertical and horizontal columns. His characters all are regular in size and composition. His strokes, with geometrical curves, are drawn like iron wire; that is, they are of regular width; beginnings and ends are not emphasized.

Deng Shim was not the only Qing calligrapher who closely followed the classical models of seal script. Earlier masters such as Wang Shu (1668-1739) and Qian Dian (1741-1806) wrote in a similarly pleasant but somewhat uninspired way. Indeed, there exists a piece by Qian Dian, which is all but indistinguishable from the one by Deng Shim shown in Figure 9.[13]

From this early style Deng Shim took off on one of the most fascinating artistic careers of any Chinese calligrapher. By studying ever more models and by writing them ever more freely, Deng gradually revealed himself to be the genius whom we now revere.[14] This is not the place to follow his development in detail, but we should at least examine one of *his* late masterpieces. Figure 10 shows the first panel of a six-panel screen done in 1804, one year before his death.[15] The overall composition of vertical and horizontal columns is still regular, yet a slight rhythm pervades the entire piece. The uppermost characters in the two vertical columns, for example, do not stand exactly on the same horizontal level, and the two characters in the horizontal column below tilt slightly away from each other. In the compositions of the characters there is no longer any trace of stiffness. The purely geometrical forms of Deng's youth have gone. Almost none of the vertical strokes run down in a completely perpendicular direction, nor are the horizontal strokes perfectly horizontal. Each character has its individual, sophisticated balance. For example, in the penultimate character in the second line (ren) the right 'leg' is drawn out longer than the left one. Deng also tends to differentiate clearly the parts that make up a character, such as the left and right hand part. The two parts in the penultimate character in the first line *(you)* each have a separate weight, but together they form a tectonic unit.

The brush strokesform inner spaces between them. Agood example is the second character *di* . The inner spaces are not only a byproduct but have acquired a shape in their own right. This is one of the hallmarks of a master calligrapher. The strokes no longer resemble iron wires, but rather iron bars, bent with an incredible energy.Their simple and disciplined shapes vibrate with life. In the *ren* character the stroke is strongest at the most intensive turn of the curve, as if to emphasize the force that is necessary to bend it.To be able to inforce the energy in the turn of a stroke by the very shape of the stroke is another hallmark of the master calligrapher.

With the forceful and tectonic calligraphy of his old age Deng Shiru had moved a long way from the timid performance of his youth . He liberated himself from his models, but emulated them creatively. Yet we should go beyond saying that Deng used his models creatively; we should try and describe even more precisely how he did it and what he achieved. When Deng Shiru and many other *beixue* masters wrote in ancient script types such as the seal script, they availed themselves of stylistic features that had only developed much later in the history of calligraphy in the cursive types of script. The very fact that they wrote archaic script types preserved on metal and stone with brush and ink on paper was a deliberate anachronism. In Deng Shiru's forceful work of 1804 one can identify such stylistic features that are borrowed from later types. The grid pattern of the columns has loosened up, the composition of the characters is delicately balanced, and, above all, the strokes reveal the movements of the elastic hair brush.There are slight modulations in their width and sometimes they have a rugged contour resulting from the (relatively) speedy movement of the brush.

The synthesis of different types of script which the *beixue* masters achieved is even more apparent in thefollowingjuxtaposition. Figure n shows a section from a rubbing of the second Stone Drum.[10]The Stone Drums *(Shigu)* date from the eighth century BC and carry the earliest extant stone inscriptions in China. They were rediscovered in the Tang dynasty. Again we see a regular grid in the columns and the strokes are of even width, yet the compositions are less geometrical than those of the later small seal script on the *Yishan Bei* (figur e 6). Figure 12 is a copy of this drum inscription by Wu Changshuo (1844 - 192 7) , one of the great late masters of the *beixue. " W u* Changshuo wrote the Stone Drum inscriptions all his life. This version dates from

Figure 9. Deng Shiru (1743-1805),
Calligraphy: A Poem. Hanging scroll, dated 1781. Shanghai Museum.

Figure 10. Deng Shiru (1743-1805),
Baishi CaotangJi. Screen of six panels, dated 1804.

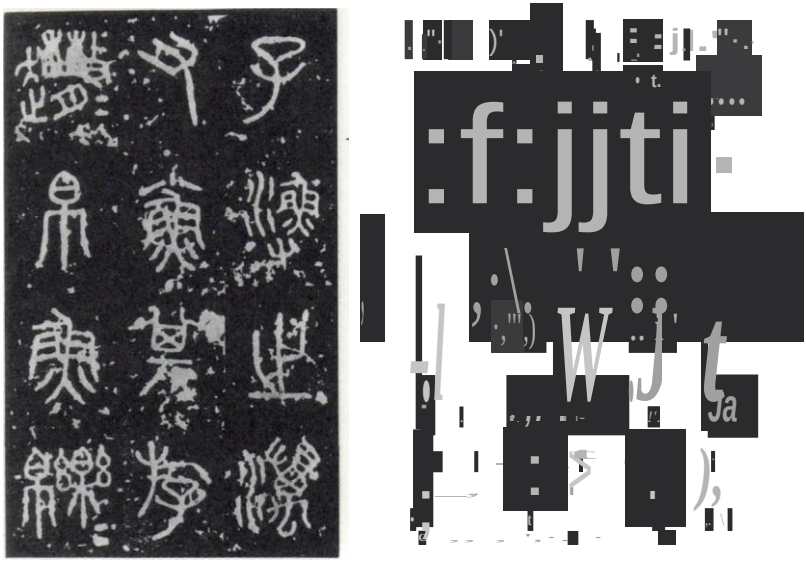

Figure 11.*The Second Stone Drum*. Rubbing. Eighth century BC.

1912. Like previous masters, he creatively changes his model, by drawing on expressive values from cursive types of script. Wu retains the vertical columns, but eliminates the horizontal columns of the model. A lively rhythm thus permeates his entire work. In the composition of single characters, in the number and relative position of the strokes, Wu Changshuo follows the structures of his model. However, his characters are less stable than those of the original stone drums. He gives them a different balance and often tilts them in such a way that the upper right corner is pushed slightly upwards. This compositional device is normally only used in the speedily written regular *kaishu* , and more especially in the cursive *xingshu* and *caoshu.* In writing single strokesWu Changshuo borrows even more obviously from later types of script. He often emphasizes their beginnings and modulates their width and shape. To some of *his* strokes he gives a rugged contour and a splintery quality, evoking an antique flavor. Yet he does not try to imitate the appearance of worn stone engravings slavishly. Rather he makes creative use of the specific possibilities of the elastic hair brush. Some strokes even showsome 'flying white' *(Jeibai).* Wu Chang-

Figure 12.Wu Changshuo (1844-1927),
The Second Stone Drum. Hanging scroll, dated 1912.

shuo thus allows himself much freedom in the execution of his strokes. But this freedom is by no means without restriction. It is constrained and guided by the particular properties of brush and ink and by many years of discipline in handling other types of script.

When oracle bones were discovered at Anyang in 1899 some calligraphers started to copy the characters on them.They attempted to amalgamate this most ancient type of script with features oflater types. Calligraphy based on oracle bone characters became at once the most modern calligraphic style, and at the same time the style that referred most clearly to remote antiquity. By then the masters of the *bei xue* had swung full circle. They had brought all of Chinese script into the sphere of calligraphy.

In applying technical and stylistic standards of writing with the brush to the sort of script that was originally done on metal and stone and finally even bone, the Qing masters greatly extended the boundaries of the realm of traditional literati calligraphy.They projected the aesthetic standards of the literati tradition backwards into vast areas in the history ofwriting that had not previouslybeen part of this tradition . In this way they created a coherent aesthetic world that encompassed all phases of Chinese script. In a period of political destabilization the Qing calligraphers thus reinforced the unity of Chinese culture.

And one last thought: one could say that epigraphical and archac:ological studies spurred a radical modernization of Chinese calligraphy. This happened in a period in which modernization in China almost inevitably implied western ization . One cannot westernize calligraphy, however. The changes which the Qing dynasty calligraphers achieved are a paradigm for an autonomous modernization process in China that was independent ofWestern values.

Notes

1. *Shodo Zenshu* (Tokyo, 1966-69), XXI, plates 88-89. For Liu Yong, see Arthur W Hummel editor, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington DC, 1943-44), I, 536-537.
2. Fu Shen, *Traces of the Brush: Studies in Chinese Calligraphy* (New Haven CT, 1977), numbers 79, 76; and Nakata Yujiro and Fu Shen, *Obei Shuzo Chugoku Hosho Meisekishu* (Tokyo, 1981-1983), *Min Shin hen*, II, plate 93. For Yi Bingshou see *Shodo Zenshii*, XXIV, 170.
3. The *Kuaixue Shiqing Tie* by Wang Xizhi, the *Zhongqiu Tie* by Wang Xianzhi, and the *Boyuan Tie* by Wang Xun (349-400).
4. Fu Shen, *Traces of the Brush*, numberra; and Nakata and *Fu, Obei Shuz/5*, I, plates r-6.
5. Reproduced in Nishikawa Yasushi editor, *Seian Hirin* (Tokyo, 1966), plates ro9-no.
6. *Shodi5Zenshii*, I, plate 73; *Kinbun Shu3 (Shoseki Meihin Sokan* 3/120) (Tokyo, 1964), number 376. Also Jessica Rawson, *Western Zhou Ritual Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections* (Washington DC and Cambridge MA, 1990), 153, and 138 for bronze finds in Shaanxi.
7. *Shodo Zenshu*, VI (*Nanbokucho* II), plate 59.
8. *Shodo Zenshu*, VI (*Nanbokuchon*), plate 86.
9. Mu Xiaotian and Xujiaqiong, *Deng Shiru Yanjiu Ziliao* (Beijing, 1988).
10. Reproduced in Deng Yizhi editor, *Deng Shiru Fashu Xuanji* (Beijing, 1964), plate 6.
11. See Li Yangbing's *Sanfenji* of 767 in the Xi'an Beilin. Reproduced in *Seian Hirin*, plates 83-84.
12. *Shodi5Zenshii, xv (Chugoku* ro, *So* I), 8, figure n. For the different historical and stylistic layers in Qing dynasty seal script see Lothar Ledderose, 'An Approach to Chinese Calligraphy,' *National Palace Museum Bulletin*, VII, number r (March/April 1972), 1-14.
13. *Shodo Zenshu*, XXIV (*Chugoku* 14, *Shin* 11), plate 15.
14. For an analysis of Deng Shiru's stylistic development see Lothar Ledderose, *Die Siegelschrift (chuan-shu) in der Ch'ing-Zeit: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der chinesischen Schriftkunst* (*Studien zur Ostasiatischen Schriftkunst* r) (Wiesbaden, 1970), 70-82.
15. *ShinToKanpakuHakuShi Si5di5ki (Shoseki M eihin Sokan165)* (Tokyo, 1971), 3.
16. *ShuSekikobun (Shosek i Meihin Sokan* 4) (Tokyo, 1964), plates 16-17. For the stone drums see the comprehensive study by Gilbert L. Mattos, *The Stone Drums of Ch'in* (*Monumenta Serica Monograph series* XIX) (Nettetal, 1988).
17. *Shodo Zenshu*, XXIV, plate 92.