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*Frederick W. Mote, Ch'en Pao-chen, W. F. Anita Siu, "Part A: Early Forms of Writing", The Gest Library Journal 2, no. 2 (1988): 19-34, accessed January 14, 2017, [https://library.princeton.edu/eastasian/EALJ/goodman\\_howard\\_1.EALJ.v02.n02.p001.1.0.pdf](https://library.princeton.edu/eastasian/EALJ/goodman_howard_1.EALJ.v02.n02.p001.1.0.pdf)*

## Part A. Early Forms of Writing

Writing has been independently invented perhaps four or five times in human history, yet only two of those inventions led to mature script systems capable of writing down the full range of speech and literary expression. One was the interrelated writing systems of the ancient Mediterranean world, of about six thousand years ago, from which eventually emerged the first phonetic alphabet. What we know today as Minoan Linear B probably was that script. It appeared sometime after 2000 B.C. and led to the alphabetic scripts used throughout the world. In East Asia those include the Tibetan, Uighur, Mongolian, Manchu, and possibly the Hangul phonetic script adapted to Korean in the fifteenth century — if the speculation that it was derived from thirteenth-century Phags-pa script is correct.

The other major system of writing is that invented within the Chinese culture sphere. The earliest known physical remains of early Chinese script are inscribed tortoise shells (*chia*) and animal bones (*ku*) used for divination. “Oracle bone script” (*chia-ku-wen*) was not known until discovered archaeologically early in the present century, and until last year the earliest known examples dated from about 1600 B.C. Examples of oracle bone fragments with incised writing from that period are shown here. Early in 1987 the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences, Beijing, announced an important discovery: inscribed oracle bones found near Sian in 1986 have been dated to the period 3000-2500 B.C. The characters they bear have not yet been fully deciphered, but they clearly are from an earlier phase in the development of oracle-bone script. Until further evidence is found one can only hypothesize about the place and time of this script’s invention.

From the time of oracle-bone script onward, Chinese writing went

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through continuous development. During the formative period of the imperial era, roughly the third century B. C. to the third and fourth centuries A.D., the forms of Chinese writing were standardized. Our material evidence for this period of development comes from bronze vessels dating to Shang and Chou times (ca. 1700 to 250 B.C.), bronze seals from Han, writing done with brush and ink on strips of bamboo and wood (*chien*), and writing done with brush and ink on silk (*po*) for the period before the invention of paper in Former Han dynasty times (204 B.C. to A.D. 9). With *chien* and *po* writings one can begin to speak of "books." Examples of the script in several of these forms, showing a millennium of development, are included in this portion of the exhibit.

The following essay and the accompanying label for no. 1 are by Ch'en; labels no. 4-11 are by Siu; and labels no. 2-3 by Goodman.

## EARLY FORMS OF WRITING

Discovered at Hsiao-t'un, Honan, at the turn of this century, oracle-bone inscriptions (*chia-ku-wen*; see no. 1a) are the fragments of divination records kept by the Shang people of the An-yang period (ca. 14th-11th centuries B. C.).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the inscriptions are the single most important source for the documentation of the Shang civilization. The con-

tents of the inscriptions cover a wide range: from matters of statecraft to the personal concerns of kings.<sup>2</sup> As the oracle bones attest, through an involved process of scapulimancy diviners would seek verification of predictions regarding political and court matters.

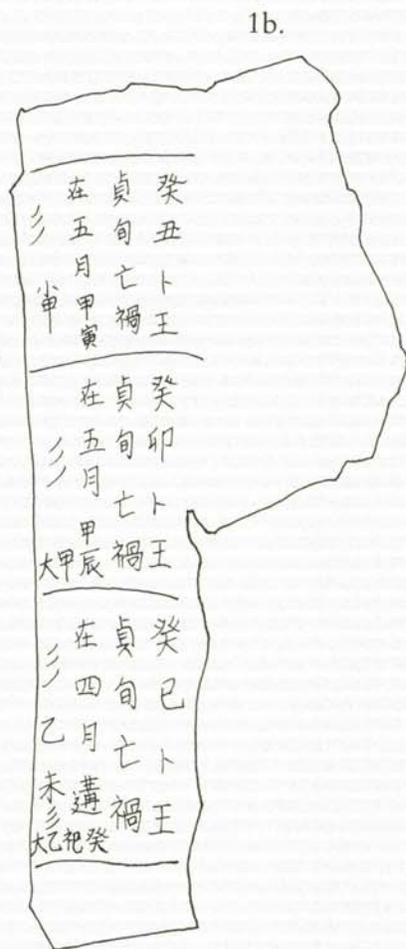
As far as archaeologists can reconstruct, the divining process took several steps. First, the preparatory diviner (*pu-jen*) would drill a series of shallow indentations in the back of a prepared ox scapula (shoulder blade) or turtle plastron (shell). He then would apply a hot brand to each indentation, causing cracks to appear on the front surface of the bone or shell.

1a-b. *Chia-ku-wen*. Inscribed characters on bone (a); modern transcription of text by Howard L. Goodman (b).

Date: 13th c. B.C., Shang dynasty, An-yang period.

Dimensions: 12.07 x 5.41 cm.

Collection: Gest Oriental Library (P. 78).



Thereupon, another diviner would pose questions.<sup>3</sup> The first diviner would then read the cracks and interpret the patterns; his "readings" would be written beside the cracks with a brush dipped in ink or in vermilion pigment. Sometimes the actual outcome of the divined event would later also be recorded as appended marginalia to the given interpretation. In most cases, the written text was likely to have been incised on the spot with a sharp bronze knife.<sup>4</sup>

The text of most of the oracle-bone inscriptions is succinct and formulaic, as exemplified by three inscriptions on the bone fragment in the collection of the Gest Oriental Library, Princeton University (no. 1a).<sup>5</sup> The inscription begins with a preface, which includes the specific date of divination. (The date is always expressed in the traditional sexagenary cycle, or *kan-chih*.) Following this, the name of the diviner (*chen-jen*) is given. Afterwards, the topic in question appears. And finally, a planned event is mentioned. The first inscription, which appears at the bottom of the shell, reads (see no. 1b for transcriptions into modern Chinese):

On the day *kuei-ssu* a divination took place. The king himself came to inquire: "Will any misfortune happen within this coming ten days?" This divination occurred in the fourth lunar month. The day (*kuei-ssu*) happened to be the exact day scheduled for a *shan*<sup>6</sup> ritual ceremony to worship the deceased king, Ssu-kuei. On the day *i-wei*, there will be another *shan* ceremony given to worship another deceased ancestor, Ta-i.<sup>7</sup>

The second inscription, located in the middle, reads:

On the day *kuei-mao* a divination took place. The king himself came to inquire: "Will any misfortune happen within this coming ten days?" This divination occurred in the fifth lunar month. On the day *chia-ch'en* there will be a *shan* ritual ceremony given to worship the deceased king Ta-chia.<sup>8</sup>

The third inscription, at the top, reads:

On the day *kuei-ch'ou*, a divination took place. The king himself came to inquire: "Will any misfortune happen within this coming ten days?" This divination occurred in the fifth lunar month. On the day *chia-yin* there will be a *shan* ceremony given to worship the deceased king Hsiao-chia.

These three inscriptions are the records of three routine divinations known as *pu-hsün*,<sup>9</sup> which were held every ten days during the fourth and fifth lunar months of the same year.<sup>10</sup> They show common characteristics of form, grammatical structure, and calligraphic style datable to the reign (ca. 13th c. B.C.) of King Tsu-chia, the third to rule in An-yang. (This would be Period II of Tung Tso-pin's five-period scheme of the evolution of oracle-bone inscriptions.)<sup>11</sup> The graphic form of the character for king (*wang*) in these inscriptions is uniformly written with an extra horizontal stroke on top of the conventional shape found in most other Period I inscriptions.<sup>12</sup> In terms of grammatical structure, an extra character, *tsai* (meaning "in"), is found preceding each specified month of the divination; Period I inscriptions with the same context eliminate the character.<sup>13</sup> In terms of calligraphic style, all the characters in these three inscriptions are small, even, carefully carved, and

tightly arranged into a neat and organized composition. Such characteristics contrast with those of Period I, in which characters look large, yet uneven in size, and loosely spaced and not well-ordered.<sup>14</sup>

The graphic change, the grammatical readjustment, and the calligraphic evolution, according to Tung Tso-pin, might have resulted from a ritual and political reform initiated by King Tsu-chia after succeeding his elder brother Tsu-keng to the throne.<sup>15</sup>

Also according to Tung's determination that the *shan* ceremony for Ta-chia in the fifth lunar month (second inscription) was the only one in Tsu-chia's reign, the specific date for the execution of our second inscription should be the eleventh reign year (probably 1258 B.C.).<sup>16</sup> If acceptable, the year would apply to the other two inscriptions, because the three were executed consecutively, all in one month.

NOTES TO SECTION 1  
PART A

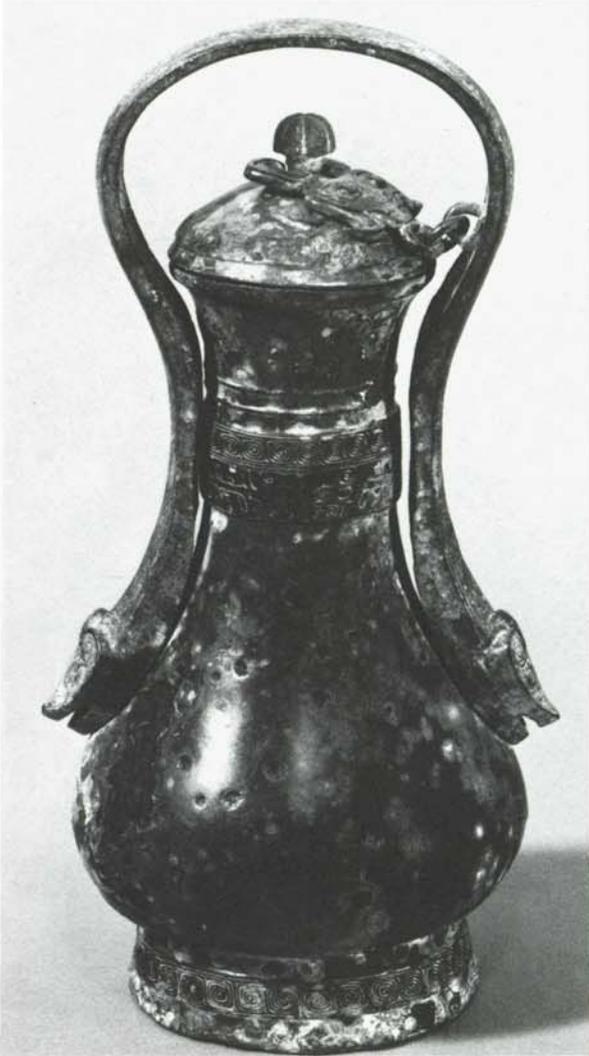
1. For a survey of oracle-bone research, see Tung Tso-pin, *Chia-ku hsüeh liu-shih nien* [Sixty Years of Oracle-bone Studies] (Taipei: I-wen, 1965), pp. 14-45 and the extensive bibliography. There are over 150,000 pieces of oracle bones in public and private collections. They are of different sizes and only some bear inscriptions. Only about 2,000 characters have been identified by scholars in the past 85 years. Important lexical references and dictionaries of these inscriptions are Shima Kunio, *In kyo bokuji sōrui* (Tokyo: Dai'an, 1967), Sun Hai-p'ō, *Chia-ku-wen pien* (Kowloon: Chung-hua, 1978), and Ch'en Meng-chia,

*Yin-hsü pu-tz'u tsung-shu* (Peking: K'o-hsüeh ch'u-pan, 1956).

2. On the importance of oracle-bone inscriptions to the reconstruction of Shang civilization, see Shirakawa Shizuka, *Kōkotsumon no sekai* [The World of Oracle-bone Inscriptions] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1972), including an appended bibliography covering 1900-1970; David Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Los Angeles: U. of California P., 1978); and Kwang-chih Chang, *Shang Civilization* (New Haven: Yale U. P., 1980), pp. 99-105, 329.
3. Tung Tso-pin was the first scholar to discover the names of different diviners and their active periods. See his *Chia-ku hsüeh*, pp. 63-70.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
5. A literal copy of these three inscriptions was published in Frank H. Chalfant and Roswell Britton, *Seven Collections of Inscribed Oracle Bones* (New York: n.p., 1938), Princeton U. section, #78. There are 119 oracle-bone pieces in The Gest Library Collection.
6. The *shan* ceremony is characterized by the use of a drum-like musical instrument; see Tung, *Chia-ku hsüeh*, p. 113.
7. After his death, the king was referred to by a name that corresponded to a day in the *kan-chih* cycle.
8. This inscription was identified and discussed in *ibid.*, p. 110.
9. The *pu-hsün* divination was, as expected, held on every last day (the *kuei*-day) of a ten-day cycle (*hsün*) throughout the An-yang period. For more examples, see *ibid.*, pp. 95-98.
10. Based on the ten-day factor in the *kan-*

- chih* calendrical system, *kuei-ssu*, *kuei-mao*, and *kuei-ch'ou* follow one another directly.
11. For Tung Tso-pin's five-period scheme and the ten criteria, see his *Chia-ku-wen tuan tai yen-chiu li* [Examples of the Periodization of the Evolution of Oracle-Bone Inscriptions] (Peking: Chung-yang yen-chiu-yüan, 1933). For comments and reference to other dating schemes, see Keightley, *Shang Sources*, pp. 91-132.
  12. Tung, *Chia-ku hsüeh*, p. 115.
  13. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
  14. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-02; also see his *Yen-chiu li*. See also Keightley, *Shang Sources*, pp. 104-09.
  15. Tung, *Chia-ku hsüeh*, pp. 103-18.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

EARLY FORMS OF WRITING



2a-b. *Yu* (Wine vessel). Casting in bronze (a); inscription (b).

2b.

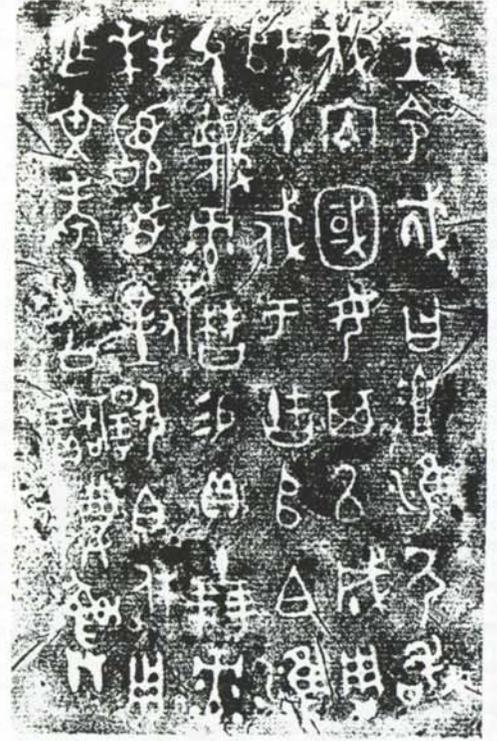
Date: Shang dynasty, An-yang period (14th-11th c. B.C.).

Dimensions: 31.5 x 16 cm.

Collection: The Art Museum, Princeton University. (1965-5).

In this very early example of cast metal calligraphy, the meanings of the four characters themselves are unclear. However, they are still pictographic: notice the shapes of a bow and quiver. This contrasts starkly with the later cast characters (see no. 3b) of the Chou period, which are more abstracted in order to meet standards of writing.

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3a-b. *Yu* (Wine vessel). Casting in bronze (a); inscription (b).

3b.

Date: Western Chou period, ca. 10th c. B.C.

Dimensions: 21.1 x 21.2 cm.

Collection: The Art Museum, Princeton University. (1965-6).

The inscription, cast inside the vessel and its lid, consists of 48 characters, some of which explain that when the owner was rewarded for military merit, the vessel was cast to honor his deceased father. This is an important document of Western Chou history. The characters are different from the previous example in their rectiform and regularized appearance. Uniformity of composition and size came with the decrease in pictorial representation.

> 4a-b. *Standard measure*. Casting (a); rubbing of inscription in small-seal script (b).

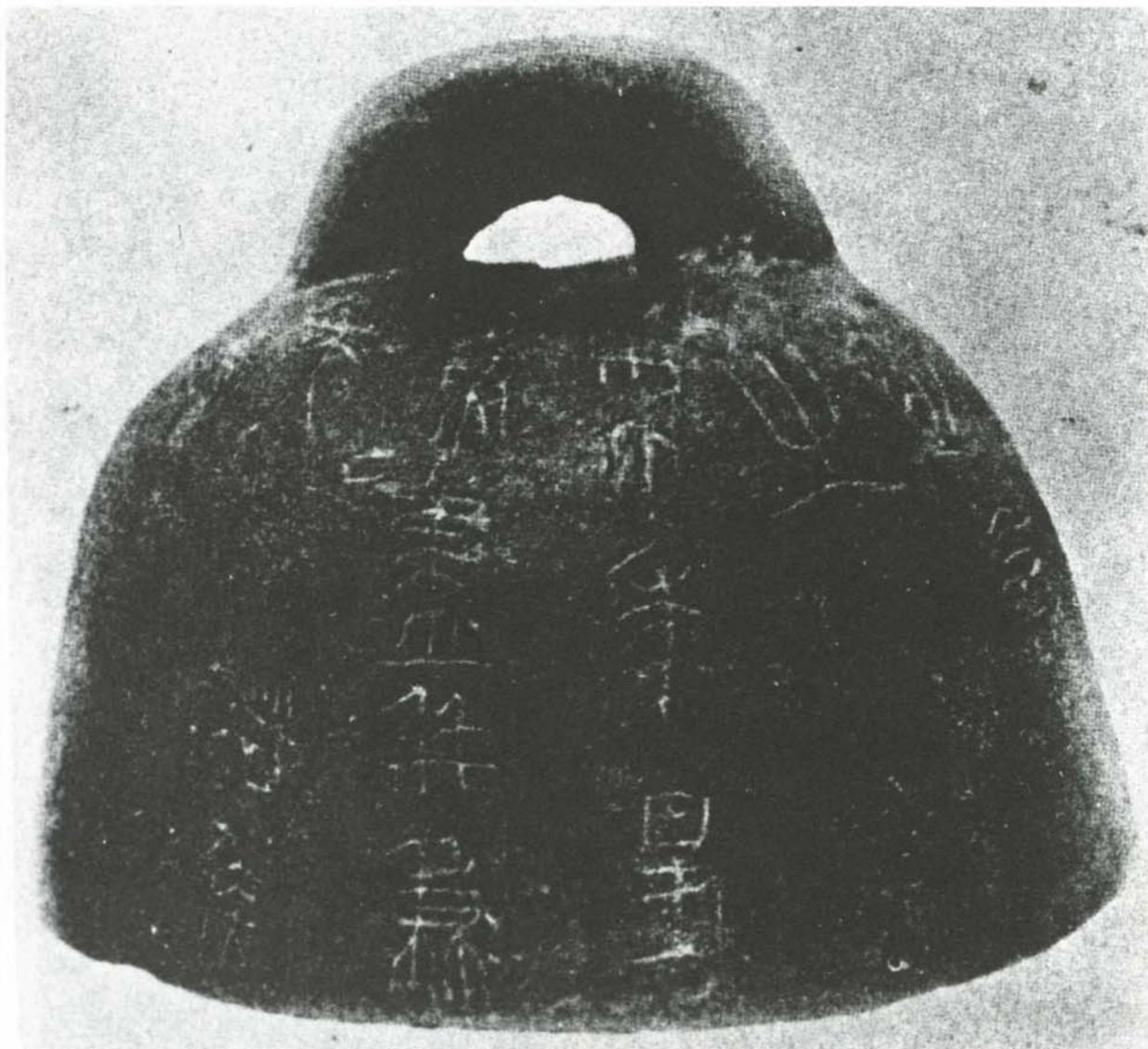
Date: Ch'in dynasty, early 3rd c. B.C.

Dimensions: 31 cm in width.

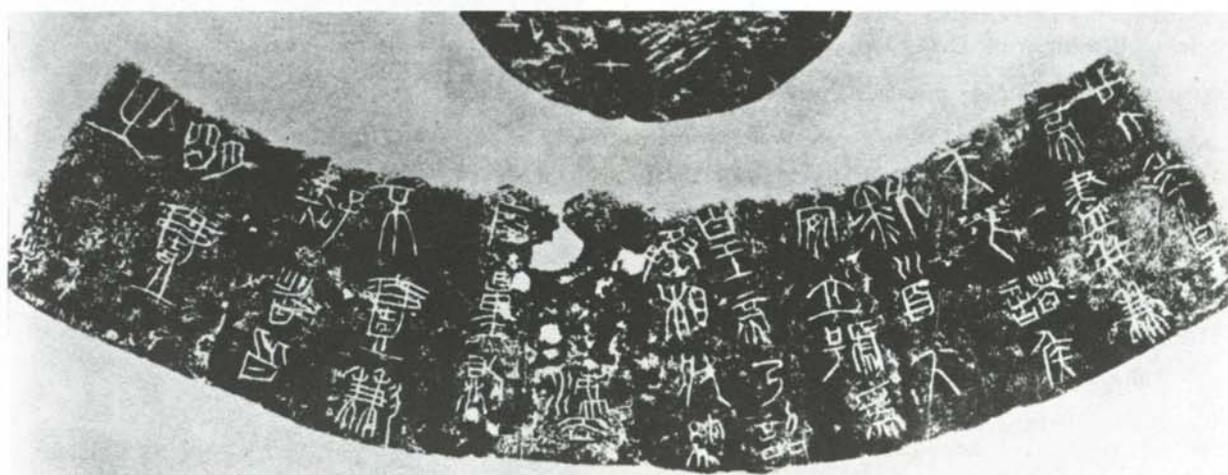
Source: Kanda Kiichirō et al., *Shodō zenshū* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1958), vol. 1, no. 138.

Inscribed on an official standard measure of weight in the Ch'in dynasty, the small seal script, a simplified seal script, represented here is unadorned and utilitarian in function. The elongated form is matched by a rectilinear configuration and thin consistent strokes. The unarticulated placement of characters conveys a primitive feeling.

EARLY FORMS OF WRITING

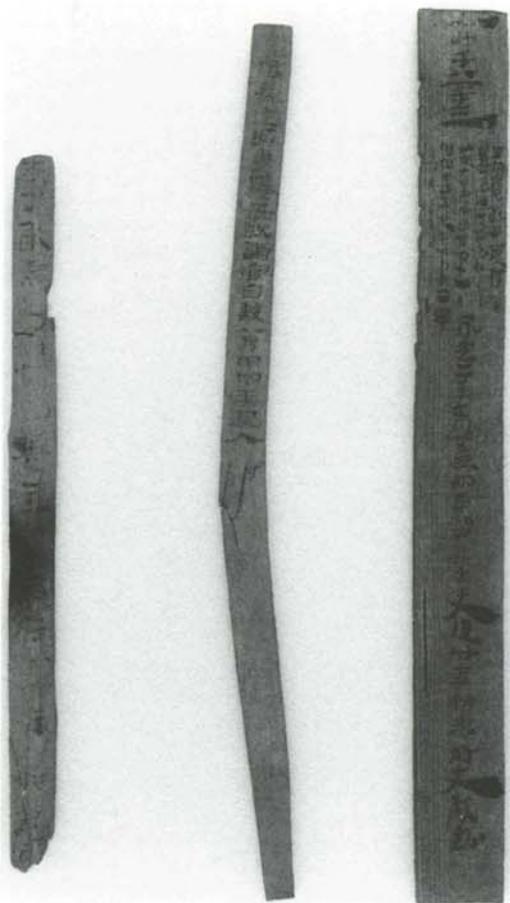


4a.



4b.

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5. *Wooden tablets*. Ink on wooden strips in clerical script.

Date: rt. strip, 42 B.C.; ctr. and left, mid-1st c. B.C.

Dimensions: 18.7 to 23.5 cm high.

Collection: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Inst., Washington, D.C.

Source: Fu et al., *Asian and Islamic Calligraphy*, p. 23.

The text on these wooden strips served a daily practical function and was written in a casual manner with a concern for expediency. The arrangement of characters does not follow rigid rules. Nevertheless, the rhythmic pauses and random accentuations create a sense of grace and gravity.

6. *Stele of ritual vessel (Li-ch'i pei)*.

Rubbing of inscription in clerical script.

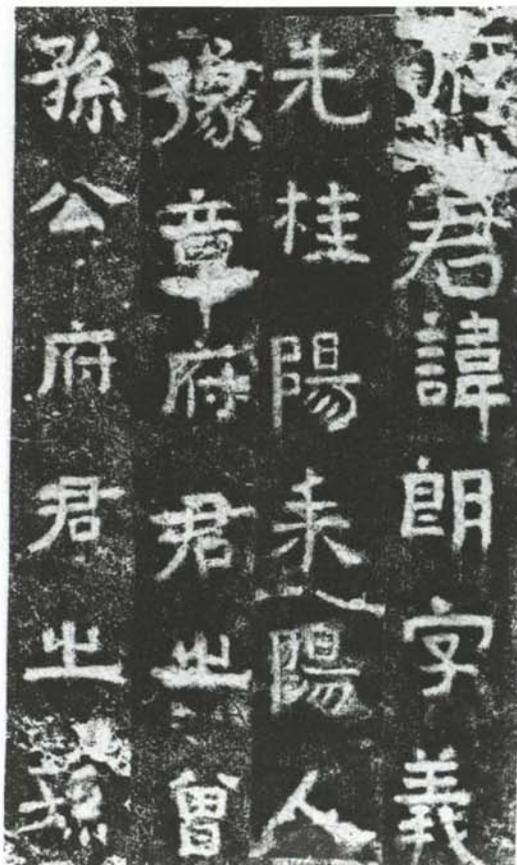
Date: 156 A.D.

Dimensions: 25.75 x 13 cm.

Source: *Shodō* 2, no. 85 (stele located in Ch'ü-fu, Shantung).

This text is in a ceremonial form of clerical script, and the rectilinear script is tightly composed and proportioned for a dignified appearance. Overall restraint is displayed in the parallel arrangement of horizontal strokes and consistent thickness, except where the shape of the strokes varies to stabilize the individual characters.





7. Tomb epitaph of Ku Lang, Governor of Chiu-chen prefecture (*Chiu-chen t'ai-shou Ku Lang pei*). Rubbing of inscription in regular script.

Date: 272 A.D.

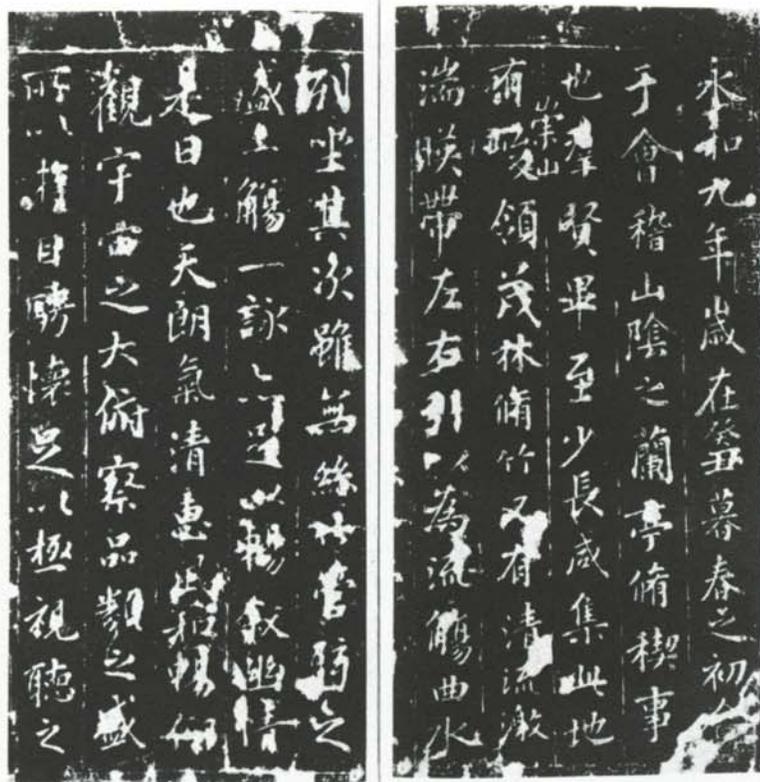
Dimensions: 25.5 x 15 cm.

Collection: Professor F. W. Mote.



The evolving regular script breaks away from the disciplined proportion and emphatic accentuation required of monumental clerical script. The strokes are evenly spaced in an easy manner within the grid and assume greater freedom. As an example of the incipient regular script, it has an awkwardness and crudity which would gradually disappear in later times.

8a.

8a-b. Preface to the Orchid Pavilion gathering (*Lan-t'ing chi hsü*).

a: Rubbing of inscription in regular script.

Calligrapher: attr. Ou-yang Hsün (551-641).

Date: *Ting-wu* rubbing version, carved ca. 998-1061.Source: *Shodō* 4, nos. 24-25.

b: Ink on paper in regular script.

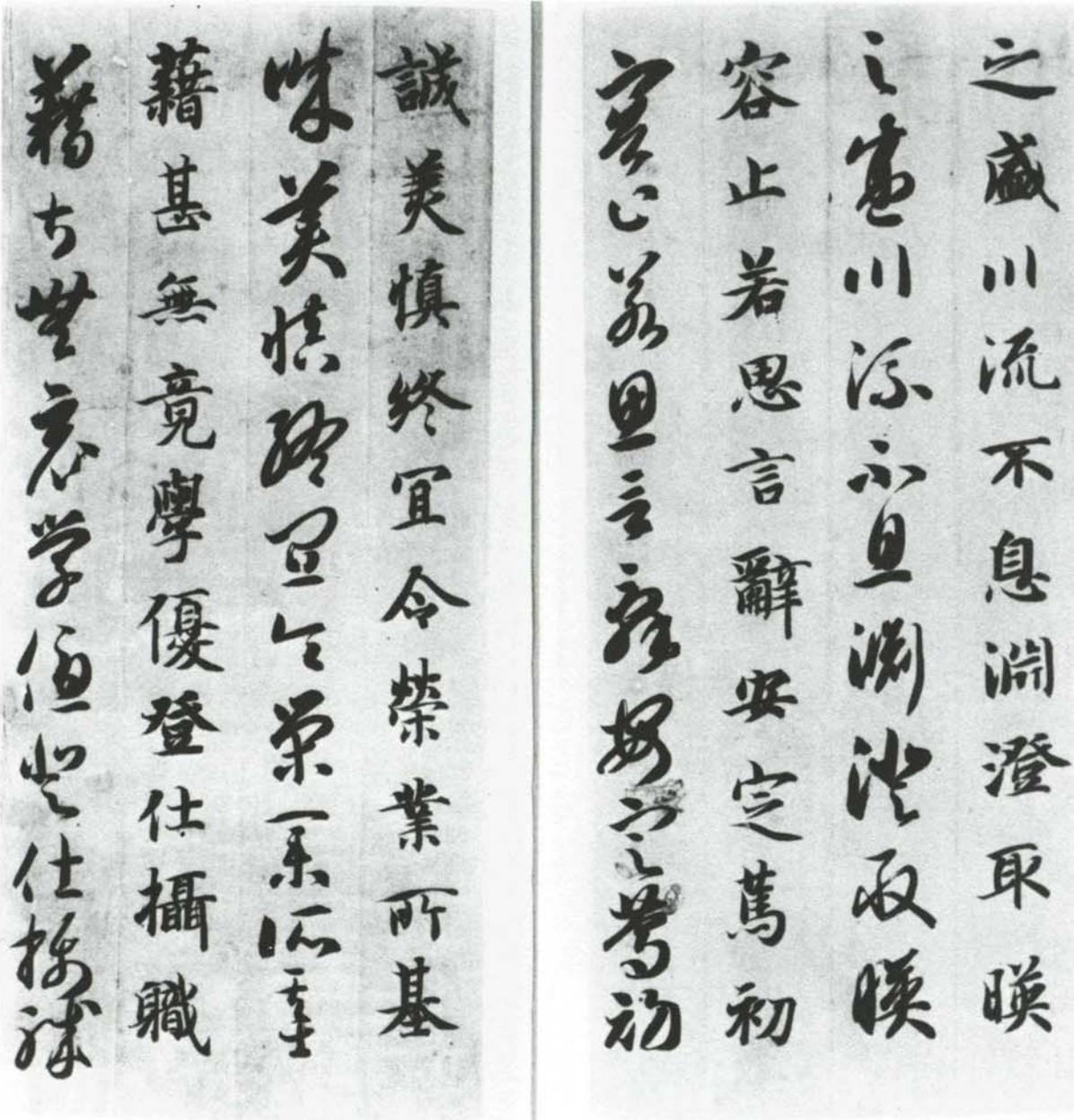
Calligrapher: attr. Ch'u Sui-liang (596-658).

Collection: Saitō family, Japan.

Source: *Shodō* 4, no. 12.

The fully developed regular script is represented here by two T'ang dynasty copies of Wang Hsi-chih's exemplary work. The original passage was composed and written in the ninth year of Yung-ho (354) as a preface to a collection of poems composed for a literary gathering. Wang Hsi-chih's calligraphy is traditionally cited as the best model of elegance, formal beauty, and visual balance.

8b.



9. Thousand-word essay in regular and cursive script (*Chen-ts'ao ch'ien-tzu-wen*).

Calligrapher: Monk Chih-yung (late 6th-early 7th c.).

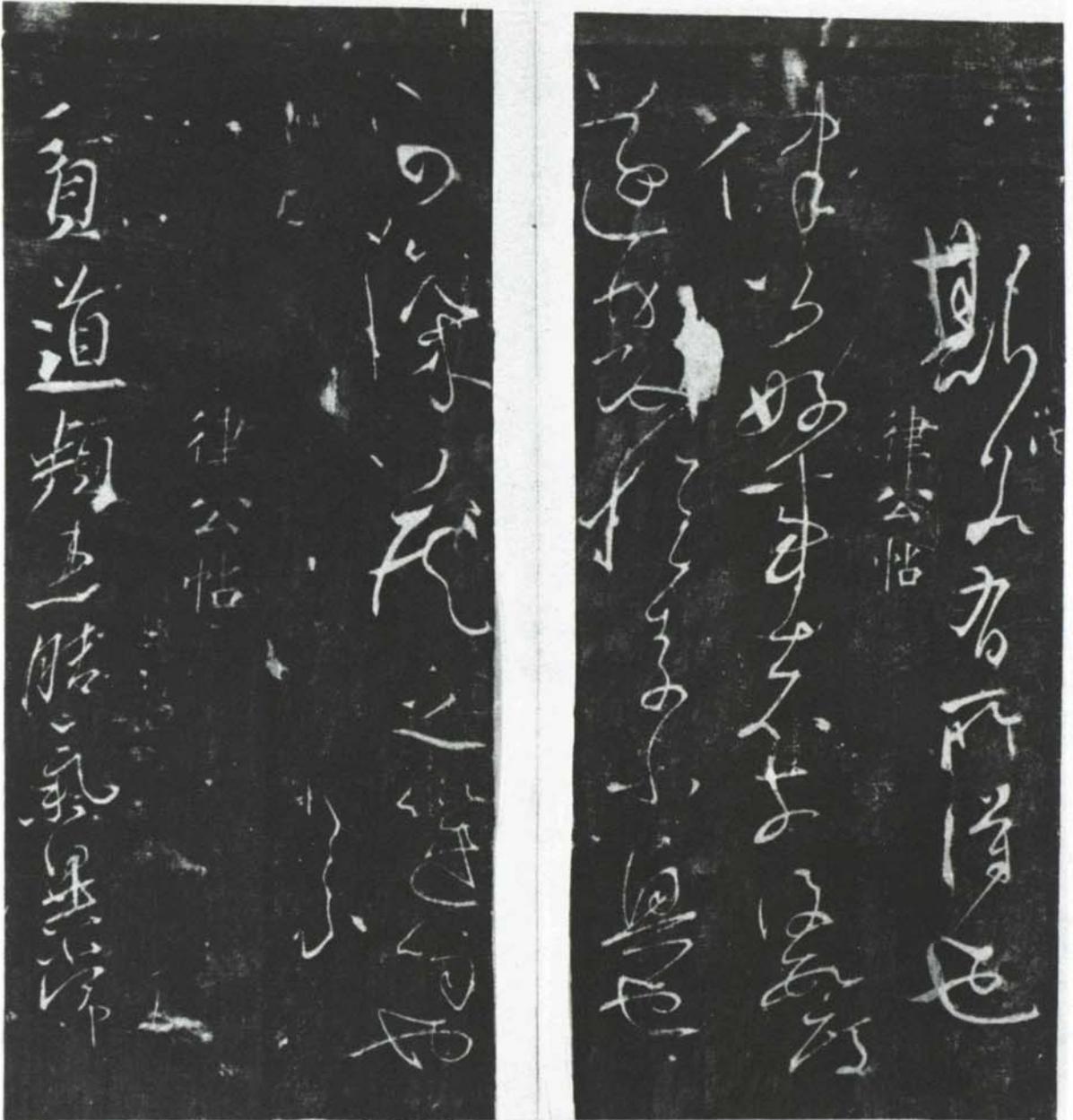
Date: early 7th century.

Dimensions: 25.5 x 11.3 cm.

Collection: Ogawa family, Japan.

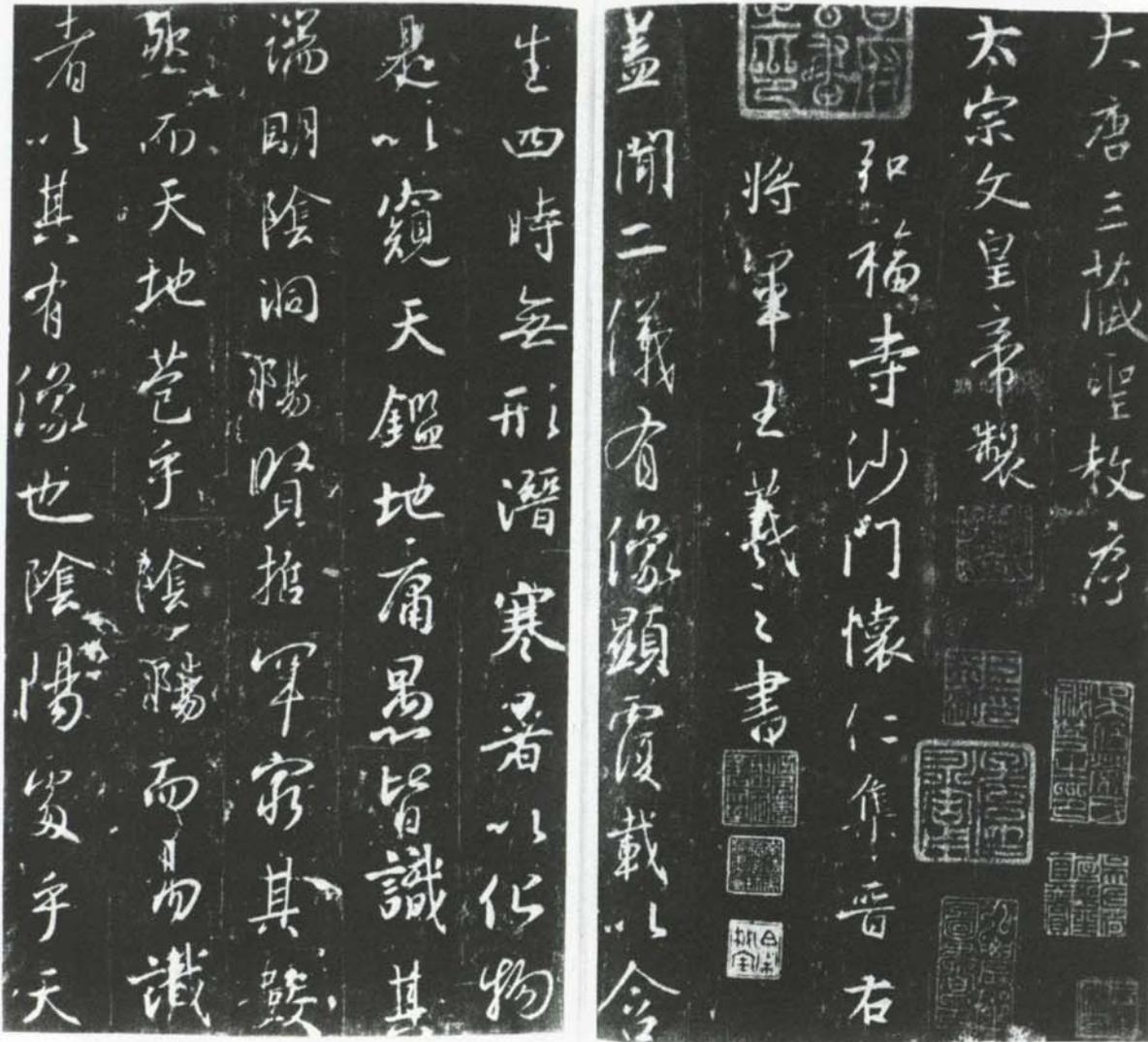
Source: *Shodō* 5, nos. 74 and 75.

The "Thousand-word essay" is a source book of one thousand characters written in both the regular and cursive styles in the format of paired vertical columns. The graceful balance of the regular script in the Wang Hsi-chih tradition now conforms in general to a squarish structure. The cursive script, executed in the *chang-ts'ao* style, has an internal structure built upon complex abbreviations that employ such elements as spiraling strokes, short individual strokes, and multi-functional dots.



10. Lü-kung manuscript (*Lü-kung t'ieh*).  
Rubbing of inscription in cursive script.  
Calligrapher: Monk Huai-su (late 8th c.).  
Date: undated.  
Dimensions: 26.5 x 11.5 cm.  
Source: *T'ang Huai-su fa-t'ieh*, pp. 2b-3a.

Also called "crazy cursive," the cursive style of Huai-su exhibits an uninhibited immediacy and creativity that take form in slender, sinuous, and fluently winding strokes. The whimsical composition contains unbroken, energized movement.



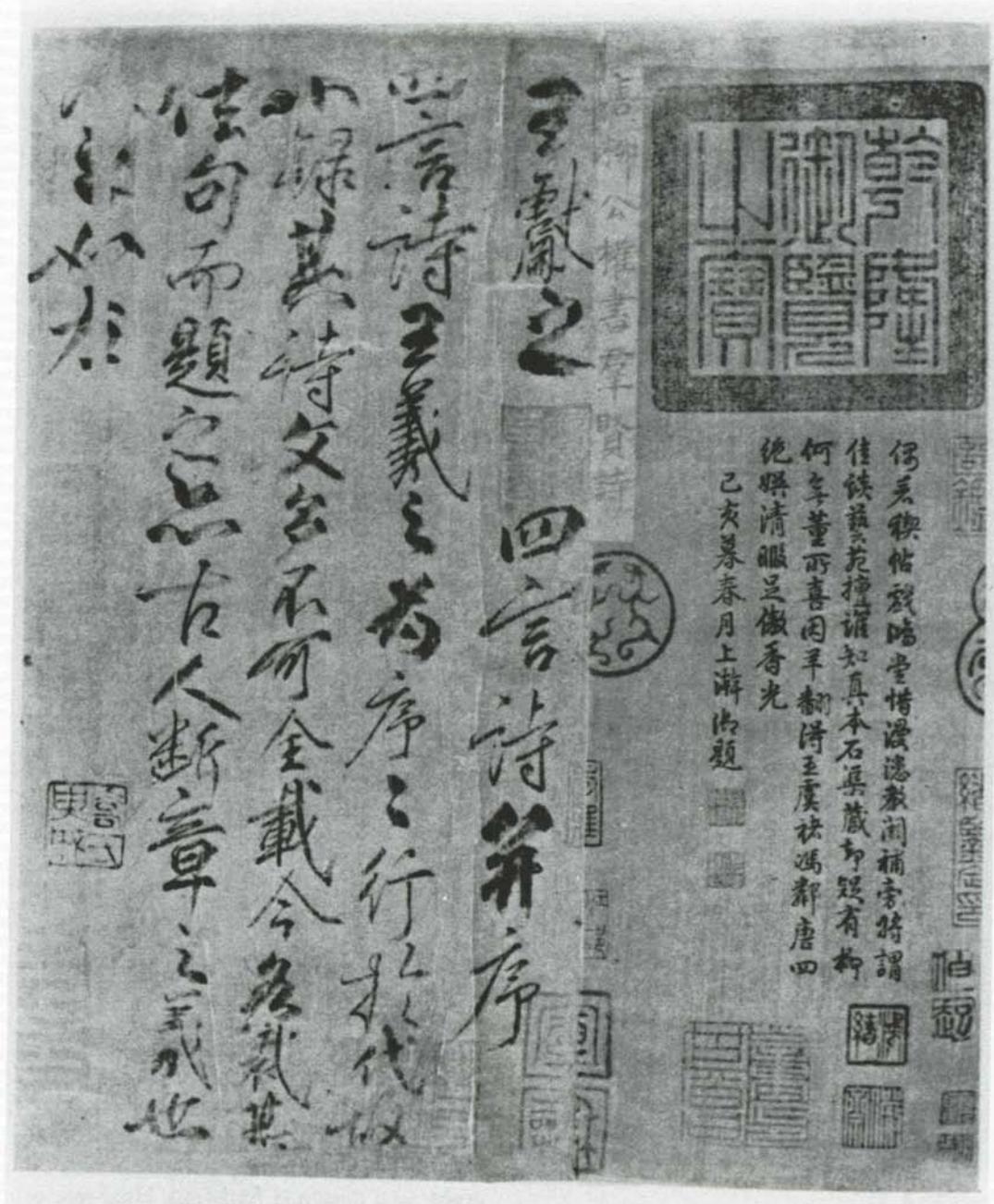
11a. Preface to the sacred teaching of Monk San-tsang of the T'ang dynasty (*Ta T'ang San-tsang sheng-chiao hsü*). Rubbing of inscription in running script.

Date: 672 A.D.

Dimensions: 26 x 14 cm.

Source: *Shodō* 8, nos. 50-51.

Running script is characterized by expediency of execution and its inclination to partial abbreviation. The linking strokes often betray the inner movement within the characters that is usually concealed in regular script. This calligraphy was designed by Monk Huai-jen, using elements of that of Wang Hsi-chih (321-379).



11b. *Orchid pavilion poems (Lan-t'ing shih)*.  
Ink on silk in running script.

Calligrapher: Liu Kung-ch'üan (778-865).

Date: undated.

Dimensions: 26.5 cm long.

Collection: National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Source: *T'ang Liu Kung-ch'üan shu Lan-t'ing shih*.

Liu's running style is also modeled on that of Wang Hsi-chih, but he leaves his personal touches—the casual alternation between the neatly executed characters with slender strokes and the heavy ones with a deliberate roughness.