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Character & Context
in Chinese Calligraphy

Edited by

Cary Y. Liu, Dora C.Y. Ching, and Judith G. Smith



Michael Nylan

Bryn Mawr College

Calligraphy, the Sacred Text and Test of Culture



Few attempts have been made to explain calligraphy's place as the premier art in pre-modern China. American and Chinese scholars alike have apparently assumed that the mere fact that "a symbol system was in continuous use for more than thirty-five hundred years" or that "the two great institutions that have held the Chinese state together—the ruling elite and the writing system—have coexisted in mutual support for three thousand years"¹ was enough to insure that written forms carried a far greater aesthetic weight than in most other civilizations. Alternatively, scholars have repeatedly invoked the supposedly archaic practice of communicating with the gods via written materials as sufficient explanation for a phenomenon that manifests itself more than a millennium after the Shang oracle bones; in doing so, they have compounded an initial misunderstanding of the bones' function by wrongly presupposing an absolute continuity in the content of religious beliefs over long stretches of time and space.² One of the more interesting attempts to address the phenomenon, John Hay's essay "The Human Body as a Microcosmic Source of Macrocosmic Value in Calligraphy," takes a different tack, however, in drawing the reader's attention to parallels between the specific vocabulary fashioned to explain calligraphy's particular aesthetic appeal and the language of *ch'i* theory in Chinese science.³ Still, analogies constructed between the "bones" of calligraphy and the "bones" of the body, however extensive or elegant, do not speak to the *origins* of calligraphy as fine art. They can only remind us of the inescapable *effect* of calligraphy's secure elevation to the status of art, for once calligraphy became a locus of cultural value, it was incumbent that it fit within the standard framework of cosmological discourse underlying all the discussions of science and art from the mid- to late Western Han period (206 BC–AD 8).⁴

This essay challenges the notion that calligraphy was the inevitable product or transparent reflection of certain distinctive Chinese traits or beliefs that have prevailed since time immemorial. Instead, it contends that calligraphic forms began to be regarded as the premier art in a particular time and place, the late Eastern Han (25–220), as a result of complex semantic shifts in the language accompanied by major shifts in attitudes toward texts and textualization. For well over a millennium in China, this essay shows, writing (as either "graphic form" or "literary composition")

The character *wen*

Figure 1a (left)

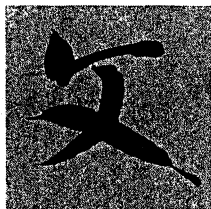
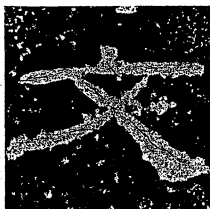
Seal script. Detail from a rubbing of the inscription on a bronze bell. Early Western Chou period, 9th century B.C., from Ch'ang-an Chang-chia-p'o (the maker is Hsing Shu). H. 37.5 cm. From *Chung-kuo wen-wu ching-hua* 1992 (Peking: Wen-wu ch'u-pan-she, 1992), pl. 107.

Figure 1b (middle)

Clerical script. Detail from *Stele for I Ying* (*I Ying pei*), 153, Temple of Confucius, Ch'ü-fu, Shantung. Rubbing. From *Shoseki meihin sōkan* (Tokyo: Nigensha, 1965), v. 2, no. 22.

Figure 1c (right)

Cursive script. Detail from Chih-yung, *The Thousand Character Essay* (*Ch'ien-tzu wen*). From *Shoseki meihin sōkan* (Tokyo: Nigensha, 1964), v. 6, no. 69.



tended to be somewhat downplayed, if not positively disparaged, as a lesser technique or tool; for much of that period, the ultimate sign of gentlemanly cultivation was instead held to be the ability to quote the *Odes* or recite extemporaneous variations on them to facilitate social and diplomatic interaction. Only a fool would be blind to the undeniable beauty of many examples of writing in the bone and bronze inscriptions dating to Anyang and Western Chou (ca. 1100–771 B.C.)—and their beauty comes not by accident, I warrant. The refusal to attach the words “calligraphic art” to such writings therefore stems from a determination to explore the attitudes of the high culture toward the value of beautiful writing and the ability to execute it. The high culture’s attitude changes so definitely in late Eastern Han that it seems meaningful to reserve the word “art” for the calligraphy produced in a setting shaped by radically new views about the function and value of fine writing.

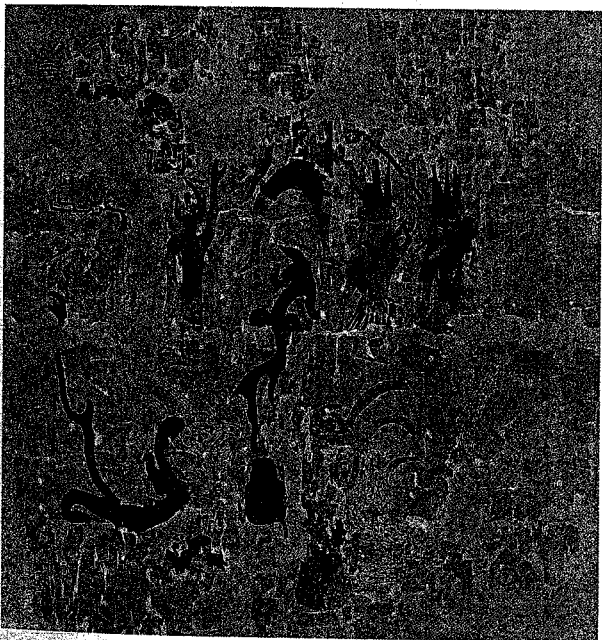
In essence, before late Eastern Han, fine writing served to dignify the content of a text, to dignify the object the text was placed on, or both. A finely written Western Chou investiture inscription, for instance, at once declares the importance of the event it commemorates and beautifies the bronze on which it appears, so that content and ornament jointly redound to the credit of the person invested, in whose possession the vessel lies. Thus my argument that graphic forms in their earliest occurrences, as traced in the oracle bone (*chia-ku*) or the seal (*chuan*) and clerical (*li*) scripts shown in fig. 1, are meant to confer added dignity upon a precious object or an exemplary person. (This is therefore “functional beauty,” which I would distinguish from “art” for the purposes of this essay.) In the late Eastern Han, by contrast, fine writing begins to be connected with the special abilities and qualities of the person who does it—no longer an anonymous artisan employed by a person of high social status but rather a person of high status himself. By the late second and early third century A.D., the period that witnesses the creation of the standard (*k’ai*), running (*hsing*), and cursive (*ts’ao*; fig. 1) scripts,⁵ elegant writing is thought to reveal the extraordinary dignity of the writer. It is this double change—the change of executant from anonymous servant to admired artist and the change by which fine writing no longer embellishes production but discloses the producer—that makes it useful for us to reserve the word “art” for the products of the latter.

Discussions of the origins of calligraphy have hitherto been structured largely in terms of stark dichotomies: form vs. content, decoration vs. substance, religious vs. secular, individualistic vs. public-minded impulses. Such dichotomies, usually treated as transhistorical, generally muddy rather than illuminate the problem of calligraphy’s origins, first because they ignore the specific historical context prompting certain aesthetic de-

velopments, and second because such formulae are themselves at odds with the spirit of early aesthetic theory in China, which deemed a facility for precise rendering to be less admirable than the ability to intimate the inclusive, the multi-referential, and the multivalent. If they are to follow this essay's argument, readers will need to put aside these formulaic ways of thinking. Readers meanwhile will be asked to focus on three words in Chinese whose historical evolution has shaped aesthetic theory. The most important of these words, of course, is *wen*, which at first means "[exemplary] pattern" (not necessarily visual) and only much later comes to mean "written text" and even "culture." The other two key words threading through this essay are *hsiang*, defined as "images emblematic of a hidden order"; and *t'u*, defined as "charts identifying the site and distinctive configurations of power." *T'u* charts run the gamut from maps given as tokens of enfeoffment to fantastic figural representations of the local gods of the soil, such as the second-century B.C. example from Ma-wang-tui (fig. 2).⁶

Though evolutions in thinking are never as neat as the historian's periodization implies, extant texts reveal a lengthy progression in thinking about *wen*, which passed through no fewer than seven conceptually discrete stages. In Stage 1, from the early Chou (10th century B.C.) through the Spring and Autumn (770–ca. 470) period, talk of *wen* ("pattern") primarily signified exemplary behavior worthy of admiration and emulation (that is, "model behavior"). In Stage 2, roughly the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.), the search began for the cosmic analogues to explain, verify, and bolster theories about exemplary human behavior. At the same time, a small expansion in the semantic field of the term *wen* extended it to some few select types of exemplary "writing" designed to convey a strongly transformative message, presumably because the effectiveness of this sort of magical or quasi-magical communication depended upon profound sympathies inherent in the naturally patterned world of Heaven-and-Earth.⁷ In Stage 3, during the Ch'in (221–206 B.C.) and the early Western Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 9), the state urged literate men to abandon cosmic and ethical speculation, which might generate a dangerous disunity, and devote their energies to devising *wen tzu* ("precise naming," a brand-new term coined to mark their greater preoccupation) in support of the imperial projects.⁸ Then, in Stage 4, the leading thinkers of the second century of Western Han, in rejecting the state's wealth-and-power policies, worked hard not only to confirm but also to elaborate systematic correlations between human and cosmic patterns. But even at so late a stage in Chinese history, writing in and of itself (as one sort of *wen*) was not particularly valued by the elites who at that very moment were themselves establishing elegant touchstones for its use, since the "true classicists" (*chen ju*) believed writing too liable to loss or abuse by careerist "clerks," the narrow-minded professionals.⁹

Figure 2
 Detail from *Diagram of the Local Gods of the Soil* (*She-shen t'u*), ca. 168 B.C., from tomb no. 3 at Ma-wang-tui. Silk fragment, ink and color on silk, 45 x 43.5 cm. From *Chung-kuo K'ao-ku wen-wu chih mei*, v. 8, *Hui-huang pu-hsiu Han chen shih* (Taipei: Kuang-fu shu-ch'ü ch'í-yeh ku-fen yu-hsien kung-ssu; and Peking: Wen-wu ch'ü-pan-she, 1994), pl. 8.



However, with Stage 5, in mid-Eastern Han, there came a major break in thinking about *wen*, with many *shih* openly applauding the greater value of texts in comparison with either speech or exemplary behavior. Only written texts, it was alleged, could help *shih* maximize their potential for greatness in their three most characteristic activities: preserving the classical Way of Antiquity, aligning themselves with the genuine spirit of the past through literary production, and confirming the legitimacy of the ruling house. (Leading scholar-officials nonetheless continued to fulminate against the frequent misuse of writing's potentials by government hacks.)¹⁰ Stage 6, dating to the final decades of the Eastern Han, witnessed a second major break. Henceforth, the production of elegant literary works became less closely identified with the court bureaucracy and more with a stance of outright opposition to government abuses. Given such abuses, nostalgia for a golden age associated with good rule developed in tandem with the inclination to advertise to one's peers and ruler the purity and strength of one's commitments to the realm beyond the sullied world of politics.¹¹

Until the collapse of the Han, however, *shih* were too uncertain in their attitudes about the Han state to forsake it entirely as the main source of power and authority. Political ambivalence found its aesthetic counterpart in a comparable ambivalence toward certain script styles not thought to conduce to the ultimate dignity of public office, with the result that both the bird (*niao*) and cursive styles, which offered far greater artistic scope for accomplished draftsmen, were relatively neglected by *shih* and left to craftsmen gathered at the court.¹² It was only in Stage 7, then, corresponding to the Wei-Chin period (AD 220-420), that *shih* succeeded finally in seeing their own group as a viable alternative to the throne, a rival source of authority. At that point, elites at all levels searching for ways to promote their own claims to extra-governmental authority over and against those of the state and the merely literate came to appreciate the advantages of promoting high standards in elegant calligraphic form. Insofar as both the technical and ethical demands of producing proper calligraphic form could be set far higher than those for the judicious selection of texts to be written, calligraphic forms could be—and were—employed to exclude the *hoi polloi* from real consideration in this period of rapid reinfudation. As it happened, thanks to various technical advances in the Han, a hitherto unmatched virtuosity in calligraphic form was indeed available for the first time to the non-artisan, so that fine calligraphy—with its accrued connotations of exemplary behavior, cosmic strength, encyclopedic knowledge, adherence to the past, detachment from corruption, and arduous training in the polite arts acquired after basic literacy—became the preferred form of public expression by a certain group of elites intent upon claiming high status and authority. Therefore, it was this confluence of political and class

interests, as well as of technical and literary advances, that unexpectedly propelled calligraphy—not poetry and not painting—to its high rank as the premier art in China. And it has been the continuing impact of such associations that has helped to maintain calligraphy's rank among those who would base their highly politicized stances on the claim that they have risen far above mere politics.¹³

Granted, at this stage in the level of our knowledge, no reconstruction of the distant past can reasonably avoid charges that it is overly speculative, since few relevant documents survive from early China and those that do are often ambiguous. The same binome used for cursive or “grass-style” calligraphy, *ts'ao-shu*, to give but one example, also means “to draft a document.”¹⁴ Still, even preliminary conjectures about this important topic are worth hazarding, not only because they may reopen academic debate about the origins of Chinese calligraphy, but also because they have much wider implications for the study of civilization in China. According to the tentative reconstruction offered here, literate elites in early China were by no means unified in their attitudes toward the role of texts and textualization within the political process. This suggests that scholars must rethink long-cherished notions about the centrality of writing to ancient Chinese civilization that have usually gone unquestioned.¹⁵ Perhaps anachronistic views that are part of the larger construct of a monolithic Chinese civilization have deterred art historians from posing the very basic question, How was it that talk of calligraphy came increasingly to dominate theories about the arts from the Six Dynasties period (222–589) onward, gradually supplanting the musical recitation of the *Odes* as the quintessential marker for the cultured gentleman? Why calligraphy, we must ask, and not one of the other available alternatives?¹⁶

Stages 1–4: Early Attitudes Toward *Wen*

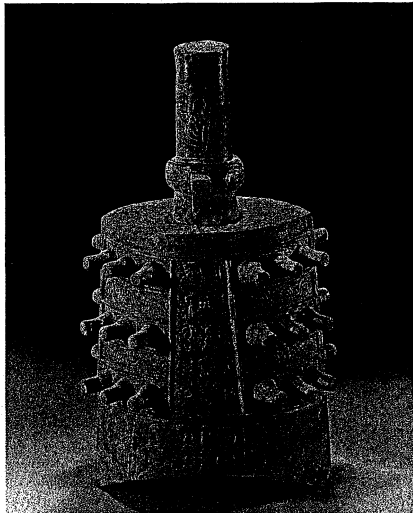
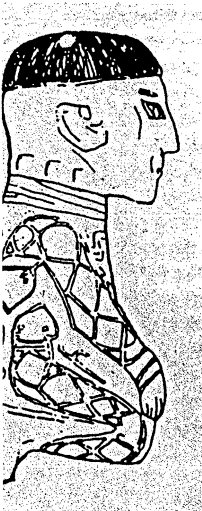
The origin of the character *wen*, which appears first in the Shang oracle bones (ca. 1300 B.C.), is—like that of all the other oracle-bone forms—unknown. For a long time, speculation has started from the belief that *wen* represents a crisscross pattern, with the latest analysis interpreting that pattern as a tattoo on the human body signifying high status, as indicated by precious jades found in royal tombs of the time (fig. 3).¹⁷ Some scholars, following the lead of Arthur Waley, have assumed that the single character *wen* served to represent graphically what were, in effect, two distinct words: a stock epithet of the royal ancestors, whose exact meaning is still unknown, and the word “pattern.”¹⁸ My own impulse is to counter this assumption with the argument that the epithet always extols the dead ancestor for having “set a model pattern” of behavior for his or her descendants. One early example drawn from the *Odes* lauds, for example, the remote

Figure 3 (left)

Line drawing of a jade figure from the tomb of Fu Hao, ca. 1200 B.C. From Liu Tun-yüan, *Mei-shu k'ao-ku yü ku-tai wen-ming* (Taipei: Yün-ch'en wen-hua ch'u-pan-she, 1994), 41, fig. 1.

Figure 4 (right)

Bronze bell with inscription, Late Western Chou period, 9th century B.C., from Ch'ang-an Chang-chia-p'o (the maker is Hsing Shu). H. 37.5 cm. From *Chung-kuo wen-wu ching-hua* 1992 (Peking: Wen-wu ch'u-pan-she, 1992), pl. 107.



ancestor of the Chou royal house, the legendary Hou-chi, whose domestication of wheat and barley led to the creation of stable, wealthy communities organized on the basis of sedentary agriculture.¹⁹ The earliest texts known from China, then, apply *wen* to those memorable patterns that endure in time as an ideal locus for the appreciative gaze of cultivated elites. Legitimate dynastic authority itself finally rests upon the careful emulation of such venerable models.²⁰ But as so much of Shang and early Western Chou history remains shrouded in mystery, it is traditions about the Master, Confucius (551-479 B.C.), dating to a time six centuries after the Shang-Chou transition, that would seem to offer our first opportunity to elicit reliable information regarding the possible etymology and extensions of *wen*.

In the Confucian *Analects* (compiled in the early 4th century B.C.), no fewer than sixteen passages discuss *wen*, *wen hsiieh* (the study of *wen*), *wen ts'ai* (ornaments of *wen*), and *wen chang* (displays of *wen*).²¹ Unfortunately, the *Analects* offers less elucidation than we might expect from such a number of passages, in part because it is a patchwork of aphorisms dating to many different eras, in part because the context for these *wen* and *wen*-compounds is often so vague as to admit of quite different constructions by successive generations of commentators.²² Nevertheless, enough context exists to show that *wen* carries one of two meanings in the *Analects*: Either it describes the exemplary behavior ascribed to the Ancients, behavior that went beyond the basic moral obligations to kin and ruler to forge wider societal connections of benefit to all,²³ or it refers to that brilliant ornament that overlays a substance, greatly enhancing its basic value. The text establishes a strong tie between these two distinct meanings when it likens the effect of superb human refinement upon the fundamental human nature to that of fine painting laid on a plain surface.²⁴ By analogy, the Confucian ideal of benevolent rule through rites and music presupposed a latent harmony in life that could be brought to a still higher pitch of perfection through conscious human agency. The impression of monumental strength imparted by the Western Chou bell shown in fig. 4, cast five hundred years before Confucius in the heyday of Chou moral rule, is therefore only intensified by the considered use of fine cloud-form ornaments and intaglio writing. (Excessive decoration, in Confucius' definition, would by contrast mask or weaken the true nature of a thing rather than bring out its distinctive potential.)²⁵ The *Analects*, like most other early Warring States texts, presupposes a near identity between the moral and the aesthetic such that the good and the beautiful tend to be conflated, particularly when discussion turns to consider things of lasting beauty.²⁶ Equally to the point, only a single, very late passage in the *Analects* employs *wen* in the sense of written characters.²⁷

Figure 5

Clothing box decorated with astronomical chart with the twenty-eight constellations, from the tomb of the Marquis I of Tseng, Sui-hsien, Hupei, 433 B.C. Painted lacquer, l. 71 cm; w. 47 cm. From *Chung-kuo Kao-ku wen-wu chih mei*, v. 5, *Chan-kuo ti-hsia yüeh-kung* (Taipei: Kuang-fu shu-chü ch'i-yeh ku-fen yu-hsien kung-ssu; and Peking: Wen-wu ch'u-pan-she, 1994), pl. 82.



Texts of the late Warring States period, which are both more numerous and more varied in content than those of earlier eras, allow us to sketch with greater confidence the next stage in the evolution of the semantic center for *wen*. In general, genuine Warring States texts are preoccupied with finding the ultimate sources of human behavior and social organization. Numerous incommensurate structures for political institutions had been proposed by theorists competing for political patronage, so early Chinese thinkers looked to the cosmos to verify the relative worth and applicability of such models. The consensus was that all things had evolved from an unseen unitary origin, described as *T'ien* or *Tao* and construed either as the benevolent anthropomorphic god Heaven or the phenomenal order of Heaven-and-Earth. Hence, the supreme good for humans was to be sought in a thorough grounding in the cosmic regularities. Most Warring States thinkers began to reflect upon the major patterns in the natural world (e.g., the progression of the seasons, the regular movement of constellations in the night sky, the configurations of the earth) in the light of their implications for human society, the better to support their arguments by natural and so incontestible "proofs." Literary and visual texts of the late Warring States through the early Western Han period pushed the boundaries of *wen*, always within a context of kingly rule, until it covered those larger patterns in the cosmos believed to be of supreme significance for the human order. Hence the famous injunction by the "Great Commentary" to the *Changes* (*I ching*; late 3rd century BC?) to "contemplate Heaven's patterns," even the "patterns of birds and beasts," so as to gain insight into the foreordained human task of "completing the patterns of Heaven and Earth."²⁸ Or the frequent visual references of the time alluding to the image of the perfect ruler who resides at the still center while the societal sectors revolve around him, in the manner of that unmoved mover, the Dipper, which presides over the major constellations of the four directions in their solemn procession through the night sky over the span of the liturgical year (fig. 5). Then, too, an equal concern with understanding the root causes for spectacular irregularities within All-under-Heaven ended in the highly detailed classifications of comets and other portents correlating form to source that are compiled from this period onward (fig. 6). At the same time, Warring States thinkers seldom troubled to distinguish between written and spoken accounts, let alone elevate the written to a special position vis-à-vis inherited culture.²⁹

For roughly a century and a half following unification under the Ch'in in 221 BC, the Ch'in and Western Han states encouraged literate elites to turn away from their concern with *wen* as cosmic patterns. Strictly speaking, the study of cosmic patterns was now reserved as an imperial prerogative, and scholar-officials were to engage in it only upon the emperor's express command.³⁰ Instead, the newly centralized empires, anxious to

suppress or co-opt all dissident voices, had their highest officials attend to *wen* in the reductionist sense of *wen tzu*, words that precisely name. On a stone stele erected at Lang-ya (fig. 7), for instance, Ch'in's First Emperor boasted of having "unified the measures of vessels and implements, and standardized the *wen tzu* in writing [*shu*]."³¹ Through their standardization of bureaucratic forms recording speech, then, the Ch'in and early Han emperors, as proponents of Legalist and Huang-Lao theories of statecraft, proposed to lay claim to perfect dominion over the universe captured by that speech. Quite consistent in their beliefs and practice, the early emperors promoted those literati who composed speeches carefully, who wrote script forms accurately, and who could readily call up the political precedents contained in hallowed texts, including the corpus of the Five "Confucian" Classics.³² Even in their occasional literature they preferred the distinctive *fu* rhyme-prose, where exhaustive catalogues of highly specialized vocabulary were skillfully fashioned into exact descriptions on set themes.³³

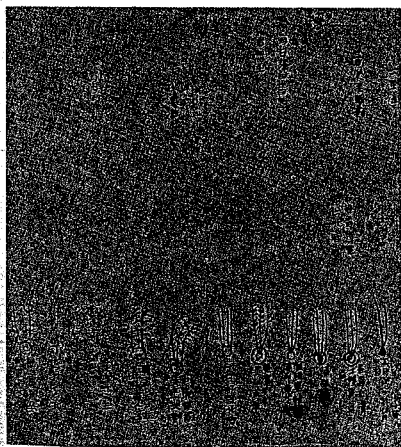
Under the Han, the state's evident lack of interest in the ethical issues thrown up by the Classics drew repeated fire from many of its self-described loyal supporters. Arguing vociferously against the state's wealth-and-power agenda executed by the "vulgar classicists" (*su ju*) in its employ were the classical Confucian masters such as Tung Chung-shu (187-104 BC), who called upon all "true classicists" to return to that earlier ideal proposed by the Sage, emulation of the exemplary behavior of the Ancients.³⁴ Meanwhile, classicists in either camp, the "vulgar" or the "true," knew that to further their own aims they had to display a mastery of several oral and written traditions, including those associated with the Five Classics, for emperors and kings liked their supplicants to couch requests in elegant language replete with allusions, just as they demanded proofs by historical analogy whenever major changes in public policy were under review. Regardless of their ethical orientations and academic specializations, those in government employ culled available traditions for good examples of the proper linguistic forms for courtly persuasion through indirection. Still, no particular emphasis was yet placed on the value of written forms per se, as Ssu-ma Ch'ien's (145-86 BC) *Archival Records (Shih chi)* (comp. ca. 100 BC) attests; quite the contrary. All those in government employ naturally relied on writing as a bureaucratic tool in the course of administering the state, as when a Han bamboo-strip document from the far-flung reaches of the empire instructs local officials to refer capital cases to the throne for final judgment (fig. 8). But those claiming to draw inspiration from Confucius specifically deplored any suggestion that mere writing (in the form of bureaucratic documents, laws, or even binding rules for behavior), rather than the propagation of ethical values through the emulation of exemplary figures in authority, might be regarded as the primary tool of governance.

Figure 6 (left)

Detail from painting of comets and explanatory text (*Hui-hsing t'u*), ca. 168 B.C., from tomb no. 3 at Ma-wang-tui. Ink and color on silk. From Fu Chü-yu and Ch'en Sung-chiang, *Ma-wang-tui Han mu wen-wu* (Changsha: Hu-nan ch'ü-pan-she, 1992), 129.

Figure 7 (right)

Detail from *Lang-ya Stone Stele*, 219 B.C. Rubbing. From *Shoseki meihin sōkan* (Tokyo: Nigensha, 1964), v. 1.



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By the end of the Western Han, the leading classical scholars at court, led by Liu Hsiang (79–8 BC) and Yang Hsiung (53 BC–AD 18), made concerted efforts to weave together all the constituent strands of meaning hitherto attached to the single expression “cultivating *wen*”: conforming with the glorious deeds of the dead; attaining enduring status and value; epitomizing the cosmic regularities; and mining certain authoritative traditions—not all of them in writing—for insight into the supreme sources of order. Otherwise, they feared, the sociopolitical order would soon descend into outright opportunism and ideological chaos.³⁵ Since Liu Hsiang was imperial bibliographer, chief redactor of ancient texts in the imperial library, and author of many essays and treatises, including one on “reading” portents as infallible divine messages,³⁶ one might reasonably expect Liu to have equated the entire patrimony of inherited culture with the written word. Similar expectations might be held of Yang Hsiung, author of the first major dictionary in China, specialist in ancient script forms, and acknowledged genius in two literary forms: the epistolary and the prose poem.³⁷ But though the celebrated writings of both these men helped to pave the way for a much later shift in focus to the written word as an ideal repository of the past, neither thinker invested texts with the distinctive “god-like” or “divine” (*shen*) status that they would enjoy some two centuries afterward.³⁸ In the minds of Liu and Yang, written texts in general—even those transmitted from the sages of old—were too problematic, being liable to loss, misreadings, forgery, and falsehoods.³⁹

Yang Hsiung, for instance, mindful of the proliferation of competing ethical visions propounded in a broad spectrum of written texts that purported to be authoritative, compared texts to more mundane goods whose real value would have to be “weighed in the balance” by a moral arbiter, the teacher, who would distinguish good from bad.⁴⁰ The quality of his teachers, not the number of texts at his command, would then determine a person’s ethical character. While Liu and Yang in their own works both set the standards for civilized writing, both expressed their utter disdain for the mere trappings of culture, especially those literary techniques that relied upon memorization and regurgitation. To their way of thinking, their state and society all too often erroneously valued those techniques more than the single-minded self-cultivation of the sage, which schooled humans to render good judgments.⁴¹ In consequence, their contemporaries’ attention was often sadly diverted from the more remarkable insights open to them regarding human beings’ inborn potential to track and inscribe mysteriously—without recourse to ordinary reading or writing—the cosmic-social harmonies in All-under-Heaven through sagely behavior. The extraordinary power of *wen* as sublime pattern surpasses the utilitarian confines of conventional writing.

Figure 8

Bamboo slips unearthed in Wu-wei, Kansu, Western Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 9). Each approx. 23.3 x 1 cm. The text puts the phrase "Sovereign Emperor, His Majesty" on its own bamboo strip to ritually indicate the extraordinary nature of the authority invested in the Son of Heaven. The next strip orders local officials to "broadly fulfill the King's Instructions" in their administration of justice. From *Chung-kuo mei-shu ch'üan-chi, Shu-fa chuan-k'o pien* (Peking: Jen-min mei-shu ch'u-pan-she, 1987), v. 1, pl. 47.

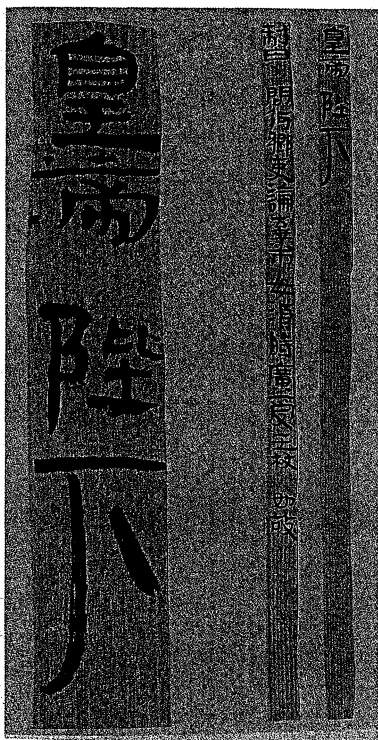


Figure 9

Nine Palaces Diagram (Chiu-kung t'u) and *Table of Branches and Stems (Kan-chih piao)*, detail from the *Book of Hsing te*, version B, ca. 168 B.C., from tomb no. 3 at Ma-wang-tui. Ink and color on silk, 44 x 84 cm. From Fu Chü-yu and Ch'ien Sung-chiang, *Ma-wang-tui Han mu wen-wu* (Changsha: Hu-nan ch'u-pan-she, 1992), 135.



Expanding upon the work of Hsün-tzu (d. ?235 B.C.), Liu and Yang stressed the aesthetic dimensions of good behavior, conceived as that conjunction of the pragmatic and the moral that captures the essence of the cosmic Tao. The gentleman was himself to become an "image" or "emblem" of virtue for others; that was, in fact, his sole function.⁴² Like Hsün-tzu, these classicists decried the false discrimination and over-discrimination of the sophists as much as a lack of discrimination. For in their views, human beings approached divinity to the degree that they exemplified inclusiveness, rather than "one-sidedness," partiality, or the exclusionary impulse. Believing as they did that mere writing "could not completely express words, or words, ideas,"⁴³ they were more interested in "schemata of recurrent patterns, ultimate origins, and numerical categories implying totality"⁴⁴—all compact distillations of phenomenal experience which promised to order the unforeseen in human existence while avoiding the misleading demarcations and dichotomies of rhetorical language. Thus, their probable reliance on the kinds of elaborate diagrams on precious silk or lacquered wood known from Ma-wang-tui (Hunan), Ju-yang (Anhui), and related sites, each of which graphically depicts the parallel symmetries binding the triadic realms of Heaven-Earth-Man, symmetries that allowed the good man to improve materially both his own fate and that of his compatriots by actions synchronized with the sun, moon, and stars (figs. 9, 10).

It is hardly surprising that Liu Hsiang conducted serious alchemical experiments and concerned himself with portent reading, or that Yang Hsiung pondered the subtle interrelations of the musical, numerical, and astronomical orders, since these two found ordinary language, not to mention texts, insufficient to convey the subtle mysteries of phenomenal existence. Nor is it surprising that intellectual historians hail Liu Hsiang and Yang Hsiung as the first self-conscious advocates of "the return to antiquity" (*fu-ku*) movement, for Liu and Yang intended to redirect learning back to its pre-Ch'in focus, whereby societal models would be tested in terms of their cosmic analogues. Once such a redirection had been achieved, the teachings—not the writings—of truly authoritative men (principally Confucius and his chief disciples, in which group they placed themselves) would be raised to a position commensurate with cosmic portents sent by Heaven. Taking their notion of Confucius as guide, these classical masters insisted on the unassailable propriety of the noble man's preoccupation with the full range of ideas associated with *wen*, though such a preoccupation often enough led moralists to condemn the state's concerns.⁴⁵ Only through such a holistic approach could the person of cultivation eventually develop the requisite level of taste to experience the keenest pleasure—equally moral and aesthetic in its dimensions—in immersing the self in the archaic grandeur of the classical models. Confronted with the