

Forum

Hand-Writing Styles in Early Chinese Manuscripts

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A. Preliminaries

Since the early 1970s Chinese archaeologists (and tomb robbers) have uncovered fairly large numbers of manuscripts dating from the centuries just before and just after 221 BCE, the year of the first political unification of China into an empire. The majority of these manuscripts are written on bamboo strips, less frequently on silk or wood. The earliest of the finds date from approximately the second half of the fourth century BCE; with rare exception earlier excavated or discovered texts are either epigraphic or inscriptional, that is, written on hard, durable materials. The manuscripts come from many different places, representing many different kinds of content. Generally speaking, we can identify two large categories of manuscript based on content, (i) literary and (ii) non-literary. Literary manuscripts include works that are known from the transmitted tradition, either because they are manuscript versions of transmitted texts proper or because their content, while not matching the text of any known transmitted work precisely, reflects literary or historical themes familiar from the received literary tradition.¹ Most of the discovered manuscripts that fall into the literary category are of this type. In only a very small number of cases does the main content of a literary manuscript not find a reflection somewhere in the received literary tradition.² Among literary manuscripts four corpora stand out as having so far attracted the most attention from students and scholars alike. These are, in the order in which they have become available to the scholarly public:

¹ Because Chinese texts have been transmitted largely in printed form from about 1000 A.D., manuscripts have played a comparatively minor role in traditional Chinese textual criticism and textual studies generally. The scholarly response to the discovery and availability of early Chinese manuscripts in recent decades has been to see this material not as integrally linked to the tradition of printed texts, forming a single line of textual transmission, but rather as a kind of newly recognized ancillary counterpart to traditional text history. It has become customary in the study of early and mediaeval Chinese texts to recognize ‘transmitted, received texts’ and ‘excavated, manuscript texts’ as distinct, complementary kinds of text forms.

² There are, to be sure, minor passages in many of these literary manuscripts, the content of which is not known from the transmitted corpus, but these unknown passages typically constitute parts of larger textual units that are generally familiar from the received tradition, if only because of names and events mentioned.

Silk manuscripts from Mawangdui 馬王堆, ca. 200 BCE, (Mawangdui tomb itself closed in 168 BCE) discovered in the early 1970s and first announced in July, 1974.³



Fig. 1: Mawangdui *Laozi silk jia* 甲 manuscript fragments.⁴

³ Hunan Sheng Bowuguan 1974, 39–8, 63.

⁴ Guojia Wenwuju 1980, color plate 1. This is the so-called ‘*jia* 甲 [i.e., “A”] manuscript’, chronologically the first of the two silk manuscripts found at Mawangdui, usually thought to be about thirty years earlier than the second one. See illustration two for an example of the second Mawangdui silk manuscript.



Fig. 2: Mawangdui Laozi silk yi 乙 manuscript fragment.⁵

⁵ See Guojia Wenwuju 1980, color plate 2. This is the so-called 'yi 乙 [i.e., "B"] manuscript', chronologically the second of the two silk manuscripts

found at Mawangdui. The earlier one (fig. 2) is called 'jia 甲', and is about thirty years earlier than this one.

Bamboo strip manuscripts from Guodian 郭店, Hubei province, ca. 300 BCE, discovered in the 1990s and published in 1998.⁶



Fig. 3: Guodian, 'Zi yi' 緇衣 ('Dark Attire'), str. 01.⁷

⁶ See Jingmen Shi 1998, 1–2.

⁷ See Jingmen Shi 1998, 17. Note that the image is of a single unbroken strip that has been photographically divided into three pieces as a *mise en page* practical matter.

Bamboo strip manuscripts from the Shanghai Museum corpus ca. 300 BCE, purchased on the antiquities market in Hong Kong, provenance and discovery therefore of uncertain date and locale; published to date in nine nearly-annual installments, 2001–2012.⁸



Fig. 4: Shanghai, 'Zi yi' 緇衣 ('Dark Attire'), str. 01.⁹

⁸ See Ma Chengyuan 2001, 1–4, for the initial brief account of the purchase and scope of the collection. Apart from this, the acquisition of these strips by the Shanghai Museum was announced in the *Wen hui bao* 文匯報 newspaper on 5 January, 1999, pp. 28–29. I am grateful to Ms. Sun Yingying 孫瑩瑩 (University of Washington) for informing me of this newspaper announcement. Volumes two through nine, all edited nominally by Ma Chengyuan, appeared in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2012.

⁹ Ma Chengyuan 2001, 45. As with figure three, the image here is of a single unbroken strip that has been photographically divided into seven pieces.

Bamboo strip manuscripts from the Tsinghua University collection, which, like their Shanghai Museum counterparts, were purchased on the antiquities market in Hong Kong and are therefore of undocumented provenance and discovery. On the basis of the physical appearance and shape of the bamboo strips themselves and the distinctive features of the orthography, the Chinese scholars charged with editing this corpus of material have determined that they are mid to late Warring States period manuscripts, that is, roughly the late fourth century BCE, about the same date as the Guodian and Shanghai manuscripts mentioned above (Li Xueqin 2010,1–4).



Left and up: Fig. 5: Tsinghua 'Jin teng' 金滕 ('The Metal-bound Coffin') str. 01-02 (right–left).¹⁰

¹⁰ Li Xueqin 2010, 75. On the reverse of the last bamboo strip of this manuscript is written a title that says *Zhou Wu wang you ji Zhou gong suo zi yi dai wang zhi zhi* 周武王又[有]疾周公所自[以]代[代]王之志 ('Zhou gong's intention to offer himself in place of the king when king Wu of Zhou was seriously ill'). This ought strictly speaking be used as the name of the manuscript, but because it is somewhat unwieldy and because the content of the manuscript matches very closely the well-known

The non-literary manuscript category includes medical and legal texts, divinatory works, hemerological records, civil and military administrative orders and records, etc. Three of the best known and most widely studied collections of such manuscripts are:

Han period (206 BCE – 220 CE) wooden slip documents from Edsen Gol (Chinese Juyan 居延, Inner Mongolia), known generally as Juyan Hanjian 居延漢簡.¹¹

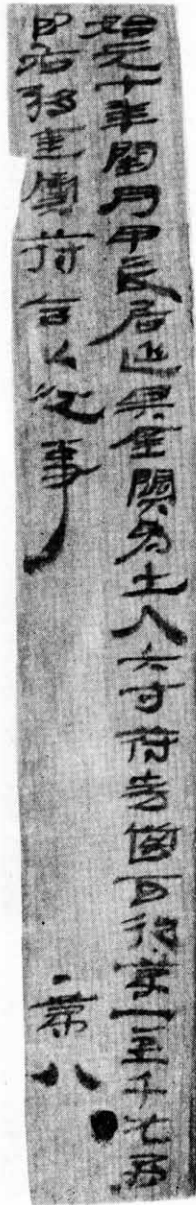


Fig. 6: Wooden strip, administrative document dated to 95 BCE.¹²

'*Jin teng*' ('The Metal-bound Coffers') chapter of the *Shu jing* ('Classic of Documents'), it has become common to refer to the manuscript by the name '*Jin teng*.'

¹¹ See Lao Gan 1957, 1–2; Loewe 1967, 1; Lao Gan 1986.

¹² Cf. Lao Gan 1957, vo. 1, plate 01, transcription at Lao Gan 1986, 1.

Bamboo strip manuscripts from Baoshan 包山, Hubei province, ca. 300 BCE, excavated in late 1986 and early 1987, published in 1991.¹³



Fig. 7: Baoshan divinatory document, str. 234.¹⁴

¹³ See Hubeisheng 1991, 1–2.

¹⁴ Hubeisheng 1991, vol. 2, plate 193; transcription at Hubeisheng 1991, vol. 1, 368. As with illustration three, the image here is of a single unbroken strip that has been photographically divided into four pieces as a practical matter.

Bamboo strip manuscripts from Zhangjiashan 張家山, Hubei province, ca. 200 BCE (Zhangjiashan tomb itself closed in 186 BCE or shortly thereafter), excavated in late 1983 and early 1984, published in 2001.¹⁵



Fig. 8: Zhangjiashan, 'Yin shu' 引書 ('Breathing & Stretching Exercises') str. 01.¹⁶
(left: obverse, with text; right: reverse, with title)

¹⁵ See Zhangjiashan 2001, 1–2.

¹⁶ See Zhangjiashan 2001, 109, transcription and notes at Zhangjiashan 2001, 285.

B. Hand-writing style

In his handbook on Latin palaeography the late Bernhard Bischoff recognizes 'two fundamentally different techniques of writing... the calligraphic and the cursive'. The former, he states, is 'proper to bookhands', the latter 'to the whole spectrum of everyday scripts'.¹⁷ Bischoff offers a number of very precise details about the Latin writing techniques that characterize the differences between these two styles. These concern the diachronic development of the letters of the Latin alphabet, in particular the relation between the old cursive and the development of Latin uncial and half-uncial letters. In drawing a distinction between these two writing techniques, apart from the shape of the letters themselves, he also takes into account such things as the preparation and shape of the quill, the angle at which the writing instrument is held relative to what is being written on, the care with which the writing instrument is or is not raised from the writing surface to produce discretely executed or cursively linked letters, etc.¹⁸

In order to consider scripts other than Latin in this regard we might generalize the difference between the two techniques roughly in the following way.

Book-hand / calligraphic writing: formal, executed with care, attention to varying pressure on the writing surface and angle of the writing instrument and to general orthographic precision; neat and often elegant orthography, with attention to the appearance of the manuscript as a whole.

Cursive writing: informal, casual, executed without apparent conscious attention to the distinction between broad and fine strokes, little or no attention to varying pressure or angle of the writing instrument, minimal care given to orthographic precision, graphs are 'run on', often becoming linked one to the next; not neat and rarely elegant, apparent lack of concern with the appearance of the finished product.

In a nutshell, we can say that book-hand script is *refined*, cursive writing is *utilitarian*. Bischoff suggests that the contrast in writing technique can be correlated with a contrast in the kind of document written; the refined book-hand script was used chiefly 'in elevated higher grades of writing' and the utilitarian cursive was in 'daily use', written by 'everyone'.¹⁹

Can we identify anything in early Chinese manuscripts similar to this two-way distinction in early Latin writing technique and its possible correlation with manuscript content? If so, what are the implications of such a distinction? Illustrations one through five above are all passages from

¹⁷ See Bischoff 1986, 51.

¹⁸ See Bischoff 1986, 51–53.

¹⁹ See Bischoff 1986, 53.

well-known literary texts. The form of writing in each case, though different in some places one from the other, seems overall to fit the criteria for refined book-hand status. Illustrations six through eight by contrast are all passages from non-literary works and would seem to be written in a comparatively casual, everyday utilitarian style. The writing technique associated with literary works in these examples, which I am suggesting might be called a refined, book-hand script, shows, among other features, a more regular and more generous use of space between individual characters than do the utilitarian scripts of the non-literary pieces. In the case of the Mawangdui silk manuscript, we find also red lines separating the vertical columns of characters. These are features that enhance the appearance of the manuscripts as physical objects; they are not characteristics of the actual ‘letter-form’ orthography *per se*. This suggests that the distinction between refined and utilitarian writing techniques embraces more than simply character form, and is a feature of manuscripts in all of their physical as well as orthographic respects.²⁰

The distinction between refined script and utilitarian should not be confused with the general historical development, as it is traditionally understood, of the so-called Han *li shu* 隸書 ‘clerical’ script emerging out of the pre-Han *xiao zhuan* 小篆 ‘small seal’ script. The term ‘clerical script’ refers to that Qin-Han-period form of writing that is supposed eventually to have become the Han ‘standard,’ and should not be allowed to imply a use only for clerical, i.e., administrative documents.²¹ The script of illustration six, the wooden administrative document dated internally to 95 BCE, might be thought to reflect nothing more than the evolution of writing in general from the forms seen in the manuscripts of one or two centuries earlier, irrespective of the literary ~ non-literary distinction. But the same suspicion cannot be maintained for the scripts of the manuscripts shown in illustrations seven and eight, the first of which is essentially contemporaneous with the Guodian and Shanghai manuscripts and the second of which is contemporaneous with the Mawangdui manuscripts.

Conversely, the most frequently made observation about the script of the two Mawangdui silk manuscripts is that the second of these two silk manuscripts (illustration two), dating from the early second century BCE, uses the Han *li shu* 隸

書 ‘clerical’ script, whereas the first (illustration one), dating from the late third century BCE, about a generation earlier, is written in the pre-Han *xiao zhuan* 小篆 ‘small seal’ script, as are the bamboo strips of about a century earlier (figures three, four and five). The later of the two Mawangdui silk manuscripts, using the *li shu* 隸書 ‘clerical’ script, is all the same very much a literary text, and its overall appearance, including the fact that it is written on silk in the first place, conforms to the general criteria for a formal-hand manuscript. This example shows that the terms *xiao zhuan* 小篆 ‘small seal’ (pre-Han) and *li shu* 隸書 ‘clerical’ (Han) refer to script types, distinguished by changes in both graphic structure, stroke ductus and minor calligraphic features that can be observed in the development of the writing from the fourth to the second centuries BCE, and that this distinction is separate from the matter of formal vs. quotidian orthography.²² The general point to be considered is that manuscripts with literary content and qualities are typically written in a refined calligraphic style and manuscripts of an administrative, legal, medical, calendrical or other prosaic kind tend to be written more informally, in a utilitarian style. The distinction is not absolute, of course. Based on an informal and limited survey, it seems that while literary manuscripts are rarely found written in a casual, quotidian script, non-literary manuscripts

²² Chen Jianguo and Xu Min in the preface to their dictionary of Qin-Han manuscript characters suggest that the difference between the two Mawangdui *Laozi* silk manuscripts is not one of time, but is rather a distinction between a ‘cursive’ *li shu* ‘clerical script’ (the A manuscript) and a ‘formal’ *li shu* ‘clerical script’ (the B manuscript). (Chen and Xu 1991, 3) To be sure, it is generally recognized that there were diverse forms of the *li shu* ‘clerical script’, some comparatively early examples overlapping with the ‘late’ use of the *xiao zhuan* ‘small seal’ script in the third century BCE. To my eyes the difference between the *Laozi* A manuscript and the B is more than a cursive vs. a formal *li shu*; the structure of some of the commonest characters is substantially different in one from the other. In the end whether we call the script as it is found in these two Mawangdui silk manuscripts both *li shu* or one a ‘late’ *xiao zhuan* and the other *li shu* is of less moment than how we understand the features of the script for purposes of dating the manuscripts and assessing the status that the scribes and users attributed to them. Yan Lingfeng in an early study of the Mawangdui *Laozi* silk manuscripts, while identifying the script of the A manuscript as *xiao zhuan* ‘small seal’ script and that of the B as *li shu* ‘clerical script’, recognizes that these two forms of writing were contemporaneous with each other in the late third century BCE, and thinks, contrary to the prevailing view, that both manuscripts are pre-Han. (Yan Lingfeng 1976, 1–2) The Chen and Xu characterization of the scripts of the two manuscripts as ‘cursive’ *li shu* in one case and ‘formal’ *li shu* in the other raises the problem of how to establish objective definitions of something as inherently subjective as judging a ‘cursive’ from a ‘formal’ script. At the extremes, of course, where the differences would seem to be objectively discernible, it is easy to point to one or the other. But neither of the two Mawangdui manuscripts is in my view an extreme example of either a cursive or a formal script, though both seem closer to the ‘refined’ quality of a formal script that tends to be found in manuscripts of literary works, which both the A and B manuscripts are, than to anything that could be considered an everyday casual script.

²⁰ It is also possible, perhaps likely, that the preparation and quality of the writing medium varies directly with the distinction between a literary text in a refined script and a non-literary text in a quotidian script, but for the early Chinese manuscripts, to which very few scholars have direct physical access, this speculation is difficult to assess.

²¹ See Qiu Xigui 2000, 89–130, which presents the traditional view in detail and Galambos 2006, 31–63, where the considerable uncertainties about the traditional view are set out.

may not so infrequently be found written in a formal, refined book-hand. In other words the distinction between refined and everyday script and its correlation with manuscript type is somewhat uneven, tending in one direction more than the other; literary manuscripts and a refined script almost always go together, but the association of non-literary manuscripts with a casual, quotidian script is less predictable.

These observations may seem unsurprising, even trivial, but if the correlations can be sustained generally by examination of a large number of manuscripts, we might be able to gain some measure of understanding of the contemporaneous attitude toward written documents overall. What did the people involved with these manuscripts, – the people who compiled them, the people who ordered them produced, the scribes who wrote them, the people who read or recited them, the people who included them in tombs, etc. – think about the physical object itself, such features as its appearance, its production, its utility and its cultural status, apart from its content?²³

If the distinction between a refined and a utilitarian writing technique can in fact be recognized in a large number of early Chinese manuscripts, then we can turn the implication around, without too great a risk of circularity, and infer that a manuscript written in a careful, refined, book-hand should be understood as having some measure of high status among its creators and users, even if its content to our eyes does not at first suggest such ‘literary’ merit.²⁴ The more general, typological question with respect to manuscript cultures, is whether such a basic, two-way distinction in hand-writing technique, correlated with content, can be identified for manuscripts from other areas and periods and what such a correlation may imply about diverse cultural norms?

²³ There is a further consideration in regard to the bamboo-strip manuscripts that are found in tombs. Xing Yitian has pointed out that the very large numbers of bamboo strips constituting what would seem to be a single manuscript text suggests that such texts were written explicitly for burial with a deceased person. The sheer weight and size of such a single manuscript, when as many as a hundred bamboo strips are strung together into a single physical unit, would make it very unwieldy and its actual use very difficult. For this reason Xing Yitian speculates that such manuscripts as are found in tombs were written just for burial, and not for any actual use by a living person. (Xing Yitian 2011, 21–23).

²⁴ The *qiǎn cè* 遣冊 ‘record of tomb contents’, for example, of Mawangdui tomb three consists of over four hundred bamboo strips, each recording the quantity of one item included in the tomb. While this can in no way be considered a ‘literary’ text, much of it is written all the same in a script that would appear to be more akin to an elegant book-hand than to an everyday utilitarian style, and in that respect befitting a funerary document. See He Jiejun 2004, plates XX–LI. I am grateful to Ms. Sun Yingying for pointing out to me that, because some of the strips appear more elegant than others, the script on these four-hundred plus strips suggests that they were not all written by the same person.

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