

The Evolution of Ancient and Modern Chinese Characters: A Study of Bone Inscriptions from Western Han Dynasty

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Abstract: The tens of thousands of bone inscriptions unearthed from the Weiyang Palace site of the Western Han dynasty capital Chang'an in the mid-1980s contain a mixture of seal script, clerical script, and cursive styles. Analysis of the calligraphic features of these bone inscriptions shows they inherited the Qin seal script but evolved into Han clerical script, providing authentic historical evidence of the evolution of ancient and modern Chinese characters.

Keywords: Bone inscriptions; Engravings; Clerical script evolution; Aesthetics

As a form of engraving, bone inscriptions resemble pictographic symbols, oracle bone script, bronze inscriptions, and cliff carvings in both shape and production technique of carving. Regarding the function of bone inscriptions, there are three main theories—archives, tags, and tally sticks. Also, this batch of bone inscriptions spanned the entire Western Han dynasty instead of disappearing with the objects they were attached to, indicating their importance as national-level archives for preservation, reference and use rather than just labels for objects. Hence, it is full of research value.

1. Clerical Script Evolution and Terminology for Bone Inscriptions

In the evolution sequence of Chinese characters, clerical script occupies the second place and is considered the watershed between ancient and modern characters, comprising Qin clerical script, Bafen script, and Han clerical script. Qin clerical script represents the gestation period of clerical script. The formation of clerical script should have occurred from the mid to late Western Han dynasty to the Xin dynasty. To the Eastern Han dynasty, clerical script was fully matured, exemplified by two main categories. First, solemn and refined, like the *Yiying Stele*; second, simple and natural, like the *Shimen Song*.

During the bone inscriptions period, Chinese characters were also evolving spirally from ancient to modern forms. As Jiang Shanguo said, “The clerical script transformation was a qualitative change in the evolution of Chinese characters.”^[1] First, losing pictographic shapes and becoming linear and symbolic; second, changing from rounded to square shapes; third, developing vertical, horizontal, and diagonal strokes; fourth, the horizontal stroke “heng” developing the “silkworm head-swallow tail” twist, and the “pie” stroke developing an upward flick. As Wang Yong said, “The pursuit of simplification and efficiency in the clerical script transformation was mainly reflected in the simplification of the complex structures in the seal script.”^[2] Therefore, the brisk bone inscriptions represent the casual calligraphic style of the Western Han dynasty and can be considered as “vulgar clerical script” of that period.








2. Structural Features of Characters in Bone Inscriptions

Below is an analysis of the similarities and differences between characters on the bone inscriptions and Qin clerical script, Bafen script, and Han clerical script in terms of character structure, to examine the transitional role of the bone inscriptions in the evolution of ancient and modern Chinese characters.

2.1 Independent Structure

The character “yuan” on bone inscription 14050 is compared with the same character on the Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin Slips, Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts, Juyan Han bamboo slips, Beijing University Han bamboo slips, Liqi Stele and Shimen Song. (Table 1)

Table 1: Comparison of the independent character structure of “yuan”

Independent Structure of “yuan”						
						
Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin Slips	Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts	Juyan Han bamboo slips	Bone inscription 14050	Beijing University Han bamboo slips	Liqi Stele	Shimen Song








The “yuan” character on bone inscription 14050 inherits the same lineage as the examples from the Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin Slips, Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts, JuYan Han bamboo slips, Beijing University Han bamboo slips, Liqi Stele and Shimen Song, clearly showing the evolution from Qin clerical script to Bafen and Han clerical script.

The independent character structure in this type of bone inscription has already trended toward Han clerical script, eliminating the seal script shape and displaying new stroke order. It represents a new character style after seal script.

2.2 Left-Right Structure

The character “de” on bone inscription 5294 is compared with the same character on the Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts, Yinque Mountain Han bamboo slips, Juyan Han bamboo slips, Beijing University Han bamboo slips, Liqi Stele and Shimen Song. (Table 2)

Table 2: Comparison of the left-right character structure of “de”

Left-Right Structure of “de”						
						
Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts	Yinque Mountain Han bamboo slips	Juyan Han bamboo slips	Bone inscription 5294	Beijing University Han bamboo slips	Liqi Stele	Shimen Song








The “heart” component of the “de” character on bone inscription 5294 retains the seal script style. But the “de” on bone inscription 5294 also displays the basic features of mature clerical script like the flattened shape, silkworm tail ending stroke, and right-leaning shape, with the double person radical on the left compressed modestly.

In summary, the left-right structured “de” character on bone inscription 5294 reflects the historical trajectory of the evolution from ancient to modern Chinese characters. Also, the mixed use of ancient and modern script seen frequently on the bone inscriptions indicates the writing styles circulating in society were not yet completely unified.

2.3 Top-Bottom Structure

The character “shou” on bone inscription 13601 is compared with the same character on the Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin Slips, Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts, Juyan Han bamboo slips, Beijing University Han bamboo slips, Yiyong Stele and Shimen Song. (Table 3)

Table 3: Comparison of the top-bottom character structure of “shou”

Top-Bottom Structure of “shou”						
						
Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin Slips	Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts	Juyan Han bamboo slips	Bone inscription 13601	Beijing University Han bamboo slips	Yiyong Stele	Shimen Song



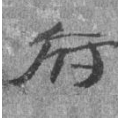

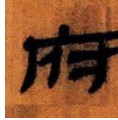


The “shou” character on bone inscription 13601 bears an astonishing resemblance to the one on the Yiyong Stele. As a top-bottom structured character, their prominent common trait is the lack of a dot on the “roof” component. Compared with the “shou” characters from the Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin Slips, Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts, Juyan Han bamboo slips and Beijing University Han bamboo slips, the obvious difference in the “shou” on bone inscription 13601 is the presence or absence of the dot on the roof component.

These examples of clerical script precisely prove that the “clerical transformation” was not linear but spiral advancement, facilitating understanding of the evolution from ancient to modern script.

2.4 Surround Structure

The character “fu” on bone inscription 1326 is compared with the same character on the Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin Slips, Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts, Juyan Han bamboo slips, Beijing University Han bamboo slips, Liqi Stele and Xixia Song. (Table 4)

Table 4: Comparison of the surround character structure of “fu”

Surround Structure of “fu”						
						
Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin Slips	Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts	Juyan Han bamboo slips	Bone inscription 1326	Beijing University Han bamboo slips	Liqi Stele	Xixia Song

Observing closely, the “fu” on bone inscription 1326 and the “fu” on the Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts and Beijing University Han bamboo slips are almost identical in shape, with the initial dot stroke moving in the same downward direction, promoting the evolution from ancient to modern script through the concrete form.

In short, the surround structured “fu” character on bone inscription 1326 not only providing new research material and perspectives on the evolution history of ancient and modern Chinese characters, but also revealing the casual engraving phenomenon that will offer new research material on the development of cursive script. As Zong Baihua said, “Chinese calligraphy is essentially a rhythmic art.”^[3]

3. Aesthetic Implications in the Calligraphy of Bone Inscriptions

Although the systematic study of calligraphic art started in the 1920s, exploration of calligraphic aesthetic thought has existed since the emergence of pictographic writing.

Observing the carving of the Western Han bone inscriptions, it is clear most were engraved directly with a single blade, reflecting the search for beauty by the ancients based on Confucian thinking to establish an aesthetic ethos in Western Han society. Although the hard bony material resulted in fine and shallow engravings, it did not impede the aesthetic expression of the bone inscriptions, instead creating a rugged beauty of form.

For contemporary calligraphic and seal carving creation, one should take stone inscriptions as the basis and only speak of creative innovation after extensive imitation of the masters, with the intent of unconscious innovation. This kind of calligraphic creation builds upon the bone inscriptions as a contemporary manifestation of Han dynasty seals, beneficial for understanding the aesthetic ethos of epigraphy in the Western Han dynasty and providing aesthetic inspiration for calligraphic and seal carving creation.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the bone inscriptions narrow the gap between “writing” and “engraving”, revealing the calligraphic style of the Western Han dynasty. Through comparing the bone inscriptions with Qin clerical script, Bafen script, and Han clerical script, it can be concluded that this batch of bone inscriptions played an epoch-making historical role in the evolution from ancient to modern Chinese characters, Hence, they hold irreplaceable historical value and merit emphasis on in-depth research.

References:

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