

Compiled by Zhang Gongzhe Translated by Shao Da

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

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CONTENTS

A SURVEY OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE

CALLIGRAPHY / 7-19

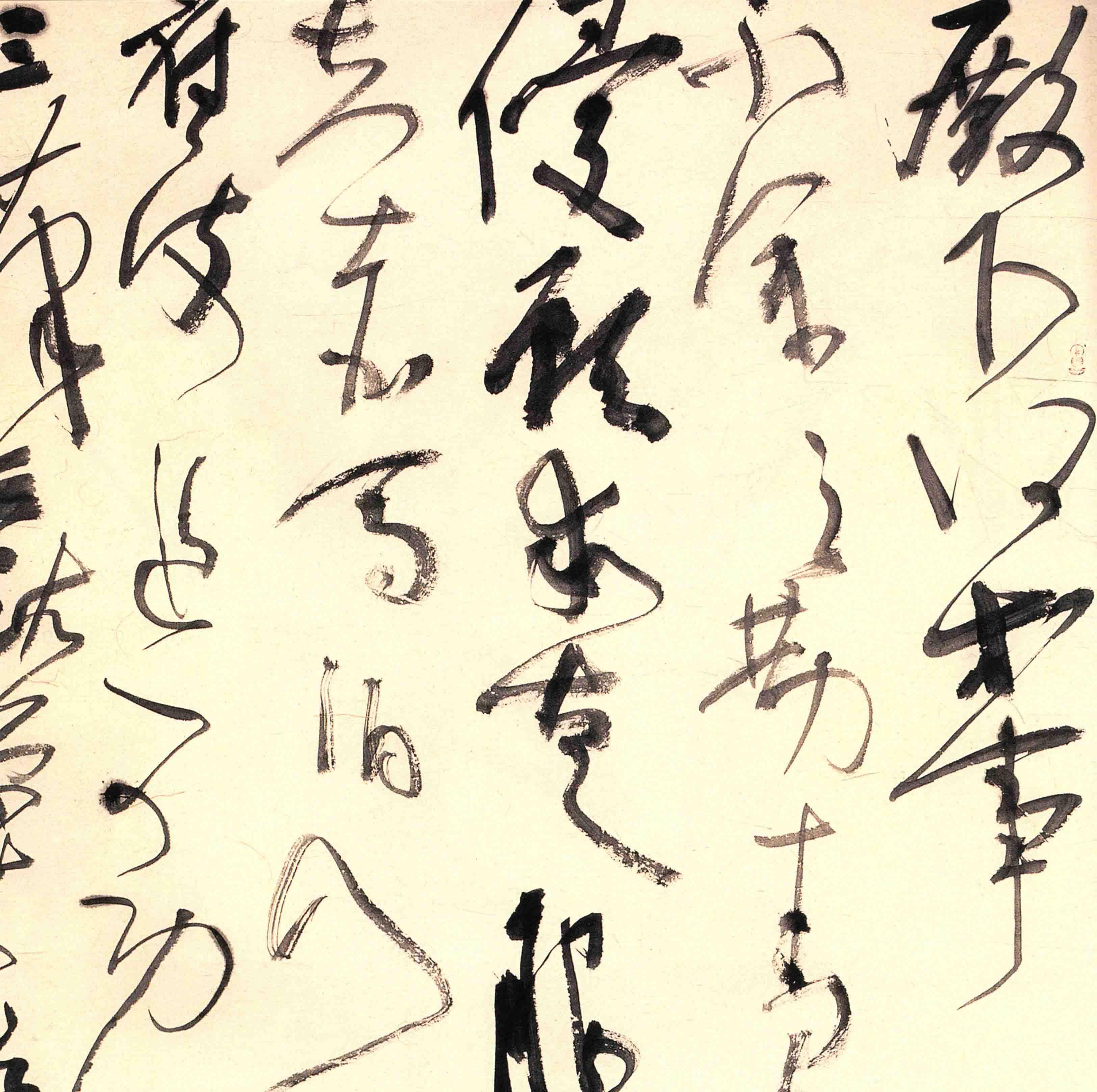
- I CURSIVE SCRIPT / 20-75
- II RUNNING SCRIPT / 76-133
- III SEAL SCRIPT / 134-153
- IV OFFICIAL SCRIPT / 154-167
- V REGULAR SCRIPT / 168-189



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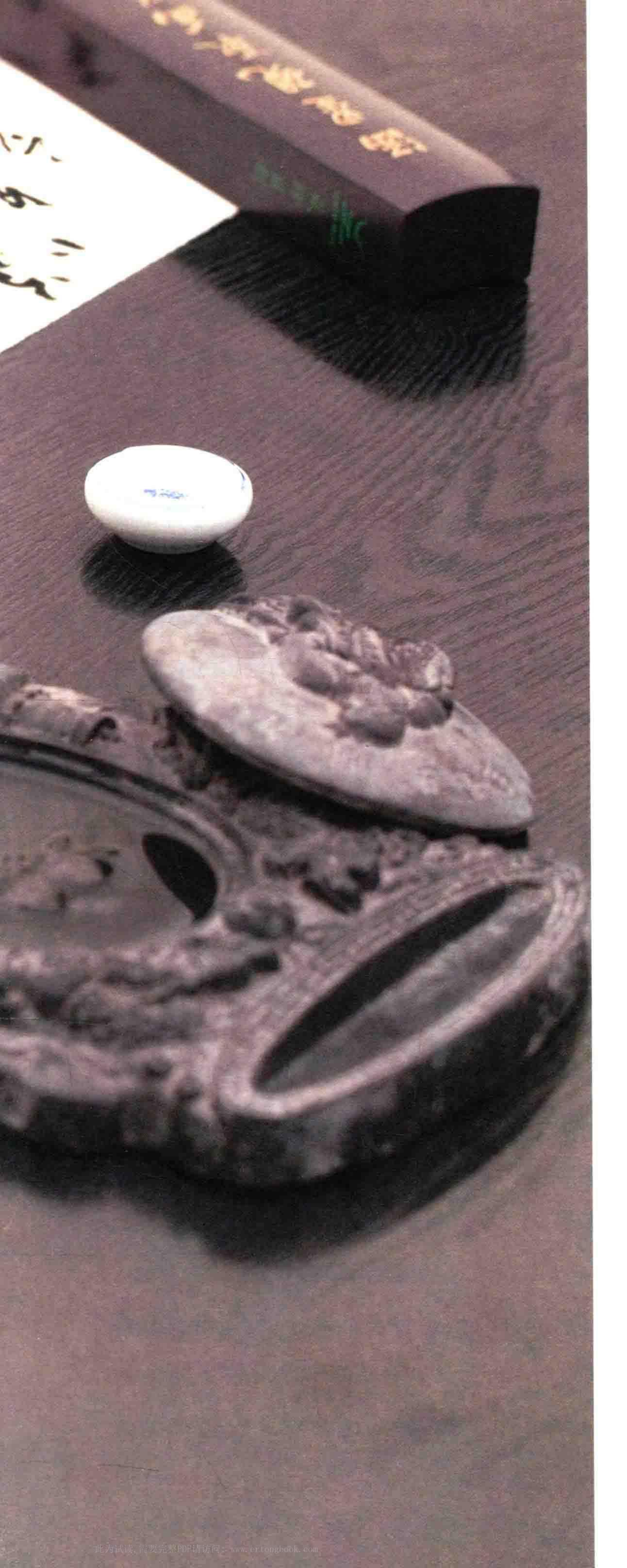
CONTENTS

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- II RUNNING SCRIPT / 76-133
- III SEAL SCRIPT / 134-153
- IV OFFICIAL SCRIPT / 154-167
- V REGULAR SCRIPT / 168-189

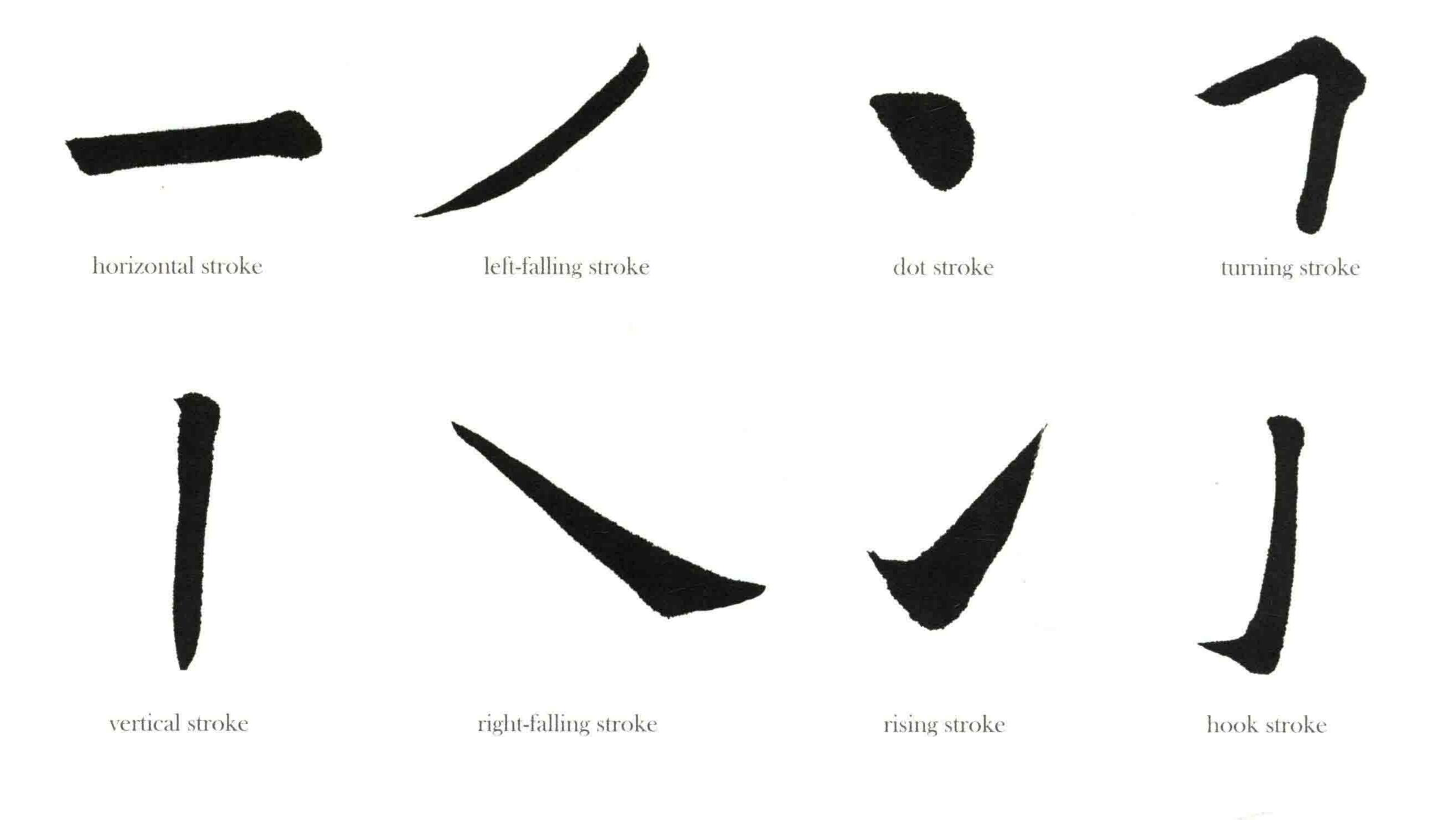




A Survey of Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy

The Chinese Calligraphers Association (CCA) was set up in May 1981, marking the beginning of a new historical period in the development of Chinese calligraphy. Hence this book mainly deals with the art of penmanship since the 1980's.

During the past 30 years or so, Chinese calligraphers have achieved good results, but they have met many problems and challenges as well. Nevertheless, research workers seem to be unprepared for the new situation, reflecting that theory is divorced from practice to some extent in this field. We must admit that, firstly, it's very hard for researchers to stand aloof and take a completely objective view of the new trend in calligraphic creation; secondly, numerous and jumbled data make



theoretical study even more difficult.

The following discussion will centre on two topics, namely, the position of contemporary calligraphy in the long history of Chinese penmanship, and the primary characteristics manifested in calligraphic practice over the past 30 years.

Chinese penmanship, literally "the way of writing," is an art form of writing Chinese characters beautifully with ink and brush on paper to create visual effects and thus inspire an aesthetic feeling. According to legend, Chinese characters were invented by Cang Jie, a historiographer during the reign of the Yellow Emperor. However, to be exact, the origins of Chinese characters can be traced back to the late Shang Dynasty around 3,000 years ago when inscriptions were habitually carved on tortoise shells or animal bones for the purpose of divining or keeping records (known as "oracle bone inscriptions" or jiaguwen in Chinese). Several forms of script that were contemporary with Chinese characters or even earlier had long been consigned to oblivion, but the squareshaped Chinese characters are still in wide use today. Typically, a Chinese character is made up of three elements, namely, form, meaning and sound; special studies on these elements had separately led to the emergence of calligraphy, scholium and phonology.

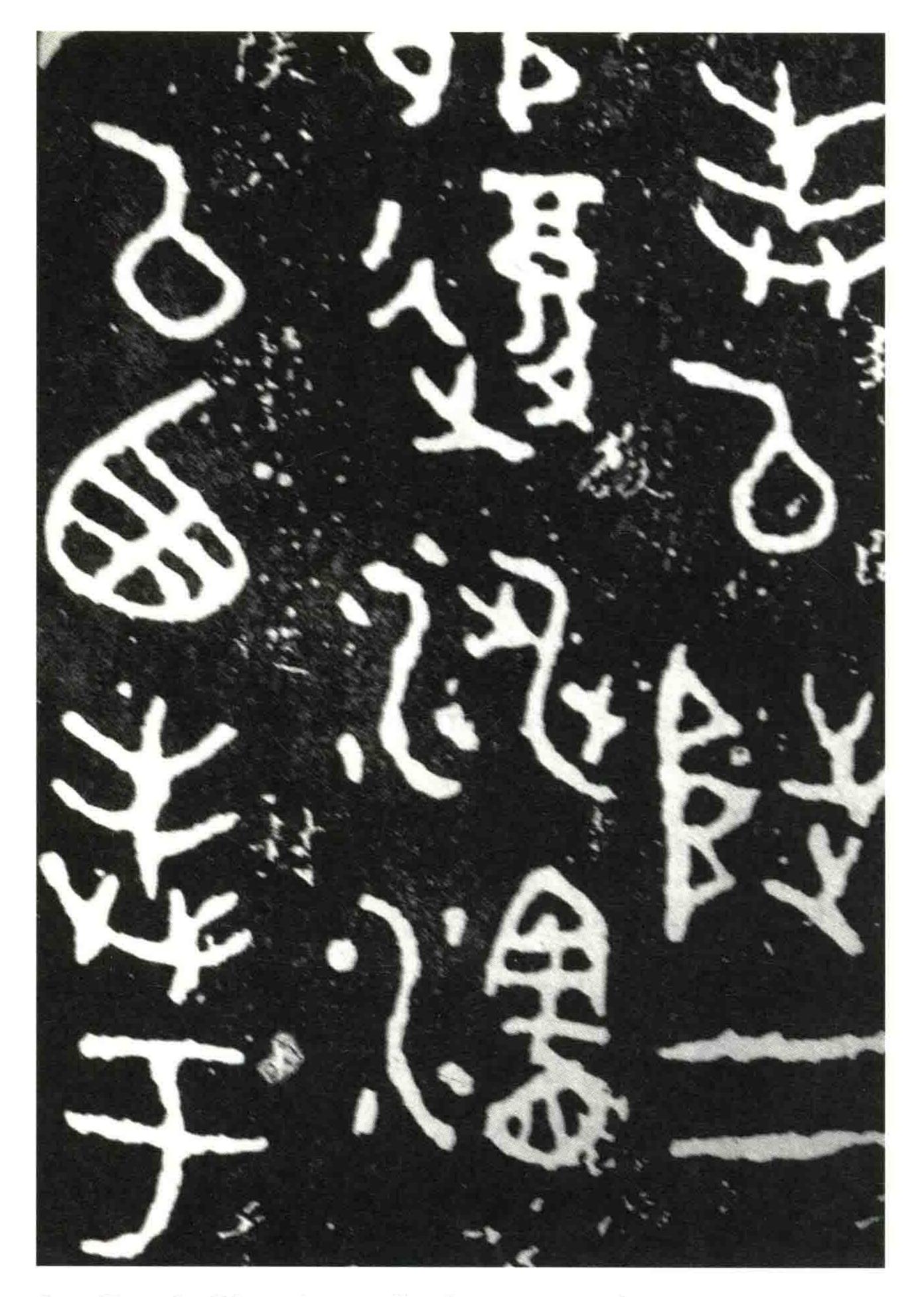
In general, Chinese characters consist of eight basic strokes—the horizontal, vertical, rising, left-falling, right-falling, turning, dot and hook strokes, and each character has quite different structure, which offers many potential possibilities for the way of writing. As an art form, Chinese calligraphy relies heavily on its unique writing tools—the brush, inkstick, inkslab and paper, which are commonly called "the four treasures of the study."

The writing brush made from bamboo or wood as its shaft and animal hair (like rabbit, goat or weasel's) as its tip boasts a history of over 2,000 years. It can make various strokes in calligraphy, thus graphically reflecting the writer's changing feelings. The inkstick mainly made of soot and animal glue has a long history as well. To prepare liquid ink for brush writing, an inkstick has to be rubbed with water continuously on an inkslab. In modern production of inksticks some ingredients like camphor, borneol and chemical aromatic are added to give off a delicate fragrance.



Sacrificial Vessel Stele (partial) of the Eastern Han, 1.5m high, 0.73m wide, engraved in official script, currently existing in the Confucian Temple in Qufu, Shandong Province

This stele was set up in the second year of Yongshou (156) in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220). The official script (*lishu*) is an ancient style of calligraphy current in the Han Dynasty, simplified from *xiaozhuan* which was adopted by the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty for the purpose of standardizing the Chinese script.



San Family Plate (partial) of Western Zhou, 20.6cm high, 54.6cm diameter, in the collection of the Palace Museum of Taipei

This bronze plate of the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 1100-771 BC), allegedly unearthed from Fengxiang County of Shaanxi Province during the reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty, has an inscription of a total 357 characters. In the Shang-Zhou period, inscriptions were typically engraved on bronze objects in the style of dazhuan (also called jinwen, the predecessor of xiaozhuan of the Qin Dynasty).



Jiaguwen

The earliest known Chinese script, the inscriptions carved on tortoise shells or animal bones (known as "oracle bone inscriptions" or *jiaguwen* in Chinese) of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-1100 BC) display a fully developed writing system. They were found in 1899 from the Yin ruins (ruins of the late Shang capital city near Xiaotun village, Anyang City, Henan Province; the later period of the Shang Dynasty was also called Yin, hence the name). The Shang royal family usually practiced divination by means of carved bones and tortoise shells. These ancient characters continued to be in use for some time even after the downfall of the dynasty.

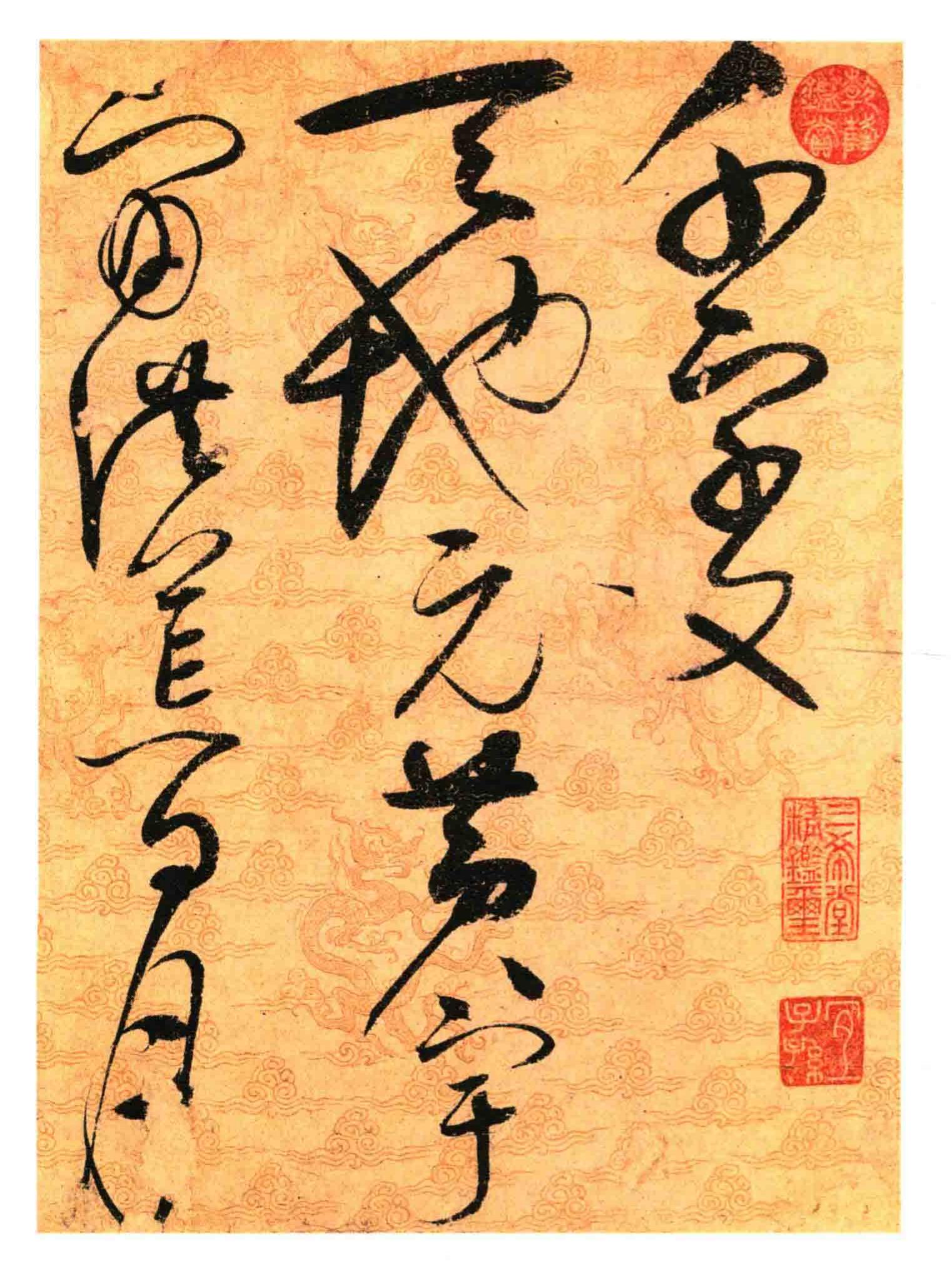
The inkslab or inkstone is used as a stone mortar for the grinding of an inkstick and containment of liquid ink. Occasionally made from other materials like jade, iron, pottery or porcelain, the inkslab itself is a worth-collecting handicraft piece due to exquisite carving. The Xuan paper, a high quality rice paper good for calligraphy, is so named because it was originally produced in the well-known historical city of Xuancheng in southeastern Anhui Province. Usually with the bark of wingceltis (Pteroceltis tatarinowii) as raw material, the Xuan paper features a pliable and tough texture, fine and delicate grain, white and smooth surface, and great resistance to ageing, corrosion and moth-eating. Therefore, it's said that artistic works on such paper may have a lifetime of a thousand years.

Historically speaking, the development of Chinese calligraphy went through several stages. In the beginning period of pre-Qin (c. 2100-221 BC), jiaguwen carved on animal bones and jinwen (literally "bronze inscriptions") on bronze objects—often jointly referred to as "greater seal script" or dazhuan in Chinese—were the current style of calligraphy.



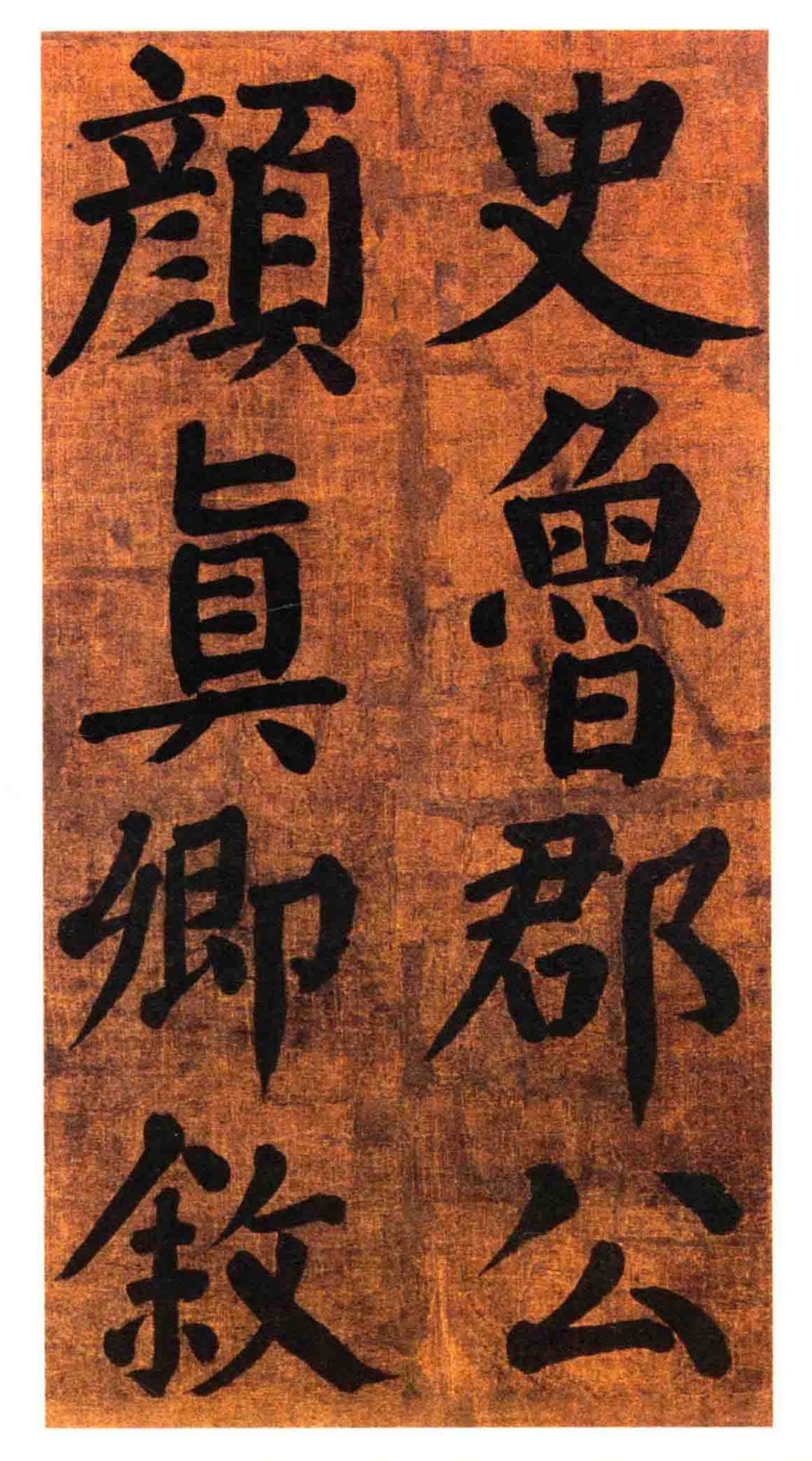
A partial section of the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" in running script, by Wang Xizhi (303-361, or 321-379)

Wang Xizhi, also called Wang Youjun (literally "right general") due to a post he once held, was one of the most esteemed Chinese calligraphers in history. Traditionally he has been referred to as "the Sage of Calligraphy." His representative work "Orchid Pavilion Preface" was composed in the year of 352, consisting of 324 characters in 28 lines. It's the introduction to a collection of poems written by his 41 literati friends when gathering at the Orchid Pavilion near Shaoxing of Zhejiang Province for the Spring Purification Festival—a traditional festival celebrated on the third day of the third lunar month by going for an outing or picnicking by the water. The original is lost, but there are numerous tracing copies and rubbings in existence today.



A partial section of the "Thousand Character Reader" in cursive script, 31.5×1172cm, by Zhao Ji (1082-1135)

Zhao Ji, the eighth emperor of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) who was called reverently Song Huizong after death, was a distinguished calligrapher and painter. He composed this long scroll at age 41 in a vigorous and racy style.



A partial section of the "Linking Verses at Zhushan Hall" in regular script, 28.2×13.7cm, by Yan Zhenqing (709-784)

Yan Zhenqing was a leading calligrapher of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) known for his regular script style, which is called the Yan style and is often imitated by calligraphy learners. He composed this piece in the year of 774. Most of his works are stele inscriptions including the "Duobao Pagoda Stele" and the "Guojia Miao Stele," all written in regular script.

Such inscriptions retain the features of the primitive pictograph. Starting with the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty (Ying Zheng by name, 259-210 BC) who unified China for the first time in history and took measures to standardize the script, dazhuan was simplified into xiaozhuan (lesser seal script) in the Qin (221-206 BC) and further simplified into lishu (official script) in the following Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220). Other forms of calligraphy like xingshu (running script), caoshu (cursive script) and kaishu (regular script) also appeared in the Qin-Han period, and characterized by vigorous strokes, they gradually evolved into the current style of the Sui-Tang period (581-907) when the country was powerful and prosperous. Literati penmanship became popular in the Song-Yuan period (960-1368), focusing on the expression of the writers' personal feelings and thus giving an entirely new complexion to Chinese calligraphy. During the Ming-Qing period (1368-1911), the art of calligraphy used the technique of ink and wash painting and seal cutting, and reached a new height.

In fact, over thousands of years, calligraphy has