Chinese Decorated Letter Papers

Suzanne E. Wright

Paper is one of the items traditionally classed as the Four Treasures of the Scholar’s Study (wenfang sibao 文房四寶), along with ink, brush and inkstone. It is not known when these four writing implements came to be regarded as a group, but the earliest treatise to deal with them as such is that written by Su Yijian 蘇易簡 (957–995), Wenfang sipu 文房四譜 (Four guides to the scholar’s study), which has a postface by Su dated to 986. This text collects together extracts from various sources that provide evidence of the history, manufacture, use and appreciation of the items. Ink, paper and inkstone are treated in one juan 卷, while the brush is treated in two, presumably because of the addition of a section on brush force, dealing with calligraphy.1

The invention of paper has been credited to Cai Lun 蔡倫 (fl. ca. 61–121), of ink to Wei Dan 韋誕 (179–253), and of the brush to Meng Tian 蒙恬 (d. 210), but archaeological evidence proves that these writings implements and materials existed long before their traditional dates of origin. Writing brushes have been excavated from several sites dating to the Warring States period (482–221 BCE); a brush discovered in the tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng, Hubei Province, datable to 433 BCE or later is believed to be the earliest such find.2 It seems likely, however, based on the existence of inscriptions that appear to have been written with a brush, that this implement was used long before the Warring States period. The methods of making brushes do not appear to have changed remarkably over the course of Chinese history; bamboo and wood have been the most common materials for the handle, while rabbit, deer and goat hairs have been most frequently used for the tip.

The ink of the Four Treasures generally refers to that material in solid form, which was then ground with water to make a liquid. Most such ink was made using soot, combined with a glue of some type, preservatives and perfumes. An early recipe for making ink is included in Jia Sixie’s 賈思勰 Qimin yaoshu 齊民要術, a sixth-century treatise on agriculture, livestock and food

1 See Amy McNair’s essay in this volume for more on calligraphy in an epistolary context.
2 Tan Weisi, Zeng hou Yi mu, 143. The dating of the tomb is discussed on pp. 39–44. Early evidence regarding use of the brush is discussed in Tsien, Written on Bamboo and Silk, 176–82.
preparation.\(^3\) Ink cakes have been excavated, however, from sites dating as early as the Warring States period; for example a small piece of solid ink was found together with an inkstone and grinder in a Warring States period tomb at Shuihudi, Yunmeng, Hubei province.\(^4\) As with the brush, the use of black and red ink in the Neolithic and Shang periods is inferred from painting on ceramic wares and writing on oracle bones.\(^5\)

Among the Four Treasures, ink and paper are the two objects that were least likely to be preserved long term, and both were the subject of woodblock-printed catalogs in the Ming dynasty that were meant to draw attention to their aesthetic qualities and perhaps encourage owners to collect rather than consume them. The two largest and most copiously illustrated of the ink catalogs are *Fangshi mopu* 方氏墨譜 (Fang’s guide to ink) produced by Fang Yulu 方于魯 (fl. 1570–1619) in 1588 and *Chengshi moyuan* 程氏墨苑 (Cheng’s garden of ink) published by Cheng Dayue 程大約 (1541–ca. 1616) in 1605; both ink makers were from Huizhou, in present-day Anhui province, and they were business rivals.\(^6\) Such catalogs generally avoid direct mention of the commercial ventures with which they were linked, but one seventeenth-century woodblock-printed book of ink cake designs, *Mo shi* 墨史 (History of ink), authored by Cheng Yi 程義 (fl. 1662–1722), another Huizhou native, seems to have been produced specifically to promote the sale of Cheng’s product; in addition to information on the production of ink and encomia from friends of Cheng, a section titled “Wuxuezhai mo mu” 悟雪斋墨目 (Catalog of Wuxuezhai inks) lists ink sticks by their names and specifies the grade, weight and price of at least the better quality items.\(^7\)

Once ink was produced in solid form it became necessary to grind and mix it with water to produce a liquid substance for writing. Inkstones were made for this purpose, most commonly of stone or ceramic, but also occasionally of metal or lacquer. Examples of this form consisting of a stone base and grinder have been found from the pre-Han periods, such as the set excavated together with the above-mentioned ink cake from tomb four at Shuihudi, which according

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\(^3\) *Qimin yaoshu*, 538–39. This recipe is translated in Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk*, 185.

\(^4\) “Hubei Yunmeng Shuihudi shiyi zuo etc.,” 53, plate 5. Tomb 4, in which these items were discovered, is dated to the late Warring States through comparison with tomb 7, which is dated to 256 BCE in an inscription, see p. 59.

\(^5\) Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk*, 183.

\(^6\) The fullest discussion of these two works is found in Lin, “The Proliferation of Images.”

\(^7\) This catalog is described in Shu Chao, “Ji moshu sizhong,” 72–73.