

Chapter Two The Asian Contribution

The origins of the Chinese civilization are also a great mystery as was the Mesopotamian origins. And just like the Sumerians and Egyptians, the inventions and advances they made were pivotal in the history of Graphic Design. Among the many innovations of the ancient Chinese were the compass, gunpowder, calligraphy and paper.

Most significant of these is writing on paper, which became the method for spreading European language, culture, religion and law throughout the world. Europeans adopted these inventions and used them to conquer most of the world.

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Earliest form of Chinese calligraphy is called Chia-ku-wen or bone and shell script. This ancient writing closely bound to the art of divination and was pictographic in nature. The next phase of Chinese calligraphy is called Chin-wen or bronze script. It consisted of inscriptions on cast bronze metal objects. These objects included food and water vessels, musical instruments, weapons, mirrors, coins and seals. Messages were scribed in the casting molds to preserve answers from gods and ancestors during divination. Bronze was also ideal for legal contracts, penal codes, and treaties.

The third phase of calligraphy is called Hsiao Chuan. Artists in different places developed different writing styles until Chinese calligraphy was unified under emperor Shih Huang Ti. He was a ruthless emperor-killing many building the great china wall and burying Confucian scholars alive. However, he unified the Chinese people into one nation and set forth decrees standardizing weighs, measurements, laws and writing to name a few things. In this style of Chinese calligraphy the lines are thicker and the strokes more even. More curves and circles are used and each character is neatly balanced and fills the bounding square nicely.

The last phase is called Chen-shu. It has been used for the last 2000 years. The skill of the calligrapher is an important element. It is considered the highest art form in China. And there is also a strong bond between oriental painting and calligraphy. This is a Li, a three legged pottery vessel. The evolution of the calligraphic character Li came from this pot.

Chinese calligraphy was inspired by nature. Every dot and stroke is given the energy of a living thing. Spiritual states and deep feelings can be expressed in calligraphy. Calligraphy was said to have bones (authority and size) blood (texture of the ink) and muscle (spirit and vital force). Li Fangying created this in 1744. Notice the attention given to white space and how the simple but elegant bamboo shaft slightly leaning to the right contrasts with the straight vertical letterforms.

Dynastic records indicate that the inventor of paper was Ts'ai Lun. He was a eunuch and high government official in 105AD. Whether he really invented it or if he perfected a current invention is not known. In earlier times, Chinese wrote on bamboo slats or wooden strips. Ts'ai Lun's process for making paper stayed almost unchanged until the nineteenth-century England mechanized it. Paper was not only made for scrolls or documents but also for wrapping paper, wallpaper, toilet paper and napkins.

In this scroll we see the visual design qualities of calligraphy. There is a range from delicate to strong and bold and how they contrast and yet compliment each other. The first idea concerning the origins of printing centers around the engraved seals used to make identification. It is believed that this evolved into printing. In relief printing, which was the first kind of printing, the spaces around an image on a flat surface are cut away, the remaining raised surface is inked and a sheet of paper is placed over the surface and rubbed to transfer the inked image to the page.

During the Third Dynasty carving calligraphic characters into a flat surface of jade, silver, gold or ivory made seals called chops. This was the fundamental technique for block printing. The negative and positive shapes were utilized as in this 14th century painting, a goat and sheep, by Yuan Chao Meng-fu. Both styles of printing could be combined. The second theory about the origins of printing focuses on the early Chinese practice of making inked rubbings from inscriptions carved in stone. In 165AD Confucian classics were carved into stone to ensure an accurate record. Ink rubbings made copies of these inscriptions.

Whether relief printing evolved from chops, rubbings from stone inscriptions or a combination of both is not known. It is not known also who invented it. With a skilled printer, it was possible to print over two hundred impressions per hour.

The oldest surviving printed manuscript is the Diamond Sutra from 868 AD. The Diamond Sutra was a scroll that contains text that conveys Buddha's revelations to his elderly follower Subhuti. The high quality of the printing suggests that the craft of printing had progressed to an excellent level by the time this manuscript was produced and the wide spread of knowledge was almost a bonus occurrence.

In the early 9th century AD, the Chinese government began to issue paper certificates of deposit to merchants who deposited metal currency with the state. When a critical shortage of iron money developed shortly before the year 1000, paper money was designed, printed, and used in lieu of metal coins. The government took control of currency's production. In addition to money, religious block prints bearing religious images and texts received wide distribution. In this religious block print we see a prayer text placed below and illustration of a Buddhist personification of supreme wisdom riding a lion. China thus became the first society where ordinary people came into daily contact with printed images.

In the 10th century, prime minister Fang Tao turned to the rapidly developing block printing method for the task of printing over a course of 21 years, 130 volumes of the nine Confucian classics. The main goal of this project was to make new master texts, but the project ended up taking a fairly obscure craft and thrusting it into the mainstream.

The scroll became replaced with page formats during this time. First, folded books that opened accordion style were made. The pages from the Pen ts'ao medical herbal were assembled in this fashion. Illustrations and calligraphy were used for headings. Rules and margins were used to separate the text into sections.

Another form of early graphic design and printing was playing cards. Many of the design conventions used, such as suit, the depiction of royalty and numbering sequences survive in playing cards today.

Around 1045AD the Chinese alchemist Pi Sheng extended the process of block printing by developing the concept of moveable type. Because calligraphy is not alphabetical, types were organized according to rhymes. The large numbers of characters in the Chinese language made filing and retrieving the characters difficult. Movable type never did replace hand cut woodblock in the Orient. It is no wonder considering that the Chinese language has over 44 thousand characters. The Chinese even invented a “lazy Susan” type holder for the small blocks of characters. The Chinese contribution to the evolution of visual communications was formidable. During Europe’s thousand-year medieval period, Chinas inventions of paper and printing spread slowly westward, arriving in Europe as the Renaissance began. This 14-century transition began in Italy and was marked by the rediscovery of classical knowledge, a flowering of the arts, and the beginnings of modern science. All were aided by printing.