

# An Exploration of 20th Century Malaya Oracle Bone Script Calligraphy: Focusing on Calligraphers Coming to the South

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## Abstract

In the first half of the twentieth century, China set off a wave of literati emigrating to Malaya. This group of literati included many outstanding calligraphers who have known as “calligraphers coming to the south”. They were the founder and pioneer of Malayan calligraphy. Oracle bone inscription calligraphy also opened up a new field of practice outside of China with the arrival of calligraphers coming to the south. Time flies, and since the division of Singapore and Malaysia, the practice of the oracle bone inscription calligraphy of the calligraphers coming to the south has gradually been buried in the long river of time, and has not yet been sorted and analyzed. Based on this, I tried to sort out the practice of oracle bone inscription calligraphy by the calligraphers coming to the south, and tried to get a glimpse of the practice of oracle bone calligraphy at that time by collecting and analyzing the oracle bone inscription calligraphy and comments scattered around.

Through analysis, it can be found that the calligraphers coming to the south generally used the oracle bone inscription to create their artwork. In the direction of creation, many calligraphers continued the aesthetics and techniques of traditional calligraphy to practice the oracle bone inscription calligraphy, and most of them inherited and continued the achievements of the China oracle bone calligraphy. Due to differences in the depth of knowledge of oracle bone inscription, there was a clear gap between the level of calligraphers. On the other hand, some calligraphers in Malaya were impacted by Eastern and Western cultures to think about the artistic development space of Chinese calligraphy, and used oracle bone inscriptions as creative materials to carry out a series of exploration and creation, leaving a valuable historical for the practice of oracle bone inscription calligraphy.

**Keywords:** calligraphers coming to the south, oracle bone inscription calligraphy, Malaya, 20th century oracle bone inscription calligraphy, word painting

## I. Introduction

There is a long history of Chinese people immigrating to Malaya. According to archaeological findings, there have been Chinese immigrants in Malaya since as early as the Song Dynasty. However, the number of Chinese people immigrating to Malaya skyrocketed in the late 18th century, when the British colonized Penang, Malacca, and Singapore. Back then, Chinese immigrants were generally contract laborers or illiterate workers known by the derogatory term ‘zhuzai’ (piggy). In the first half of the 20th century, there was another wave of immigration from China to Malaya.<sup>1</sup> This wave of immigrants included many educated literati. In particular, the dissolution of the alliance between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party in the late 1920s, Japanese invasions of China between the late 1930s and early 1940s, and the Chinese Civil War after the Japanese surrender were three time periods when waves of Chinese literati immigrated southward.

Among the numerous literati that immigrated to the south were many exceptional calligraphers. These calligraphers, dubbed “calligraphers coming to the south”, are the main subject of this article. In this article, “calligraphers coming to the south” refers to calligraphers that were born in China but immigrated southward to Malaya for various reasons. Calligraphers such as Xu Beihong, Kang Youwei, Li Jian, and Lu Dinggong, who traveled and lived in Malaya but ultimately moved back to China, or Malaya-born calligraphers such as Chiou Sin Min and Yong Cheong They are not included in this article’s definition of “calligraphers coming to the south”. Furthermore, “calligraphers coming to the south” learned their craft in China. Most of their skills had already matured by the time they moved south. Their immigration to the south meant that the history of calligraphy in Malaya began with a diverse variety of styles, creating a solid foundation for the development of calligraphy in Singapore and Malaysia after they became independent states. The calligraphers coming to the south brought the art of oracle bone script calligraphy to Malaya, forming a region where oracle bone script calligraphy was being created outside of China.

However, research into calligraphers coming to the south remains limited to simple overviews of their lives and works, and analysis of their calligraphy currently lacks in-depth research and commentary. The art of oracle bone script calligraphy in Malaya was also gradually lost to time, with no relevant research on the topic as of yet. Consequently, in this article the author has attempted to organize the oracle bone script calligraphy by the calligraphers coming to the south, collecting and analyzing oracle bone script works and literature on the subject from a variety of different places to examine how oracle bone script calligraphy was practiced.

## II. Reference sources for oracle bone script calligraphy

It is common knowledge that the practice of oracle bone script calligraphy is inseparable from the interpretation of oracle bone script. Due to the difficulty of understanding oracle bone script, oracle bone script wasn’t immediately introduced to the field of calligraphy following its discovery in 1899.

“Oracle bone script, remnants of texts on bamboo and wooden slips from the Han and Jin periods, and Dunhuang manuscripts were all discovered in the early 20th century, but calligraphers at the time paid little mind to them”<sup>2</sup>. This continued until 1921, when Luo Zhenyu published the *Compilation of Couplets of Scripts from the Yin Site*, which is generally seen as the beginning of oracle bone script in calligraphy and “the end of ‘oracle bones’ as a unique surface for oracle bone script calligraphy, which shows the expansion of oracle bone script calligraphy in a new historical context”<sup>3</sup>. The publication of *Compilation of Couplets of Scripts from the Yin Site* paved the way for more collections of oracle bone script, prompting the publication of a series of books that mimicked Luo’s oracle bone script collections. These included *Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty* (1928) by Ding Ren, *100 Oracle Bone Inscriptions from the Yin Site Vol.1* (1935) by Da Yi, *Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters* (1932) by Jian Jinlun, and *Jiqi Ji* by Wang Yi and Dong Zuobin. These books provided important reference for the practice of oracle bone script calligraphy.

The early 20th century was when the practice of oracle bone script calligraphy entered its early stage of development. It was also during this time that many Chinese literati (including calligraphers) began emigrating to Malaya. As Chen Yupei said, “In the early and mid-20th century, a large number of Chinese literati moved southward to make a living. The number of teachers continued to increase. They were an important source of calligraphy propagation.”<sup>4</sup> It was under this greater context that calligraphers coming to the south brought oracle bone script calligraphy coming to Malaya. One might wonder, how did calligraphers to the south create works of oracle bone script calligraphy in Malaya, where oracle bone script materials are hard to come by?

Most calligraphers coming to the south did not make a habit of citing their reference sources. Generally speaking, all calligraphers coming to the south benefited from prior achievements in oracle bone script calligraphy in China, since most of them directly referenced published oracle bone script poetry and couplet anthologies such as Luo Zhenyu’s *Compilation of Couplets of Scripts from the Yin Site*, Jian Qinzhai’s *Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters (Part 1)*, Ding Ren’s *Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty (Poems Included)* and *Sightseeing Poems - A Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty*. The practice of oracle bone script calligraphy by the calligraphers to the south also relied on works featured in the calligraphy magazine *Shu Pu* (published by the Hong Kong Shu Pu Publishing Company). Works that used characters gathered by the calligraphers coming to the south themselves are in the minority; they include the title inscription Zhang Shoushi wrote for Hsu Yun Tsiao’s book *History of Malaya* (fig.1) and the word paintings by Huang Yao.

Works of oracle bone script calligraphy (partial) by calligraphers coming to the south and their sources are listed below in Table 1:

Table 1. Works of Calligraphers Coming to the South

Calligrapher	Title	Source
Shi Xiangtuo	<i>Jiuyou Bafang Couplet</i>	<i>Compilation of Couplets of Scripts from the Yin Site</i>
	<i>Ancient Tree at Sunset</i>	<i>Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters</i>
	<i>The Youth Drink and Don't Ask More</i>	<i>Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters</i>
Ven. Master Song Nian	<i>The Youth Drink and Don't Ask More</i>	<i>Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters</i>
	<i>Only Good and Couplet</i>	<i>Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters</i>
	<i>Living Wild in the Mountains for Three Decades</i>	<i>Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters</i>
Guan Zhenmin	<i>Song of Spring</i>	<i>Jiqi Ji</i>
	<i>Song of the South</i>	<i>Jiqi Ji</i>
	<i>Poem to Commemorate a Journey to Yan Mountain</i>	<i>Sightseeing Poems—A Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty</i>
Tsue Ta Tee	<i>Know Not the Spring has Gone</i>	<i>Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters</i>
	<i>Snowflakes Were Like Petals</i>	<i>Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters</i>
	<i>Couplet of Joyous Reunion</i>	<i>Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters</i>
Chen Jingzhao	<i>Good Jade Like a Man of Noble Character</i>	<i>Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty (Poems Included)</i>
Huang Shi'an	<i>Following Noble Ideals of Yore</i>	<i>Yeh Yusen To Chiang Yee</i>
Zhang Shoushi	<i>History of Malaya</i>	Self-gathered
Huang Yao	<i>Fresh Start</i>	Self-gathered
	<i>Auspicious Beginnings</i>	Self-gathered
	<i>Somewhere in the Mountains, Deep Within the Clouds</i>	Self-gathered

### III. Calligraphers and their works

The practice of oracle bone script calligraphy by calligraphers coming to the south can be roughly divided into two categories. The first category is rooted in the internal framework of traditional calligraphy, using traditional calligraphy techniques to create calligraphy in oracle bone script. Whether attempting to mimic the engraved lines or following the calligrapher's personal calligraphy experience, calligraphers in this category draw parallels from traditional calligraphy aesthetics in terms of both creative ideas and techniques. This allows them to creating works that are clearly influenced by the development of oracle bone script calligraphy in China during the same era. This category can be seen as an extension of Chinese oracle bone script calligraphy in Malaya. The second category came about after some calligraphers, having lived in the transportation hub that is Malaya and thus being influenced by the contrast between eastern and western cultures, stated to view the artistic expression of Chinese calligraphy with a more open artistic vision, seeing oracle bone script as an artistic medium worth developing and creating pieces through the lens of contemporary art. This section will explore these two creative directions.

Firstly, the first category was the one favored by the majority of calligraphers coming to the south when approaching oracle bone script calligraphy. Many calligraphers followed this general direction, including Zhang Shoushi, Shi Xiangtuo, Ven. Master Song Nian, Guan Zhenmin, Chen Jingzhao, Huang Shi'an, Zhou Mansha, and Tsue Ta Tee.

Zhang Shoushi (1898–1969) was born Zhang Panshi in Jiading, Shanghai. He immigrated to Malaya in 1948 and worked as a teacher in a several schools, including Chung Cheng High School and the Chinese High School in Singapore, and Chung Hwa High School in Kuala Lumpur. In the spring of 1960, he joined the Chinese Department of the Nanyang University as a professor and was later promoted to be the head of the department. He learned calligraphy from calligraphers such as Li Meiyun, Wu Changshuo, Zeng Xi, and Xiao Tuian. He was the author of *An Outline of the History of Chinese Literature*, *Chinese Grammar Tutorial*, *Introduction of Literature*, and *Shoushi on Calligraphy*. In late September of 1989, to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Professor Zhang's death, the Calligraphers Association organized the "Zhang Shoushi Calligraphy Exhibition" at Shanghai Library.

Zhang Shoushi was a proponent of table-style calligraphy. He listed Bao Shichen's *Two Oars for the Boat of Art* and Kang Youwei's *Double paddles of the Boat of Arts* as works that had a profound influence on his views towards calligraphy. Zhang Shoushi was well aware of the unique strokes used in oracle bone script. As he said in *Shoushi on Calligraphy—Official and Clerical Scripts*, "Oracle bone script is the oracle text carved into tortoise shells and animal bones. Ancient and simple, the characters evoke the image of primordial people. Its light, straight strokes differ greatly from the rounded and subtle strokes of bronze script". He also pointed out that the uniqueness of oracle bone script brushstrokes "is related to the era and engraving materials"<sup>5</sup>. Although Zhang knew of the difference between oracle bone script and bronze script, pointing out how characters in oracle bone script are written with light straight strokes, he used a lot of "rounded and subtle" brushstrokes in his oracle bone script calligraphy, works

that clearly reflect the stone drum script style that he was best at. The same brushstrokes he used for stone drum script calligraphy works like *Wang Sun Gong Zi* (fig.2) were applied to create his oracle bone script calligraphy. From the oracle bone script couplets *South and North, Spring and Autumn* (fig.3) and *Bright Moon and Good Friend* (fig.4), it can be seen that he exclusively used a rounded brush with a concealed tip and a center-tip technique to give his oracle bone script calligraphy a heavier appearance.

Shi Xiangtuo (1906–1990), courtesy name Hongze, was born in Zhangzhou, Fujian. In 1938, at the age of 32, Shi Xiangtuo moved southward to Singapore due to the Japanese invasion of China. In 1941, he was appointed to teach ink painting at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art. Throughout his life, he educated countless artists and was hailed as the grandmaster of Chinese art in Singapore and Malaysia. He had so many students across Singapore and Malaysia that there's a "Shi Xiangtuo school" of calligraphy. A year before Shi passed away, Lin Wangjing published the manuscripts Shi had written throughout the years as a book entitled *Manuscripts by Xiangtuo*.

Shi Xiangtuo was renowned for his exceptional calligraphy and seal carving skills. When it came to oracle bone script calligraphy, he primarily referenced Luo Zhenyu's *Compilation of Couplets of Scripts from the Yin Site* and Jian Qinzhai's *Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters*. Some of his works, including *Play Music and Shoot the Waves* (fig.5) and *Jiuyou Bafang Couplet* (fig.6), borrowed brush stroke techniques used for the small seal script. Perhaps because they share similar calligraphy styles, or because Shi imitated Luo's oracle bone script calligraphy, Shi's oracle bone script calligraphy in small seal script brushstrokes is very similar to that of Luo's and can be seen as an extension of Luo's school of calligraphy.




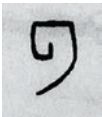


He also created works that imitated the inscription style of oracle bone script, including *Ancient Tree at Sunset* (fig.7) and *The Youth Drink and Don't Ask More* (fig.8). To create the characteristics of oracle bone inscriptions, each stroke was made without concealing the tip of the brush in order to mimic the shape of carved lines. Additionally, overlapping lines were often done with a squared angle. However, because the expression of carved lines is more rigid and every stroke tends to be the same, this style of calligraphy actually loses the natural charm of authentic oracle bone script.

Furthermore, this is what Shi wrote under his signature on *Play Music and Shoot the Waves* (fig.5): "Oracle bone script written with small seal script techniques". He was well aware of the distinct characteristics of the structure and lines of bone oracle script, but chose to use small seal script techniques in his pieces. Why would Shi use two different kinds of brushstroke techniques instead of adhering to lines reminiscent of carved oracle bone script? This article posits that this is due to the calligrapher's consideration of the weight of each stroke and the overall effect of each piece. A look through Shi's bone oracle script calligraphy shows that for larger pieces with fewer characters, Shi preferred using small seal script techniques, whereas for poems and other works with more characters, he used the carved, thin, and rigid lines of oracle bone script.

Guan Zhenmin (1880–1962), born Wangtao, was a native of the Huangyan District of Taizhou, Zhejiang. Guan graduated from the Jingshi Daxuetang's Department of Natural History. He was a profes-

















sor at Shanxi University, Principal of the Second Provincial Normal College of Zhejiang, Director of Academic Affairs and Principal of the Burma-Chinese High School, and Head of Natural Sciences in Zhejiang's Xihu Museum. In 1934, at the age of 55, Guan Zhenmin moved southward to teach at Zhongling High School in the city of Penang, where he would spend the rest of his days. He was the author of works such as *Poems and Essays of Green Cottage* and *Poetry of Green Cottage*.

Guan's calligraphy displayed a high level of consistency, maintaining good brushwork and ink quality regardless of the style or stage of his career. Guan created a sizable number of works in oracle bone script. <sup>6</sup> These oracle bone script pieces consistently reflected his desire to capture the feel of carved lines. His brushstrokes were relatively thin, ending in clear points, and lines are joined with a combination of rounded and squared edges. This can be seen in works like *Bad Fortune in Hard Times* (fig. 9), *Nothing to Pass the Long Days* (fig.10), and *A Lüshi Poem to Commemorate a Trip to the Palace Museum* (fig.11). Guan's calligraphy was heavily influenced by the tablet school of calligraphy, particularly in the way he expressed the style of bronze and stone inscriptions. As a result, his oracle bone script calligraphy contained strokes with a slight tremble (see Table 2). These trembles were likely intentional and were not related to his physical health <sup>7</sup>. Guan's 'tremors' were expressed naturally and with nuance. It is hard to discern from afar, but up close, the seemingly smooth lines reveal subtle changes. This slight tremor in brushstrokes evoked the style of bronze and stone inscriptions and enhanced the strength of each line, enriching the dynamics of his oracle bone script calligraphy.

Table 2. Guan Zhenmin's Oracle Bone Script Calligraphy					
<i>Bad Fortune in Hard Times</i> (1948)	<i>Nothing to Pass the Long Days</i> (1951)	<i>Song of Spring</i> (1953)	<i>Poem to Commemorate a Journey to Yan Mountain</i> (1953)	<i>Sing of Eternal Happiness</i> (1959)	<i>Trip to the Palace Museum</i> (date unknown)
					

Ven. Master Song Nian (1911–1998) was born Song Tiecheng. Born in Hailing, Jiangsu, he was ordained at the age of 16 and learned calligraphy from Xiao Tui'an. In 1952, he moved southward to Penang, Malaysia and stayed at the Penang Buddhist Institute. In 1960, he moved to Singapore to promote Buddhism. Ven. Master Song Nian's calligraphy exudes a sense of simplicity and spaciousness. When it comes to oracle bone script calligraphy, he wrote with smooth, concentrated lines that are even in thickness, as seen in works like *Clear Mountains and White Moon, Only Good and Couplet* (fig.12), *A Young High-Ranking Official* (fig.13), and *Living Wild in the Mountains for Three Decades* (fig.14).

From his works, it can be seen that Ven. Master Song Nian wrote oracle bone script at a slow pace, each stroke made carefully in an attempt to create clean and smooth lines, forming a style that is less like writing and more like an imitation. When writing in bronze script, he often added a tremor to his brushstrokes to reflect brokenness (fig.15) that differs from the technique he used for oracle bone script calligraphy. This was likely not because of the calligrapher's personal understanding of oracle bone script calligraphy, but a direct imitation of reference books. Most of his works in oracle bone script referenced Jian Qinzhai's *Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters*. Comparisons show that he directly imitated the form and texture of lines from *Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters*. The spacing of characters and the way lines are joined are also very similar to examples in Jian Qinzhai's work (see Table 3). It is evident that Ven. Master Song Nian's oracle bone script calligraphy followed *Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters* closely without too much personal input.

Table 3. Comparison Between Ven. Master Song Nian and Jian Qinzhai's Works			
Jian Qinzhai <i>Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters</i>	Ven. Master Song Nian <i>Clear Mountains and White Moon</i>	Jian Qinzhai <i>Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters</i>	Ven. Master Song Nian <i>A Young High-Ranking Official</i>
			
			
			
			

Oracle bone script calligraphy is a niche category of calligraphy among the calligraphers coming to the south. Either because calligraphers only wrote in oracle bone script rarely, or because some works were lost as they were passed around, calligraphers such as Cheng Jing Zhao, Huang Shi'an, and Zhou Man-sha left only a small number of oracle bone script calligraphy works.

Chen Jingzhao (1907–1972) was born in Anbu, Chao'an and graduated from the Jinan University School of Law. He learned calligraphy from Yeh Yuhu. In 1949, he moved southward to Singapore, where he worked as a teacher at Tuan Mong High School. In terms of calligraphy, Chen particularly excelled at semi-cursive script. According to a 1970 report in *Nanyang Siang Pau*, the Nanyang University Chinese



Painting and Calligraphy Research Association once invited Chen Jingzhao to give a lecture on Chinese calligraphy, pointing out that, “Chen wrote many pieces in oracle bone script and semi-cursive script”<sup>8</sup>, which means that although not many have been circulated, Chen did produce some oracle bone script calligraphy pieces. From the oracle bone script calligraphy work *Good Jade Like a Man of Noble Character, a Flower Like a Beautiful Woman* (fig.16), it can be seen that the semi-cursive signature is clearly written more proficiently than the oracle bone script text. The way he started and ended his brushstrokes when writing oracle bone script was very similar to the brushstrokes in Ding Ren’s *Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty* (fig.17). Instead of trying to create a sharp, carved texture, he added clear tremors to his lines that were distinct from Guan Zhenmin’s subtle tremor technique. Overlapping lines were handled awkwardly, as if the lines were placed there without consideration of any connections between them. This shows that Chen focused only on the structure of his oracle bone script without considering it from the perspective of calligraphy techniques.

Huang Zizhen (1903–1990), courtesy name Shi’an, was born in Jiaying, Guangdong, and moved southward to Singapore in 1928. Huang Shi’an studied calligraphy from a young age and was heavily influenced by his uncle’s philosophy regarding calligraphy, namely that “Tablet is better than hardwood. Do not copy hardwood calligraphy, for it is too soft.” His calligraphy style was similar to that of Kang Youwei. Huang Shi’an was most adept at semi-cursive and cursive script. He has relatively few works in oracle bone script calligraphy compared to his extensive work in semi-cursive and cursive script calligraphy. At the bottom of the oracle bone script piece *Keep to the Present and Follow the Past* (fig.18), Chen wrote, “On the right is oracle bone script written by Yeh Yusen... Which I gladly imitated”. This is one of the few works of oracle bone script calligraphy by calligraphers coming to the south with a cited source. The awkwardness of the brushstrokes in this copy of Yeh Yusen’s oracle bone script calligraphy are evident and a stark contrast to his practiced semi-cursive and cursive writing. The way he started and ended his brushstrokes was similar to Yeh’s work, as well as the focus on concealed tips, but the lines failed to capture the sense of strength in Yeh’s work. Chen tried to make the characters neat, uniform in size, and symmetrical, but the result was less than satisfactory.

Zhou Mansha (1916–1987) was born in Changsha, Hunan. He graduated from Hunan First Normal University and taught at the Changsha School of Art and Culture. In 1937, Zhou moved to Malaya, where he was appointed principal of Perak Selama Zhicheng School and later became founder and principal of Mingde School. Zhou Mansha is experienced in semi-cursive script and occasionally dabbles in oracle bone script calligraphy, like in his work *A Song of Falling Plum Blossoms* (fig.19). In the lower margins of this piece is a piece of important information: “While browsing *Shu Pu*, I came across a copy of the Yuan dynasty song *Falling Plum Blossoms* written in bone oracle script by Dong Zuobin and decided to imitate it.” This indicates that in addition to collections of oracle bone text, calligraphers to the south also referenced works featured in the magazine *Shu Pu* for their oracle bone script calligraphy. The piece *A Song of Falling Plum Blossoms* is a copy of one of Dong Zuobin’s oracle bone script calligraphy

works. The structure of the characters basically mimicked that of Dong's work, with few personal adjustments, but Zhou's brushwork was experienced and smooth, with dynamic transitions. As a result, the lines of his oracle bone script were condensed with varying degrees of thickness. It is a spirited and high-quality piece. Unfortunately, Zhou only did oracle bone script calligraphy occasionally, leaving only a few pieces behind.

Among calligraphers following the overall direction of using traditional calligraphy techniques for oracle bone script calligraphy, Tsue Ta Tee's oracle bone script calligraphy pushed the envelope when it came to the meaning of brushstrokes.

Tsue Ta Tee(1904–1974) was born in Beijing and served in the Chinese military and government. After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Tsue began traveling around China until the Japanese invasion. He moved to Chongqing, Guangzhou, and Macao before traveling south alone after his wife and children died in the war. He traveled around Southeast Asia, visiting countries such as Annam and Siam, and held a few calligraphy exhibitions. He moved to Penang, Malaysia in 1946 and again to Singapore in 1965. Unlike other calligraphers in Penang during that era, Tsue Ta Tee was one of the very few calligraphers coming to the south to make a living on calligraphy alone. Throughout his life, he created countless pieces in oracle bone script, bronze script, bamboo and silk, regular script, semi-cursive, and cursive.

At a time when the general public, including most calligraphers, was still wondering whether calligraphy should be considered art, Tsue Ta Tee was able to unquestioningly state that “calligraphy is art.”<sup>9</sup> This idea that calligraphy is art prompted him to pay special attention to the artistic expression of calligraphy. Tsue Ta Tee created many works of oracle bone script calligraphy. Though these works vary in quality, they all strove to break through the limitations of using oracle bone script reference books. These works included *May Horses Return to Huashan Mountain* (fig.20), *Know Not the Spring has Gone* (fig.21), *Immersed in the Wind and Moon* (fig.22), *Snowflakes Were Like Petals*, and *Couplet of Joyous Reunion*.

From his works, it is possible to detect a hint of his dismay at how calligraphers uniformly made their lines thick in the middle and pointed at the ends when trying to mimic carved characters. He also wanted to capture the sense of carved words but didn't want to limit his brushstrokes to a rigid and uniform shape. By mimicking the characteristics of carved words, he converted the feeling of carved lines into an artistic expression of calligraphy. He also paid more attention to the language of the brush and ink expressed through calligraphy than most calligraphers coming to the south.

Take *Know Not the Spring has Gone* for example, he used mainly center-tip strokes, supplemented by side-tip strokes, letting the brush flow instead of deliberately tapering the ends, which led to variations in how oracle bone script can be written (fig.23). This piece also features a variety of changes in ink saturation. For example, the ink in the characters for “river crossing” gradually become lighter (fig. 24), adding another dimension to the piece.

It's worth wondering why Tsue Ta Tee delved deeper into oracle bone script calligraphy than his fellow calligraphers coming to the south. He likely benefited from copying oracle bone characters. From 1952 to 1956, Tsue Ta Tee was invited to travel to Europe and hold calligraphy exhibitions at London's China-British Cultural Association, the University of University, Oxford University, and Paris. The BBC also invited him to hold lectures on calligraphy and film demonstration videos.<sup>10</sup> During his time in the UK, he copied oracle bone script from original oracle bone fragments at the British Museum. Tsue Ta Tee dedicated himself to the study of the oracle bone fragments and examined them daily. Moved by his dedication, the director of the British Museum allowed him to bring his calligraphy tools to copy the oracle bone inscriptions. Life in the UK was hard for Tsue Ta Tee, but although he often had to live on water and bread, the hard times never dampened his passionate thirst for knowledge regarding oracle bone inscriptions.<sup>11</sup> Tsue's understanding of the oracle bone script likely benefited from his imitation of inscriptions on original oracle bone fragments (fig.25)<sup>12</sup>. Observing and imitating oracle bone inscriptions allowed his understanding of oracle bone script calligraphy to transcend the limitations of reference books and allow for more creative calligraphy techniques.

The above descriptions are mainly about calligraphers coming to the south practicing oracle bone script calligraphy within the system of traditional calligraphy and an analysis of their works, but in addition to this direction of oracle bone script calligraphy, there were also calligraphers coming to the south that approached oracle bone script calligraphy in a more exploratory way through the lens of contemporary art. Malaya was an important transportation hub for eastern and western cultures and a place where diverse cultures met. Works by calligraphers living in Malaya would inevitably be influenced by this confluence of eastern and western cultures. Huang Yao was an example of such a calligrapher.

Huang Yao (1917–1987), born Huang Jiatang, was born in Shanghai and had ancestral roots in the town of Weitang in Jiashan, Zhejiang. He is known for his creation of the Niubizi cartoons. Huang moved south to Malaya in 1956 and taught at Han Chiang High School in Penang and Xinmin High School in Alor Setar. He settled in Kuala Lumpur after retiring in 1973. Huang Yao was very interested in western contemporary art and believed eastern calligraphy to be an extremely expressive form of art. He noted that, “we Chinese have a treasure on our hands, but we scorn and ignore it, while the Japanese took care to treasure it”.<sup>13</sup> His work reflects calligraphy as seen through the eyes of a contemporary artist.

Huang was deeply influenced by the view that characters and pictures stem from the same source, believing that “the pictorial characters of ‘pictograms’ are ‘pictures’... writing a ‘character’ is like completing a ‘picture’.”<sup>14</sup> This concept is not unique to Huang Yao. After all, Rong Geng said about pictograms back in 1924, “their shapes are determined by objects as if they are no different from pictures.”<sup>15</sup> According to Huang Yao, there is already a beauty to Chinese characters. “The pictographic ‘characters’ of original pictograms are as beautiful as the oldest paintings and reminiscent of the newest paintings. It’s

the reason why Picasso said that to study art, we should look not to Paris, but Africa. Sometimes, I can sit or lie down for entire days, just reading and writing pictographic characters, because pictograms have a kind of unrivaled beauty.<sup>16</sup> ” Based on the idea that words and pictures stem from the same source, Huang Yao discovered the artistic nature of ancient characters that are worth exploring. Between the 1960s and 1980s, before the “85 modernist calligraphy” appeared, Huang Yao had already begun creating a large collection of experimental “word paintings”. Regarding Huang Yao’s word paintings, Wang Nanming said, “Before contemporary calligraphy in Mainland China developed become ‘word paintings’, Huang Yao, who lives in Southeast Asia, was already working alone to put the practice of traditional calligraphy into a comparative study with the West and Japan, using his independent vision to find new directions for calligraphy development.”<sup>17</sup> ”

Huang Yao left many word paintings in oracle bone script and bronze script, *Heart Sutra* (fig. 26), *Diamond Sutra* (fig. 27), and *Harmonious Union* (fig.28). Huang Yao also left behind many sketches that offer a glimpse into his creative process (fig.29). Take the word painting “Harmonious Union” for example, the first step of the process would be to gather words, list the various shapes of each character, arrange them into a picture, adjust the overall structure, then go over the finished design with a brush.

It should be pointed out that Huang Yao’s word paintings differed from that of Shen Hongcha and Lu Foting in that Shen and Lu used oracle bone script to create landscape paintings. For example, Shen’s word painting *Set Sail for Home* used “over 20 words in oracle bone script, including capital, stone, cloth, boat, mountain, grass, wood, and water,”<sup>18</sup> ” while Lu’s word paintings like *Doodle of Clouds, Bugs, and Tadpoles* (fig.30) used oracle bone characters such as stone, woods, pavilion, and child. Huang Yao’s word paintings, on the other hand, also used characters from the oracle bone script but created the overall image through the shape of the words, how they are arranged, and how they separate space. In the end, the focus remains on the characters themselves.

From the constant revisions he made to his sketches, it is evident that Huang Yao designed his word paintings with clear design and decorative elements. However, when it came to word paintings, the line between calligraphy and painting skews towards painting. Put another way, the artists are ‘painting words’, which means the element of calligraphy is in danger of disappearing. This is especially clear through Huang’s brushstrokes. Though he continued to use traditional brushes and ink, his strokes began to reflect a disregard for calligraphy techniques. For example, the brushwork in *Great Auspiciousness* (fig.31) clearly leaves a lot to be desired.















It is impossible to deny how visionary Huang Yao’s word paintings were, especially considering how he explored new possibilities for Chinese calligraphy in an environment like Malaya, which had few resources at the time. To Huang, word paintings were no innovation. He said, “Modern people will be awed by paintings created using ancient words. They’ll wonder if it’s some new-fangled art style or abstract art, when in fact it is an ancient form of painting, the most beautiful figurative art.” Unfortunately, few people agreed with him when he embarked on this exploration.<sup>19</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

As mentioned above, after moving to Malaya, calligraphers coming to the south laid the foundation and were pioneers of calligraphy in Malaysia and Singapore. The calligraphers moving south led to the field of oracle bone script calligraphy also expanding to Malaya. Calligraphers that were not scholars of ancient texts generally created their pieces by consulting reference books of oracle bone text. In terms of their creative direction, many calligraphers extended traditional calligraphy aesthetics and techniques when they wrote oracle bone script calligraphy, with most of them inheriting and passing on the legacy of the achievements of oracle bone script calligraphy in China. Some calligraphers incorporated their experience with bronze script and small seal script, while many others tried to mimic the carved lines of oracle bone inscription. Unfortunately, because the calligraphers understood oracle bone inscription on different levels, some of them ended up blindly simulating the thin and rigid lines of oracle bone inscriptions. Only a few calligraphers, such as Tsue Ta Te, were able to escape these limitations. These calligraphers coming to the south also experienced the limitations of Malaya's history and environment. Unlike Tsue Ta Tee, most of them did not have the opportunity to personally handle and copy original oracle bone fragments or rubbings. Their understanding of oracle bone script calligraphy came not from oracle bone script in its natural state, but channels such as oracle bone script reference books or magazines. A lot of their understanding of oracle bone script stemmed from reference books, but the oracle bone script in these reference books were already the "interpretations" of the author, so any flaws found in the reference books naturally became flaws in the calligraphers' works. For example:

1. When Chen Jingzhao referenced Luo Zhenyu's *Compilation of Couplets of Scripts from the Yin Site* for his oracle bone script calligraphy, he copied the lines and character shapes of the oracle bone script in Luo's book without any deeper consideration.
2. When Shi Xiangtuo referenced Jian Qinzhai's *Ancient Poetry Couplets Amassed with Oracle-Bone Characters (Part 1)* to mimic the carved lines of oracle bone script calligraphy, his oracle bone script lines and angles appeared more monotonous and rigid than Jian's example (fig.32).
3. Most of Guan Zhenmin's work in oracle bone script referenced Ding Ren's *Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty (Poems Included)* and *Sightseeing Poems—A Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty*. He excelled at beautifying the oracle bone text provided in reference books (see Table 4), but this beautifying process focused only on the shape of the characters, and were adjustments made to Ding Ren's sample with the sole purpose of making the characters more squared. In terms of composition, there were no fundamental differences between Guan's work and Ding Ren's reference book. In terms of creativity, Guan followed the samples provided in Ding Ren's reference book to create oracle bone script calligraphy with symmetrical, neat, and equally-sized characters reminiscent of small seal script, which ignored the vibrant richness of oracle bone script in its natural form.

Table 4. Comparison of Oracle Bones

Ding Ren <i>Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty (Poems Included)</i>							
Guan Zhenmin <i>Bad Fortune in Hard Times</i>							

From a modern point of view, their works are all flawed in some way, but it is undeniable that Malaya at the time lacked sufficient materials and information for calligraphy, and the calligraphers living there were limited by their environment and era. Reference books became an important way for calligraphers to learn about oracle bone script, and the flaws of the reference books naturally became the flaws of calligraphers. This explains why the practice of oracle bone script calligraphy by calligraphers coming to the south generally manifest a kind of collective stereotype. On the other hand, since Malaya was a place where eastern and western cultures met, Huang Yao was inspired by eastern and western cultures to start thinking about how Chinese calligraphy art can develop, using oracle bone script to create a series of exploratory and avant-garde “word paintings”, providing precious historical images in the field of oracle bone script calligraphy.

## Notes

- 1 Liao, Wenhui. *Malaysia*. Taipei: Linking Publishing Company, 2019, p.330.
- 2 Huang, Dun. "The Formation and Origin of The Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy Scene—A Late 20th Century Retrospective", *Chinese Painting & Calligraphy*, Vol.5, 2006, p.152.
- 3 Chen, Aimin. "Oracle's Termination and the Artistic Transformation of the Oracle Calligraphy—A Discussion of the Significance and Value of Luo Zhenyu's *Compilation of Couplets of Scripts from the Yin Site for Calligraphy*", *Hundred Schools in Arts*, Vol. 5, 2006, p.185.
- 4 Chen, Yupei. "The Diffusion and Development of Chinese Calligraphy in Malaysia Since Last Century." Diss. Literature and Art from Jinan University, 2005, p.11.
- 5 Xu, Yunquao, ed. *Calligraphy by the Late Zhang Shoushi With Commentary*. Singapore: Hu Yunhua, 1979.
- 6 It is worth noting that, in the foreword he wrote for Guan Zhenmin's *Poetry of Green Cottage*, Zhou Mansha mentioned that Guan "edited works including *Compilation of Bronze and Stone Scripts*, *Collection of Text and Patterns on Eaves Tiles*, *Catalogue of Antiques at Gengyuntang*, and *Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions*." Based on this, many people believe that Guan authored *Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions* by gathering oracle text from the Shang Dynasty, but since this book is no longer in circulation, there is no way to verify whether *Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions* was really the work of Guan Zhenmin. However, for the purposes of this article, an examination of the sources of Guan Zhenmin's oracle bone script calligraphy was made, which revealed that most of his work references Ding Ren's *Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty (Poems Included)* and *Sightseeing Poems—A Collection of Oracle Text from the Shang Dynasty*, therefore *Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions* was likely not a book authored by Guan Zhenmin, but a reference book he created by combining parts of other people's collection of oracle bone text.
- 7 The author has seen small characters Guan Zhenmin wrote in an inscription for Zhang Luping. The characters are only 5mm wide and were written with smooth lines, with no sign of a tremble.
- 8 "Nanyang University Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Research Association Invited Chen Jingzhou to Talk About Chinese Calligraphy Yesterday", *Nanyang Siang Pau*, Nov. 1, 1970, p.21.
- 9 Asked whether Chinese calligraphy could be considered an art Mr.Tsue replied, "Definitely yes." Violet Oon, "The Beauty of Calligraphy", *New Nation*, 3 February 1973, p.11.
- 10 "Interview with Calligrapher Tsue Ta Tee", *Sin Chew Daily*, Nov. 11, 1965, p.14.
- 11 Chen, Yupei. "Calligraphy Art and Contributions of Tsue Ta Tee", *Chinese Calligraphy Stone Gallery—Lanting Award*, 2017, p.39.
- 12 Source: Facebook page of Tsue Ta Tee, <https://www.facebook.com/%E5%B4%94%E5%A4%A7%E5%9C%B0-383896625029014/photos/383902565028420>, Sep. 15, 2020.
- 13 Huang, Yao. *The Collected Works of Huang Yao*. Kuala Lumpur: Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall Culture and Education Council, 2000, p.129.
- 14 Same as note 13, p.122.

- 15 Rong, Geng. “The Discovery and Interpretation of Oracle Bone Script”, *Journal of Sinological Studies* Vol. 4, 1924.
- 16 Same as note 13, p.53.
- 17 Wang, Nanming. “ ‘The Practice From ‘Picture Words’ to ‘Word Painting’ ”, HuangYao, <http://www.huangyao.org/795.html>. Sep.15, 2020.
- 18 Chen, Aimin. “Oracle Bone Inscription and Calligraphy by Hongcha—A Discussion of the Historical Background and Artistic Features of Shen Hongcha’s Landscape Word Paintings”, *Culture Monthly* Vol. 12, 2018, p.163.
- 19 Huang, Yao. *The Collected Works of Huang Yao*. Kuala Lumpur: Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall Culture and Education Council, 2000, p.244.



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