

## **Leaning to Write on a Table: Further Discussion on Writing Postures in Ancient China**

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### **Abstract**

Many scholars in recent times have come to believe that before the use of tables and chairs in ancient China, people would kneel or stand when writing. They proposed that people held a brush with one hand and a slip or piece of silk or paper with the other, the elbow and wrist suspended when doing writing or painting without having to rest on any surface. This study attempts to explain that the postures for painting and calligraphy not only varied but also mutually co-existed. They included standing, kneeling or sitting upright, cross-legged, or prostrate. People could even sit with legs outstretched, drop foot, or using a “T”-shaped stool. They could have the elbow or wrist suspended, use a wrist rest, hold the brush and slip or paper and silk with their hands, or have them placed on a table. Some postures accorded with the rites, while others bent the rules or even broke them out of convenience or comfort.

This study would like to emphasize that calligraphers, including scribes, since probably the Warring States period mainly “wrote with the arm on the table, the brush supported for doing characters.” And this is not, as some scholars have advocated, a phenomenon that had only appeared with the use of tables and chairs in the Song dynasty and not because of radical changes brought to writing postures by the large number of scriptures transcribed by monks in the Tang dynasty. Commoners were not like officials, who were confined by rules by etiquette, and could place slips or pieces of silk and paper on a table out of convenience or expedience. As a result, the arm resting on the table to do writing probably was a relatively common method of writing for them. In fact, this way of writing may have been so “common” that it did not conform to ancient images of norms for ceremony and was scorned by renowned painters and calligraphers, which is why it is difficult to find traces of it in early texts and images.

**Keywords:** Table, desk, norm, rites and writing postures, ceremonial fine art, time lag