Nakasato on Block Script Brush Writing:  
The Basics of Composition

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Introduction

By means of text and image, Nakasato and I will be discussing shodô (brush writing) with regard to its most basic style - that of kaisho (楷書) or block script; an angular and frequently used style of brush writing for Chinese and Japanese characters. As both an art and a technology, brush writing is, on the one hand, an aesthetic practice that allows for freedom of expression based on considerations of form, space, rhythm and tone. On the other hand, brush writing is a technology of writing that is produced according to highly codified rules of execution. Just as the word “eternity” in English is based on a combination of marks (lines, curves and dots) drawn on the page and brought together in chronological order based on established patterns of relation to one another, so the character for “eternity” (永) is based on a combination of marks (lines and drop-marks) executed in chronological order and composed according to a predetermined sequence. As technology, learning to write and to produce words and characters in an established sequence of lines, curves, dots and/or drop marks is an important aspect of learning to read and write.

What interests me in particular are the aesthetic aspects of writing block script. In 2005, I was living in Paris and began to work with my teacher, Nakasato. With Nakasato’s full cooperation I will be discussing how to produce block script from an aesthetic perspective. What follows is a particular aesthetic approach to the production and composition of block script that is unique to Nakasato. With this in mind, and in order to clarify the aesthetics of Nakasato’s approach to teaching and producing block script, this article will posit a basic vocabulary with which we can consider an aesthetics of brush writing in the block style script. The emphasis in this article is not on the technology of producing block script, but upon considerations basic to an aesthetics of block script composition.

Marks on the Picture Plane: Lines

Based on my conversations with Nakasato and on his considerable experience as an artist and practitioner of brush writing, the two of us have developed an English vocabulary with which to talk about writing block script. Characters that are formed in the block style use a combination of types of line (vertical, horizontal and diagonal) as well as a tear-shaped mark that we have designated a drop-mark. Traditionally, in brush writing this drop-mark has been called a point or ten (点) in Japanese, but it is our feeling that this term obscures more than it reveals – for reasons we will explain later in this article.

Nakasato’s aesthetic breaks from a traditional aesthetic of block script in that he distinguishes complete lines from incomplete lines. According to Nakasato, lines and drop-marks can be “complete” or “incomplete,” “closed” or “open,” and will exhibit a combination of “strong stops,” “weak stops” and/or “no stops.” Furthermore, each type of line (vertical, horizontal and diagonal) has three forms (with the exception of diagonal left which will be explained later.) By “stop” Nakasato and I want to characterize the ways in which the brush begins and exits a line. A “strong stop” (indicated for the purposes of this article by a circle with a dot in the center) represents a conscious pause on the part of the artist when the brush stops moving. A “weak stop” (indicated simply by a dot) also represents a conscious pause on the part of the practitioner, but less emphatic. “No stop” indicates
that the brush never stops at all, but lifts in one smooth movement up and off the picture plane. If the brush exits on a stop (weak or strong) we characterize the line as “closed.” If the brush exits a line with no stop the line is “open.” It is the combination of these variables: strong stop /weak stop /no stop, closed/open lines, and the complete and incomplete lines or drop-marks they evoke - in addition to considerations of space, rhythm and tone, that constitute the aesthetic world of brush writing in the block style.

Complete Lines

Complete lines are basic to block style script and are of four types.

Complete vertical lines may be either closed or open; specifically, the line may end on a strong stop or no stop at all. If the line ends with a strong stop, this line is characterized as closed because the brush comes to a strong stop at the end of the line. If the line ends with no stop at all and the brush glides up and off the page there is no clear stop - whether weak or strong, and the line is open. The second, most basic type of complete line is horizontal. As you can see from the diagram above, a complete horizontal line begins and ends with a strong stop. There is no open horizontal complete line in the practice of block style script. The third, most basic type of complete line (as noted above) is brushed diagonal left and is also open. Like the open vertical line, this diagonal left line begins with a strong stop and ends with no stop at all – instead the brush glides up and off the page in one continuous motion.

Incomplete Lines

The notion of incomplete line is characteristic of Nakasato’s own approach to block script. We can think about incomplete lines as being one part of a complete line as shown below.

An incomplete line inhabits, but does not fully comprise, a complete line. While a complete line is composed of one or more strong stops, an incomplete line is composed of a combination of weak and strong stops. An incomplete line is almost always closed; that is, an incomplete line almost always ends with a stop – specifically a weak stop. In practice, there are five types of incomplete lines.
As you can see from the above, an incomplete vertical line is brushed in such a way that the line begins with either a weak or a strong stop and ends with either a weak or strong stop – depending on how the line is conceived; specifically, where the line is rendered from the complete line that it inhabits. In any case, the weak stop is what renders the line as incomplete. An incomplete horizontal line evokes the same dynamic; specifically, beginning and ending with a combination of weak and strong stops - depending on how the artist chooses to render the line as incomplete. An incomplete diagonal left (as shown above) begins with a strong stop and ends with a weak stop.

All of these incomplete lines noted above are closed because all of these lines end on a stop. In theory, it is possible to brush a horizontal line with two weak stops; specifically, one stop on entering the line and one stop on exiting the line, but this is a highly nuanced technique that goes beyond the space of this article regarding the basics of block script brush work.

**Drop-marks**

While block style script is primarily composed of lines (vertical, horizontal and diagonal), there is one additional mark that must be produced. Drop-marks in block style script are traditionally referred to in brush work practice as points (点) or ten, but after much discussion with Nakasato we have decided to use the term drop-mark to render more accurately the movement inherent in brushing this mark on the page. To avoid confusing the practitioner with the notion of a point, an image that evokes notions of stasis and serves to indicate no movement at all, we have opted to use the term drop-mark to give some indication of the brush work required to produce this characteristic mark of block style script. Drop-marks – when seen in this light, appear to have more in common with the dynamic of line than the static nature of a point. In so far as these drop-marks resemble drops of liquid, we made the decision to change traditional nomenclature from “point” to “drop-mark.”

Note that the brush enters the drop-mark with no stop and comes to a strong stop in no time at all. In this sense we can talk about a drop-mark in block style brush writing as an open form of a complete line, but the gesture of the brush is so abrupt and truncated that the line is transformed. The resulting mark has more in common with a teardrop shape, and hence more in common with the movement of a drop than the stasis of a point.

**Diagonal Right Lines**

Lastly, brush writing in block script style consists of a line that is brushed diagonal right. Nakasato has opted to discuss this type of line in a category by itself because the production of this type of line is a bit more complicated than the lines discussed above. This type of line may appear to the beholder (observer/reader) as one continuous line – but, according to Nakasato, is best conceived (in terms of execution) as two separate lines brushed as one. As you can see from below, diagonal right lines may be either closed or open; specifically, the line may begin with either a weak stop (closed) or no stop at all (open.) In either case the line comes to a strong stop at the heel.
Having stopped, the brush - without leaving the page – begins again at the heel (to begin the next line) and continues off the page with no stop at all. In this way a diagonal right line is conceived as being comprised of two lines: 1) a closed or open line that ends on a strong stop and is then joined with; 2) a line that begins on a strong stop and ends as an open line. Note the subtle difference produced between open and closed stops at the entrance to the diagonal right lines shown above.

**Forms of Line**

Now that we have comprehended how to produce basic types of lines (vertical, horizontal, diagonal left and right) as well as drop-marks in producing block style script, we are ready to move onto the more subtle forms that these lines and drop-marks can take when brushed onto the picture plane. The forms that lines and drop-marks can take is an important aspect of block script aesthetics.

Lines and drop-marks – whether complete or incomplete, vertical, horizontal or diagonal, can be brushed in three different forms; 1) straight; 2) with a downward or a left curve or; 3) with an upward or right curve. While in theory both complete and incomplete lines can be brushed in three forms; for the purposes of this article, we will demonstrate three forms for only complete lines and drop-marks. Complete vertical lines (whether closed or open), can be brushed 1) straight; 2) with a left curve or; 3) with a right curve.

Though Nakasato has produced all possible forms for vertical lines above, note that complete vertical lines that curve right seem to be rarely used in producing block script. Vertical lines (open or closed) that curve right are usually considered aesthetically unappealing in block script style. Nakasato and I have discussed this aesthetic standard at some length in an effort to understand why this particular form of line is rendered so uniformly unacceptable in brush work practice of block script. One of our postulates has been the possibility that a predominance of right handed brush work constituting thousands years of block script practice would have made this form of complete vertical line difficult to produce, if not downright uncomfortable, resulting in the rarity of this form leading toward its marginalization. It may also be possible that this type of line was considered unappealing to begin with and was subsequently avoided. Whatever the reason, bear in mind that this form of complete vertical line (open or closed) that curves right is rarely used in block style brushwork.

In the same way that complete vertical lines can be brushed in three forms (with careful consideration of the use of complete vertical lines that curve right); complete horizontal lines can be brushed in three forms as well.

Complete diagonal left lines are an exemption in that there are only two acceptable forms for a diagonal left line; straight or with a downward curve. There is no complete diagonal left line in block style brushwork that exhibits the form of an upward curve.
Drop-marks and diagonal right lines are brushed in three forms as shown below.

Space and Brush Writing

Just as lines and drop-marks are integral to brush work composition so is the notion of space and of how lines and drop-marks align themselves to one another in relation to the picture plane. An important compositional concept in brush writing is that of *chushinsen* (ちゅしん線) or what Nakasato and I designate as “center axis of alignment.” This axis does not appear as a mark on the page but is apprehended in the mind of a practitioner who approaches block script as an aesthetic practice. An experienced artist will take a moment to compose his or her composition in relation to this axis before putting brush to picture plane.

In block script there are three inclinations that a center axis can form on the page. In order to facilitate our awareness of these axes, Nakasato has drawn axes of alignment below as a broken dotted line that appears when two lines are set in relation to one another. Axes of alignment may run straight, incline right or incline left, and can be discerned in both vertical and horizontal compositions – as indicated below.

Center axes of alignment that incline left (Fig.19) are unacceptable and should be avoided at all costs in block script compositions. An axis that inclines left is considered a destabilizing compositional element that renders the image on the page, no matter how well brushed, unstable. The resulting composition is aesthetically unacceptable in the practice of block script. Note that just as this left inclining axis is unacceptable to an aesthetics of block style brush work, so is the form of a complete vertical line that curves right. Both inclinations, whether visible and invisible, are considered unappealing in block style aesthetics.

Rhythm and Brush Writing

Handling a brush when producing block style script can be considered a performance in the sense that brushing a line or drop-mark onto the page encompasses a gesture in time and space. With this notion of performance in mind, we can talk about the ways in which we brush a line or drop-mark in terms of rhythm. For our purposes we will be discussing two types of rhythmic structure.

Waltz Rhythm: 1-2-3

Closed vertical and horizontal lines can be brushed in a 1-2-3 waltz rhythm comprised of a three beat rhythmic structure as noted below.

The brush enters the line with a strong stop (beat 1), is carried over the length of the line (beat 2), and
exits the line with a strong stop (beat 3). As these are complete lines there are two strong stops, both upon entering and exiting the line.

March Rhythm: 1-2

Open lines and drop-marks can be brushed in a two beat march rhythm; 1-2. Lines brushed in this two beat rhythmic structure are shown below.

As previously discussed, open vertical lines and diagonals begin with a strong stop and exit with no stop at all. The first beat of the two-beat step march is accomplished with a strong stop at the beginning of the line. The second beat of the two-beat step march encompasses both the length of line as well as its exit. There is no exit stop (no third beat) as the brush lifts off the page in one continuous gesture that comprises beat two.

Nakasato’s approach envisions the production of diagonal right lines as a combination of 2 two-beat step march structures. When executing this type of line one conceives of the brush as entering the line on beat 1 (with no stop) and ending on a strong stop (second beat.) The brush then reenters the line (without leaving the page) to begin the next two-beat step march on a full stop (beat 1,) exiting the line in one beat (beat 2.)

Drop-marks are brushed with the two-beat march in mind as well. In the case of drop-marks the brush gently enters the line on beat 1 (with no stop at all) and exits on a full stop.

Tone and Brush Writing

Lines that appear on the page of a composition should present an overall unified tone. Well-executed works, no matter how large or complicated, will appear to the eye of the beholder/artist as one unified whole that "naturally" fits together. We can talk about this aesthetic property of brush writing composition in terms of tone.

Generally speaking, lines and drop-marks are brushed black on a white picture plane. The relation of black and white (positive and negative space) is a key element in brushwork composition. In a good composition the lines exhibit one tone that unifies the composition over-all. This one tone will appear to inhabit the picture plane, rendering positive and negative space in harmonious relation, and creating a balance that holds the piece together, no matter how busy or complicated the picture plane may appear. We can talk about tone as having two aspects: 1) tone of line and 2) tone of space.

Tone of Line

Fig. 23
In the diagram above, Nakasato has drawn (in pencil) an outline of both a vertical and horizontal line that share the same tone. When combined, these lines will evoke an overall tone of line that harmonizes the entire composition. By way of contrast, the lines brushed below are also of one unified tone, but the tone is quite different from that of the composition above.

The penciled analysis above clearly reveals the tone with which Nakasato has brushed these lines. The tone of these lines must be consistent if one wishes to brush an overall harmonious composition. Combining lines of different tones results in cacophony of lines that will not be considered a pleasing composition in block print style.

**Tone of Space**

Each line or drop-mark has its own relation to the white paper space it inhabits. In the same way that the relationship between a line and/or drop-mark and the space surrounding it should be harmonious in terms of line, we can also talk about the relationship between a line and/or drop-mark and the space that surrounds it in terms of space.

As you can see from above, the thick black line maintains a 50/50 area relation to the space (outlined) that surrounds it. One can envision this balance as a 50/50 ratio between the area of the black line and the white space that surrounds it. The thin black line, because its surface area is smaller, maintains a proportionally smaller area of white paper space. These two lines, when set in relation to each other retain their own spatial integrity by maintaining a 50/50 proportion between positive and negative space. These lines do not crowd one another, nor are they brushed too far apart.

The example above evokes a composition in which two lines are not harmoniously balanced in terms of their spatial relations. Instead of one tone of space there are two. The thick black line has not been accorded enough space in proportion to line, and as a result, is proportionally too large for the space the line occupies. Nakasato has explicated the disproportion by indicating a 70/30 relation of positive and negative space. Even though the thinner line does maintain a unified tone (50/50), and the tone of line is consistent throughout, the composition as a whole is thrown off because there is more than one tone of space accorded to the picture plane.

**Conclusion**

This article is intended to provide the beholder/artist with a vocabulary through which they may be able to begin to understand, produce and appreciate brush work compositions in the block script style not just as technology, but as an aesthetic form. Nakasato and I hope that our explication of the types of lines (vertical, horizontal and diagonal) as well as drop-marks, and the forms they take amidst considerations of space, rhythm, and tone will provide artists and beholders with a thorough and useful means of understanding brush work aesthetics in the block script style.
楷書体書道作品制作の基礎に関する中里理論

パーバラ・S・モリソン

要約
本論文は、楷書における技巧的あるいは審美的面のうち、審美的な面の分析をしたものである。私は中里の書いたイメージを使いながら楷書の線と点を説明し、スペース、トーンそれからリズムについて考えながら、美しい作品を書くことができるかを明らかにする。英文では楷書について多くの技巧的な説明はあるが、楷書の審美的な説明は今後の課題としたい。

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