Chinese Writing

A System of Characters Rich in Structural Diversity

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Chinese writing is a system primarily intelligible to the eyes rather than to the ears. Each written character can be comprehended without knowing the pronunciation. Chinese thus acts as a unifying force in a country where for millennia people have spoken many different dialects, dialects not understood by their countrymen. On the other hand, it is a system that requires learning by rote thousands of characters, a factor that has contributed to China's long-term problem with illiteracy.

Chinese writing differs from that of other civilizations in that it did not develop from a pictographic to a phonetic script (see glossary). Instead, early pictographs were replaced by a system in which most symbols represent sounds (ideograms), but some symbols represented things or ideas (ideographic); in general, characters included elements (phonetics) that indicated the approximate sound. The basic units that make up Chinese characters are dots, lines, and hooks, all of which are called "strokes." Strokes move only from a central starting place clockwise to a point between northeast to southwest.

Typological and Structural Development

The Shang Dynasty

The earliest evidence of Chinese writing appeared in the Shang (ca. 1500-1050 B.C.) capital of Anyang, in the Hsiao-tung district, Honan province, north-central China. Called "shell bone script" (ch'i-I-fan), the remains are chiefly pyromantic records incised on tortoise shells, including both carapace and plastron (Fig. 1), as well as on animal bones, mostly the shoulder blades of oxen (Fig. 2). Bronze, pottery, horn, jade, and stone objects also bear terse inscribed dedication epigraphs and clan emblems. The vocabulary is estimated to have comprised about 3000 to 4000 words, of which 1000 to 2000 graphs can be interpreted. Many characters represent nouns, but pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and prepositions are also found. Sentences are usually concise, almost telegraphic, with texts averaging between 10 and 15 char-acters but rarely over 50. The size of each character in the same column or passage may vary; the more numerous the strokes, the larger the size and vice versa. Most inscriptions appear to have been written directly with the engraving knife, but some were first applied in ink and then incised. The arrangement of the symbols was not standardized, but an order reading vertically downward and from right to left—later Shang convention—was fairly common.

The Chou Dynasty

Archaeological remains of writing dating to the Chou dynasty (ca. 1050-256 B.C.) are chiefly texts, cast or occasionally cast intaglio on bronze ritual vessels commemorating royal endowment (s) or political, economic, and military events (Fig. 3). The vocabulary in "bronze script" (ch'in-ten) totaled around 4000 words. Some Shang words had been dropped and new ones added, partially because Shang writing was urrarular and Chou bureaucratic. Since the inscriptions on Shang bronze objects are mostly emblems and kinsman terms, it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons between the bronze scripts of Shang and Chou. The general impression that Chou script is fuller and less angular than its Shang counterpart derives from the differences in the objects on which the texts were applied. Shang inscription was done with a jade or bronze engraving knife on hard shell and bone, while Chou writers used pointed rods on relatively soft clay molds, into which the bronze was cast. Since more expressive lines could be produced on clay, some pictographic elements of Chou script more closely resemble real objects than do those of Shang. This observation led some scholars to speculate incorrectly that Chou writing followed a pre-Shang, more pictographic tradition. In Chou writing, reading vertically from right to left became the norm, a pattern from which deviation was rare.

During the eight hundred years of the Chou dynasty, the writing system underwent considerable changes. Around the turn of the 9th century B.C., bronze script grew

Glossary

cursive: flowing writing in which the strokes are joined and the angles often rounded

graph: a written, drawn, or engraved formula or diagram

ideographic: a composite symbol in which 2 characters are joined to represent a related idea or thing, e.g., bright is the composite of the characters for moon and moon

ideophone: a sound or group of sounds that convey a particular idea

phonetic: a character that represents a sound, especially a speech sound; in Chinese writing, it is used with a radical to form a new character, with the radical indicating the sense and the phonetic indicating pronunciation

palaeography: the study of ancient systems of writing

pictographic: a picture or hieroglyph used to represent a word or idea

pyromantic: related to divination by means of fire or flames

radicals: in Chinese writing, one of over 200 basic characters that represent categories of sense; radicals are added to phonetics to form phonograms

a) Fragment of a late Shang divination record on bronze bone. The long inscription contains a prognostication and verification of border warfare. (Matsumaru and Nagado 1953-58)
increasingly less pictographic and more abstract; the framework became more attenuated. Size was more uniform, spacing and layout more even and balanced. Overall, gracefulness had become the main concern of scribes. Texts in early Chou bronze script ranged from 10 to 100 words, but by the mid-8th century some reached around 200 and even exceeded 300 words (Fig. 4).

By the end of Western Chou, the trend toward "depicturization" grew stronger, and in the Eastern Chou period, tempering the graphic framework became common. Proportions of characters were purposely and drastically distorted. Some strokes were elongated or curved, some were shortened. Extra lines or dots were added or omitted. Most of the original pictographic elements, which restricted the nature of the signs, disappeared, giving way to abstract patterns enhanced by free and rhythmical lines.

In the Eastern Chou period (770-221 B.C.), the heartland near Shan was lost to invading nomads and the capital moved east to Loyang in Honan province. The resulting administrative decentralization led powerful feudal lords to establish small independent states, and the weakened monarchy caused few monumental inscriptions to be made. To justify their authority, feudal lords commissioned vessels with lengthy inscriptions, detailing elaborate family pedigrees. As writing became secularized and more widespread, graphic style developed in two opposite directions.

Elaborate and ornate writing was a style in tune with Eastern Chou's predilection for intricate, Heratic designs on bronze vessels (Fig. 5). The convoluted script instantly became and has remained the choice of seal-makers throughout Chinese history—thus the name "seal script" (ts'ze shu). Another type of ornate script incorporating birds into the characters was popular in southeastern coastal China (Fig. 6).

Plain and utilitarian writing, although it served for equally important occasions, minimized the convoluted curves, as in the inscriptions on treaty records (Fig. 7). Lines were straightened to make writing less time-consuming, a development that was important for the future. Many examples of simplified seal script on bamboo slips, pottery, and silk attest to its popularity in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.

Toward the end of Chou, political divisiveness among the warring states led to a flourishing of regional styles in arts and crafts, writing among them. New archaeological data still do not, however, provide sufficient evidence to support the contention of some scholars that there was a typological difference between the graphs of eastern and western China.
"Chinese Writing"

Development of an Aesthetic Medium

Writing systems in many parts of the world are a mixture of communication medium, through the signs, and a means of expression, through calligraphy. The development of Chinese graphs into an art form, several took a unique path. Although artisans and craftsmen ingeniously engraved and lettered distinctive patterns into the graphs for deliberate aesthetic effect, they were not regarded as true calligraphers in the orthodox Chinese tradition. Their required new words, which caused another expansion in the percentage of ideograms-graphs. To render "ammonite," for example, the Chinese created the graph at which is a composite of the air radical and qu-schooling; for uranium they used g, the composite of the metal radical and qu-schooling graphs. Recognition of the fact that Chinese writing is primarily ideogrammatic was hindered because, during the course of evolution, some sound graphs became only approximate, and some ideogrammatic-composites retained old sound graphs while the pronunciation changed completely.

character are linked together and partly simplified, so it is less rigid and can be used more artistically. Since no strokes are eliminated or substituted it is easily legible, and it quickly became the favorite type of 3rd and 4th-century calligraphers (Fig. 12).

By the Han period (see chronology), the vocabulary had increased to about 10,000 words, and by the Six Dynasties, 15,000. A Sung encyclopedia included 31,319 words, and its Ching counterpart, 47,041. The apparently great increase was partly due to the fact that the compilers included all archaic, obsolete, and vernacular words. Only 3000 to 5000 words were actually needed for sophisticated reading and writing.

Following the protracted turmoil of the Warring States period, the Ch’in book burning in 213 B.C., and the subsequent Ch’in-Han wars, thorough studies on graph formation, if any, were lost. Around A.D. 100 Huai Shen reconstructed the structural rules in the dictionary of etymology Analyzing Graphs (Shu wen; or chih-i-ts’ao). Among his six laws, "limiting form," (pictographs), "indicating things" and "discerning a thing," (ideographs), and "form sound" (ideo-phonetic graphs) are important. The "writing rotation" (derivatives) and "provision borrowing" (loanwords) apply infrequently. Of the 9000 characters known from this time, 70 percent were ideogrammatic graphs while 15 percent were phonetic graphs and ideographs (the remaining 15 percent comprises loan words and derivations).

Direct comparison with the vocabulary of the Shang period cannot be made because of a lack of early phonological records, but paleography specialist Li Hsiao-ting has estimated that of 1236 characters, 55 percent were pictographs and ideographs, and 27 percent ideogrammatic (Keightley, 1974:68). If so, from 1200 B.C. to A.D. 100 ideogrammatic graphs increased twofold at the expense of pictographs and ideographs, a seemingly logical growth. By the late 17th century, 90 percent of the characters were ideogrammatic. The introduction of Western science and technology tried to meet the demands of an ever-expanding bureaucracy.

Cursive script could be written more quickly than its predecessors, because several strokes were linked in a single movement, so it became a script intended for informal shorthand. By the 2nd century A.D., it had evolved into a well-articulated, rhetorical style of writing; it was perfected by 4th-century literati and by the 5th or 6th century had become the channel for artistic self-expression (Fig. 10).

Rising in the 3rd century A.D., standard script had less flaring signs and more abbreviated components than cursive, although they were similar in precision. In standard, the brush pauses and turns quickly. The earliest datable example is on the K‘u-lan‘g stele inscribed in A.D. 272 (Fig. 11). Standard script came to maturity in the Sui to T‘ang period, eventually replacing clerical script. It has since changed little and remains the accepted style in China.

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CH‘IN THROUGH HAN DYNASTIES AND FOLLOWING

Recent excavations have recovered large amounts of written material, most notably that on bamboo slips. Although the paper, silk, and hemp that they were made on have rarely survived, enough is known to allow us to reconstruct the development of writing in this period.

In 212 B.C. the ruler of the Ch’in state established the Ch‘in Dynasty, China’s first empire. In order to control his vast territory more efficiently, the emperor Shih-huang issued a national unification policy which regulated not only transportation (e.g., the sizes of wheels and the widths of roads) and measurement, but also the media of communication—writing. To speed up "paperwork," official announcements, such as proclamations engraved on stone steles, were written in the less time-consuming, simplified version of seal script, commonly called "lessor seal script" (hsi-shou; Fig. 8) to differentiate it from the earlier, more elaborate "greater seal script" (ts‘ao-shou). The lesser seal script, although it had fewer curves and swirls, was still too complicated for a fast-moving information network, so it had to be further simplified. Therefore, in non-political or less formal inscriptions, such as those on measurement cups and bamboo slips, the graphs were abbreviated by substituting flaring or straight lines for the curves, and by linking several strokes into one or two swift lines (s). Before the end of the Ch‘in period, lesser seal script evolved into polyangular graphs widely used by clerks; thus it was called "clerical script" (hso-shou; Fig. 9).

The expansion of the Han empire (206 B.C.—A.D. 220) called for further simplification in the script, as witnessed by the development of three new types: cursive (ts‘ao-shou), standard (K‘ao-shou), and running (hsin-shou). In this period, "hybrid" graphs composed of mixtures of script types became common, as did several types appearing in one phrase or paragraph. These mixtures reflect the transitional phase of a developing writing system trying to meet the demands of an ever-expanding bureaucracy.

Loose script could be written more quickly than its predecessors, because several strokes were linked in a single movement, so it became a script intended for informal shorthand. By the 2nd century A.D., it had evolved into a well-articulated, rhetorical style of writing; it was perfected by 4th-century literati and by the 5th or 6th century had become the channel for artistic self-expression (Fig. 10).

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Cultural dynasty, good polishness was the implicit requirement in passing the civil service examination, and became an indispensable asset in upward social mobility.

Gradually, interest in the artistic potential of handwriting began to emerge near the end of the Han dynasty, but the direction it took cannot be well documented because most of the works of pioneering calligraphers are no longer extant. Since comments on the achievements of Han calligraphers usually appear in the Sung dynasty or later, we should reserve judgment about the extent to which writing was then viewed and pursued as art, even though many remains of Han writing are of high quality. While future discoveries and research may reveal more about the development of Han calligraphic art, it is clear that by the end of the dynasty, when all types of writing were known and social and political sanctions on good penmanship existed, there was fertile ground in which calligraphic art could root.

Four Han inscriptions (A.D. 220-589) writing was transformed into the art form adopted by the literati as an intellectual and emotional outlet. Calligraphic art became the embodiment of the ethical mind: a "quasi-graphological mirror of one's personal character and level of education" (Lederer 1972:2). The Six Dynasties period was a politically turbulent era, as the new Taizong movement made its mark on the well-established Han Confucian bureaucratic tradition. Intellectuals turned away from politics and mundane responsibilities to indulge in wine-drinking and hallucinogenic drugs. They became enshrined in debates on philosophical issues, cultivating aesthetic sensibilities, and expressing individuality. The intellectualization and individualization of calligraphic art is but one manifestation of the romantic elitism then in vogue. It was during this period that great masters of calligraphy began to appear.

Chinese calligraphy occupied such an extraordinary position in the history of Chinese art partly because of its usual graphic structure. Many Chinese characters are their constituent entities were originally pictographic, and even ideophonic characters still retained the sound-indicating elements among their pictographic features. In the process of development, most of the illustrative elements were morphologically neutralized and lost their pictorial attributes. However, the abstractionism in script in fact ran parallel with that in painting, which unlike Western painting was never concerned with perspective and chiaroscuro. Therefore, the borderline between calligraphy and painting is fluid and indistinct.

Since Chinese characters are organically more complex than alphabetical script (which is completely divorced from the original pictographs and formed with fewer elements), Chinese calligraphy is enriched with structural diversity. Each character is a micro-design. In groupings a passage or a paragraph of characters together, their relation to each other can be manipulated to create an overall composition. These visual advantages, plus the effects wrought by the flexible hair writing brush (Fig. 14) and the varying tones and different degrees of moisture of the brush, endow Chinese calligraphy with the ability to interpret lines and shapes imaginatively. The shared abstract quality in delineation as well as the employment of identical methods and material in both calligraphy and painting link these two categories of art so closely together that they share both methodology and aesthetic background. After the different script types had emerged toward the end of Han, the Chinese writing system was complete; no new types appeared thereafter. These renditions of characters became the norms from which calligraphers could choose to satisfy artistic proclivity. Post-Han developments only added refinements to the basic system.

Post-Han Calligraphic Aesthetics
Six Dynasties to T'ang
Stele continued to be the medium for commemoration and memorial inscriptions, especially in northern China. While a formal style of handwriting was preferred...
for them, the trend was from small script to standard script in T'ang. The less constrained running and cursive scripts were popular at the time, perhaps because they were more easily legible and could be written more quickly. Since these scripts are free and expressive, they are not uncommon to see running script graphs intermingled with cursive script graphs.

In the Six Dynasties period, powerful aristocratic clans continued to favor the calligraphy of the past. Among them were Wang Hsi-chih (ca. A.D. 303-381) and his son, Wang Hsi-chih (A.D. 344-388), who elevated writing to the art form practiced by intellectuals (Figs. 15-16). They are considered the founders of the orthodox tradition of Chinese calligraphy, and their life is regarded as the Golden Age of Chinese art.

Many kings of the numerous southern kingdoms that followed, particularly those in the 5th century, were ardent admirers and patrons of calligraphic art, a royal enthusiasm that continued throughout the Chinese history. Also in this period there were strong Taoist influences on aesthetic theories that account for the "spontaneity" advocated by early critics of calligraphy (Lodellone 1984). An 8th-century critic divided penmanship into three categories—"divine," "perfect," "wonderful-exquisite," and "able-skilled"—that became standard and were adopted by critics of painting a century later.

**Sung to Ming Period**

The Sung dynasty (A.D. 900-1279) witnessed the ascendancy of running and cursive scripts, as well as the merger between painting and calligraphy. Advanced techniques of producing rubbings and prints made calligraphic material widely available, so greater interest in the medium was generated. Despite flourishing antiquarianism, Sung intellectuals generally ignored clerical and seal scripts. It was the great master Mi Fu (1052-1107), a painter, calligrapher, connoisseur, and historian, who rekindled his followers' interest in archaic scripts (Fig. 17). Mi also encouraged them to explore the separate province of painting as amateurs. Impressionistic monochromatic and light-colored ink paintings made by intellectuals were strongly influenced by calligraphy, and later became a separate category called "literati painting" (wen-chen), which was popular in Korea and Japan, as well as in China. Interaction between the medium of painting and calligraphy benefited both students and critics of calligraphy. The end result was that many critics were able to extend their concerns from brushwork and the quality of the paper and seals to the structure and spacing of the characters themselves.

**Religious Connotations of Chinese Writing**

Writing and divinity are associated in many early civilizations. In China, writing was first a means of communication with ancestral spirits and other supernatural beings. In divinatory records, the characters usually followed a format that begins with a character, a word commonly translated as "to ask." Knowledge has, however, persuasively argued that it is not an interrogative verb, but rather a prayer, prediction, or statement of intent (1976:29). Aiding in interpretation of ritual texts is the presence of red pigments rubbed over the characters inscribed on shells and bones; such pigments, of which ochre and cinnamon are examples, have been found in many prehistoric ritual contexts, including burials. Black pigments on Chinese characters are probably blackened with age.

Shang rulers must have believed the potent red colors enhanced the magical quality of the written characters. To Shang diviners, oracular inscriptions possessed supernatural power through which theocratic kingship was validated and maintained by securing ancestral endorsement and by keeping records of it. Writing was not only archival, but also magical and invocational. Belief in the miraculous power of red ink writing apparently continued for at least seven centuries, when the Eastern Zhou dynasty between the Chou state and its allies (found in Nei-t'ouan, Hou-nan, Shansi province, northern China) was written with blood ink on sets of jade slabs. The date of the treaty is still controversial, but it is most likely the late 5th century B.C. Jade has always been mystical to the Chinese—its hardness also symbolizes long-enduring goodness. Appeal to diversities and longevity are both elements appropriate to the consecration of a ritual artifact (Fig. 7).

**Ch'ing to Present**

The resurgence of antiquarianism stimulated Ch'ing calligraphers to gather and study original examples of archaic script, rather than to imitate the styles of their predecessors as most calligraphers from T'ang to Ming did. Chance discoveries and scientific excavations of ancient remains, especially Shang bone-shell script and Ch'in-Han inscriptional wood tablets in the 20th century, have provided abundant original material for calligraphers interested in archaic scripts. Although traditional types of criticism have continued to be important, Western theories of aesthetics and art history introduced after the 1860s have brought to the study of calligraphy new analytical and dating techniques, as well as interdisciplinary approaches.
17 Fragment of writing by Mi Fu in running script. (Nakada 1984 pl. 48)

Writing in trances is also important in Taoist religion. The sacred texts have been read aloud in visions to Yang Hsi, a Taoist mystic, between A.D. 364 and 370. The celestial messages, which are written in various types of holy script unintelligible to mortals, were made comprehensible to the sages through a state of religious exaltation. He was given the ability to transcribe the original, pure script of the primordial level into that used on earth. Yang's original manuscript was later edited by the famous Taoist monk Tao Hung-ching and was issued in 490 under the title Declaration of the Perfect (Chen-kuo), one of the most important books in Taoist religion. Planche writing is also practiced by believers. Those with questions consult Taoist monks who, in trance, relay the message from the spirit to the living by striking sand on writing sand. This custom has a history stretching from at least the 6th century A.D. to the present. In 1972, Leidnerse witnessed a planche writing in Taiwan and observed that the medium, who was in ecstatic agitation, wrote the answer on sand in cursive script, while two assistants deciphered and read out the messages. Yang's original manuscript was also written in cursive script, a significant point since their Taoist writings in tradition 600 years ago were also in both cursive script. The puzzling curvilinear graphs on Shan oracle texts are considered meaningless doodles, but ethno-historical and ethnographic analogies suggest that they were written by Shan diviners deeply in trance who wrote in brush what was later carved by the engraver.

Around the beginning of the 7th century, another magical aspect of the Chinese writing developed into an interesting method of fortune telling, "sylogomancy" (chi-af-tzu, literally "to divine characters" or pu-tzu, "to divine on characters"). Because Chinese characters are essentially tongue-fortune-tellers with Talisman affinities predisposed to be able to predict future events by examining the structure of a word picked at random by a client, who need not have had a written language. By the Sung dynasty, many essays have described the procedures of this form of divination. This ancient divination method related to character analysis involved numerology. By counting the strokes of a little-known written characters of both last and first names and combining it with texts, and an oracle, Taoist and Confucian fortune-tellers could predict the future. These phylacteryphatic practices have not only remained intact, but most possess an unusually wide range of knowledge of all possible literate associations. This type of prophecy in divination is still practiced in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Bauer 1979).

18 Expedition, Vol. 31, No. 1

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Conclusion
The development of a writing system in China around 1200 B.C. until the present has proceeded in an orderly fashion. Some scholars, while admiring the great Latin alphabet, assert that China's system was once quite different from the original form of Chinese characters. However, China's writing system has been in continual development, as evidenced by the proliferation of new characters and the evolution of existing ones. The Chinese writing system has been highly adaptable, allowing for the incorporation of new ideas and concepts into the existing system. This adaptability has contributed to the longevity and success of the Chinese writing system, making it a powerful tool for communication and cultural expression. The Chinese writing system has evolved over thousands of years, with each period leaving its unique stamp on the language and culture of China. The present-day Chinese writing system is a testament to the resilience and creativity of the Chinese people, who have continued to adapt and innovate in the face of changing circumstances.