The Evolution of Chinese Characters(II)

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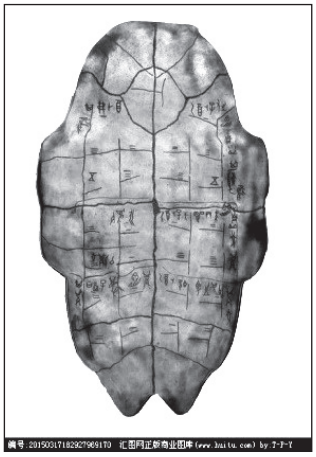
The present article is a section from a larger study entitled The History and Culture of Chinese Characters and serves as a continuation of my first article named The History and Origin of Chinese Characters (I). The purpose of the article is to exemplify the changes Chinese characters underwent during its history of evolution. Each of the 7 stages of development led to the final Simplified Characters that Chinese speaking people use nowadays. Chinese characters evolved from pictographic characters, created on the foundation of a picture, to pictophonetic characters, based on the meaning of strokes; from the Traditional complex characters to the Simplified easy to write characters; from different writing tools and materials to ink and paper; thus far one of the most widely used language created its own unique method of writing. Throughout the paper I will retell stories that contribute to the discovery of the Chinese characters, sustain my paper with either self-drawn characters or with pictures exemplifying the calligraphy of the specific script.

Keywords: Wang Yi Rong , Bronze ware, Qin Shi Huang , Scribe, Ancient characters, Modern characters, Zhong Yao, Zhang Xu, The Chinese Reform Committee, Simplified characters.

The number of Chinese characters is enormous and imprecise. The numerical approximation is of 100.000 Chinese characters, although in daily life there are used around 7.000 Chinese characters. In the endless flow of history, the Chinese characters underwent a livelong process of evolution, from a drawing to strokes, from complicated to simplified, successively emerged The Oracle Script 甲骨文, Inscription in Bronze 金文, The Small Script 小篆, The Clerical or The Official Script 隶书, The Regular Script 楷书, The Cursive Script 草书, The Semi-Cursive Script 行书 until the nowadays used Simplified Characters 简体字.

1. THE ORACLE SCRIPT 甲骨文

The Oracle Script appeared in China in Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BC) and Western Zhou (1046-771 BC) as characters carved on tortoise shell and other animal bones. Han Jian Tang believes these characters "can not only record each spoken word, but also help to the appearance of word combination and simple syntactical structure. The Oracle Script has already the possibility to make a note of complex matters, however to express the meaning of a symbol is relatively hard". (韩鉴堂 （2014）《汉字》，北京：五洲传播出版社.)



Characters carved on tortoise shell

So how did the Oracle Script appeared? During Qing Dynasty (1616-1911), in a day of 1899, the epigrapher Wang Yi Rong 王懿荣 all of a sudden fell sick. He sent people to go to the Chinese medical herbs store to buy some Chinese medicine. Once Wang Yi Rong took a closer look to the medicine called Dragon's Bone 龙骨，he observed some symbols carved on it. Wang Yi Rong had knowledge on the ancient characters and his believe that those symbols were ancient characters was very strong. He sent people immediately back to the herbs store to buy all the 龙骨the store had. From those symbols he recognized the following common used characters: Rain"雨", Sun"日", Moon"月", Mountain"山" and Water"水". The Oracle Script characters carved on the 龙骨 were thereby found by chance.

The content recorded of the Oracle Script are records of divination, therefore the Oracle Script is also known as 卜辞. The Shang Dynasty civilization was relatively behind, people believed in superstitions and no matter what, they would relate each matter to the divine. At that time the main material for the ancient divine records was tortoise shell and other animal bones. Sometimes at the end of the record, people would also carve the content and the result in form of a short sentence, known as the 卜辞. I will take as an example the following 卜辞: "癸卯卜，今日雨，其自东来雨？".

For the creation of the Oracle Script, a knife, an ox or sheep bone to carve the characters on the tortoise shell, was used. The characters lines are thin, detailed, powerful and the pictography of the character is of high degree. I will use some self-drawn characters to present the shape of Oracle Bone characters.



2. INSCRIPTION IN BRONZE 金文

Somewhere around 4000 BC, the Orient entered the Era of Bronze, whereas China stepped into the Era of Bronze ware circa 3000 BC, slightly later than the Eastern countries. During the Shang and Zhou Dynasty, the founding of Chinese bronze ware began to develop and set foot into the golden age of the Bronze Era.

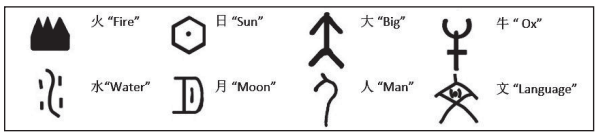
A great amount of Chinese characters were casted by people on the Bronze ware from Shang and Zhou Dynasty (1600 -256 BC). This is considered to be a very unique phenomenon in the world's bronze ware culture. Comparing the Oracle Script to these characters, the structure is rougher, simpler, vigorous and more spectacular. The sacrificial vessel that represents the Bronze ware is the cauldron 鼎 - a large, round container for cooking in, usually supported over a fire- , for musical instruments stands the bell 钟, therefore the "钟鼎"became the representative name for the bronze ware. Before, Zhou dynasty copper was also called metal, therefore the inscription was also known as "金文"or "吉金文字", moreover the largest amount of characters was to be found on cauldrons and bells, as a result the inscription was also described as "钟鼎文".

The most important matters that the Inscription in Bronze has recorded are information about the sacrificial ceremonies, war expeditions, hunt units, alliance and other activities that reflected the society at that time. The author of *"The Chinese Characters"* (2014) provides the reader with information about the characters on the bronze ware from Shang and Zhou dynasty, mentioning that there were discovered over 3000 different characters, the pity is that only 2000 were recognized. Chinese characters were found on the following bronze ware: alcohol vessels酒器, water vessels水器, musical instruments乐器, weapons兵器 and tools工具. （韩鉴堂 （2014）《汉字》，北京：五洲传播出版社）.



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For a better understanding of the difference between the two already mentioned scripts, I will provide self-drawn characters as examples.

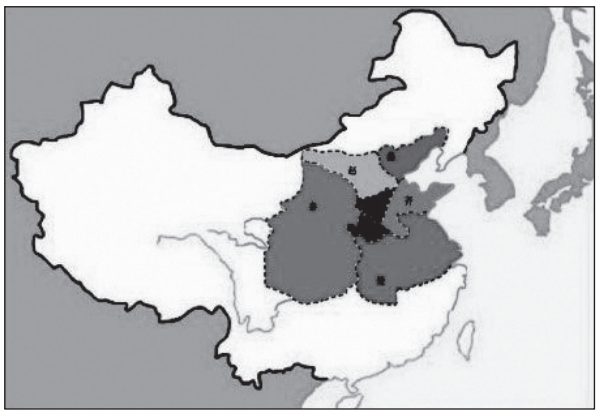


3. THE SMALL SCRIPT 小篆

The Chinese characters are under constant development. At the beginning, people used knife to carve the characters on tortoise shell, but after a while, Chinese people began to use a Chinese writing brush to write the characters. After the first Emperor of China named Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇united China in 221 BC, the Small Script made its appearance.

According to Han Jian Tang "the appearance of

the Small Script symbolizes the vanishing point of the whole Chinese ancient characters. The Eastern Zhou after Western Zhou Dynasty (770-256 BC), Zhou Royal loses authority. Especially during the Warring State period (475 -221 BC.) the countries of each state compete for hegemony. In this situation, the body of the Chinese character is not unified, the variant form of a Chinese character is increasing. The six Eastern countries Qi "齐", Chu "楚", Han "韩", Zhao "赵", Wei "魏" and Western Qin "西部的秦国" all have their own style of writing, moreover the pronunciation is also different." (韩鉴堂 （2014）《汉字》，北京：五洲传播出版社).



China's map featuring the six countries

After years of war, finally in 230 BC– 221 BC, Qin Wang won the political defeat of the eastern six countries and unified China by claiming himself to be „Qin Shi Huang"秦始皇. In order to release the decree to the whole country, so that people from everywhere can understand, Qin Shi Huang did one of the most important things, that is the unification of characters, in the national implementation known as "The book with the same characters"书同文. Qin Shi Huang ordered to Prime Minister Li Si to persist in the work of unifying the characters. In order to unify the characters Li Si used as a foundation the characters of Qin, at the same time he assimilated the characters used by other countries in order to establish the unification of characters. The result of this unification comes to be known today as the Small Script小篆. What is the meaning of the word "篆"? One view is that "seal" means to apply to the official rafters, can be inscribed,

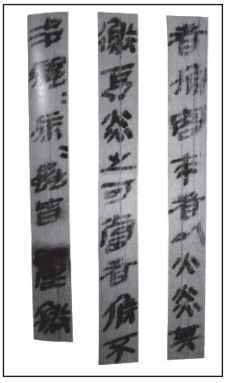


the round line describing the font. Another view is that "seal" is the meaning of a curved line.

The strokes of this script are uniform, rounded and neatly arranged.

4. THE CLERICAL OR THE OFFICIAL SCRIPT
隶书

The fourth character style that appeared nearly in the same era with the Small Script is the Clerical or the Official Script 隶书. The Qin dynasty characters from the Warring States period were recognized by the use of the Chinese writing brush on bamboo slips and wooden slips. For the purpose of increasing the speed of writing, the characters shape went through a simplification process. Because this kind of simplified typeface was written by a scribe隶 on official documents, people call this type font "隶书". By all appearances, using the writing brush was not only convenient but also fast and therefore it led to the invention of a new character style.



Characters written on bamboo slips

The emergence of the Official Script was a major event in the change of Chinese characters, besides it symbolized the walk of Chinese characters into the so-called Modern Characters"今文字"stage. The beginning of this script meant a complete break away from picture and eventually a change into strokes. At the same time, the script brought change to both the meaning and the pronunciation of the pictophonetic characters.

What are the Ancient Characters "古文字"? What are the Modern Characters "今文字"? Both of the mentioned concepts are opposite to each other. In general it is known that the development of the Chinese characters have underwent 7 stages, known in Chinese as "甲骨文，金文，小篆，隶书，楷书，草书，行书". The common point of the former 3 scripts, specifically the Oracle Script甲骨文，Inscription in Bronze金文 and the Small Script小篆; was a powerful significance of picture, therefore the pictographic extent of characters was of high degree.

But once with the beginning of the Official Script, the number of pictographic characters suffered a major degradation, meaning that the significance of picture in a character has weaken. The main change was a rise in the number of pictophonetic characters,

characters which occupy 95% of todays used Chinese characters. In general the scripts before the Official Script are known as Ancient Characters “古文字”and the script after the Official Script are called Modern Characters “今文字”. This change in the development of characters is the most important transformation brought to Chinese characters.

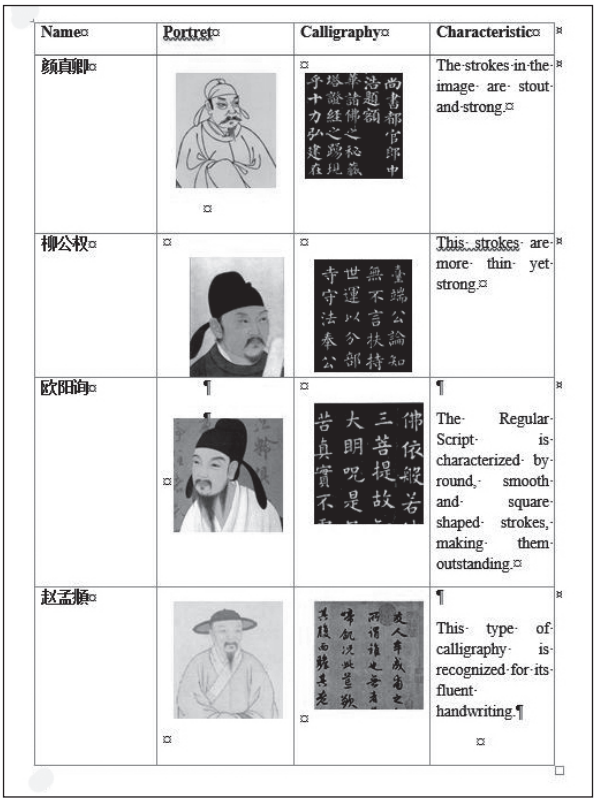
In Han dynasty 汉代 changes occurred again to this typeface, furthermore it borrowed the name of the dynasty to indicate the change “汉隶”. The wave-shaved strokes are the most obvious characteristic of the “汉隶”, although the Official Script is known for the simple and short strokes, which brought into existence 5 important strokes, for instance, the Dot “点”，the Horizontal Stroke“横”，the Vertical Stroke “竖”，the Left-falling Stroke “撇”，and the Right-falling Stroke “捺”. Important characters from the Small Script underwent a simplification process and changed to radicals for the characters in the Official Script. I will mention 3 of the most obvious transformations. The character for water “水”changed to , where the lines indicate 3 drops of water and whenever used to form a new character one will know that it refers to a surface of water. The character for hand “手”transformed into and the character for heart changed into .

5. THE REGULAR SCRIPT 楷书

The Regular Script besides 楷书 it is also known as “真书”or “正书”, in Chinese the character “真”has the meaning of “true; real; genuine” and “正” having the meaning of “regular; standard”. According to Han Jian Tang the name of楷书 for this particular style is due to the fact that it can serve as a model in learning how to write the character, thereby the name of the script derives from the word 楷模 meaning “model; example”. Even if the Regular Script appeared in late Han dynasty, but it was in Sui (581-618) and Tang dynasties (618-907) that this script flourished. (韩鉴堂（2014）《汉字》，北京：五洲传播出版社.)

It is said that during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280) a chancellor of Wei State named Zhong Yao 钟鳐 – calligrapher and statesman- brought to China a great contribution and that is the invention of the Regular Script. To speak the truth, his invention is seen as a simplification process through which he helped the writing to be more convenient. The Regular Script is well proportioned, careful and precise and the strokes are pleasing to the eye. The Regular Script and the Official Script are basically alike in shape and structure, the difference is in writing. The strokes of the Regular Script are simple and straight, it is not wave-shaped as the Official Script.

The characters that are used today are the Regular Script for the printed style and the handwritten form. With this typeface, the Regular Script, the Chinese



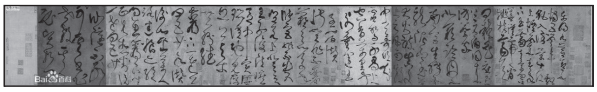
Name	Portret	Calligraphy	Characteristic
颜真卿			The strokes in the image are stout and strong.
柳公权			This strokes are more thin yet strong.
欧阳询			The Regular Script is characterized by round, smooth and square-shaped strokes, making them outstanding.
赵孟頫			This type of calligraphy is recognized for its fluent handwriting.

characters have not changed anymore. After the Regular Script took form, except the shape of the characters which is under constant simplification, nothing else changed.

6. THE CURSIVE SCRIPT 草书

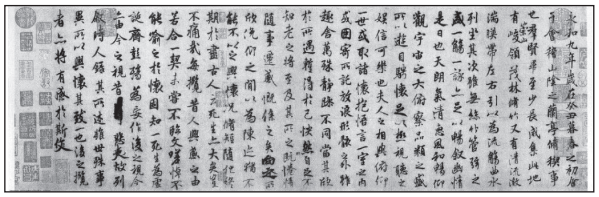
The Cursive Script 草书 is another style of character, recognized as the simplified form of the Official Script that is written without lifting one’s pen from the paper. According to 《说文解字》- the first book to systematically analyze the origin of characters and also world’s first dictionary of characters - the author Xu Shen says: “The Cursive Script became popular in Han Dynasty”. The script distinguishes from the other through the outline of the word, rules for the loss of the scribe and a fast handwriting. （许慎(1985)《说文解字》，北京：中华书局出版社.）

In accordance with the point of view of Han Jian Tang, the Cursive Script may be divided into 3 categories 章草，今草 and 狂草. “The first category entitled章草 is the initial stage of the Cursive Script; later on is changed into今草; whereas狂草 became popular very late, the writing is flamboyant and the work of art portrays the artistic realm of beauty which has always been loved”. The greatest calligrapher from ancient China is the Tang Dynasty Zhang Xu 张旭 (675- aprox.750), also known by people as “The Saint of Cursive Script” or “草圣”. His representative work is worked in ink and is entitled《古诗四帖》.（韩鉴堂 （2014）《汉字》，北京：五洲传播出版社.)



7. THE SEMI-CURSIVE SCRIPT 行书

The Semi-Cursive Script is a faster writing form of the Regular Script, the difference is that the Semi-Cursive Script is not that carefully and neatly as the Regular Script is and is also not that hard to understand as the Cursive Script, but rather the typeface could be classified as a style between the Regular Script and the Cursive Script. This type of writing is not always used. There are many calligraphers that use the Semi-Cursive Script, however the most outstanding are东晋（317—420）and 王羲之（303—361）. I will set as an example the representative work of王羲之 named 《兰亭序》



In order to show the development of the Chinese characters during history I have chosen a page of the book *„Tracing the roots of Chinese characters.500 cases”* (2007) (李乐毅 （2007）《汉字演变五百例》，北京：北京语言大学出版社)



8. THE SIMPLIFIED CHARACTERS 简体字

At present, the standard Chinese characters commonly used in mainland China are simplified. From where did the idea of simplifying characters come from? How did the simplified characters come into being?

Chinese characters have a long history, they have been used on a vast area by a great number of people and it has been used to record many old scriptures. The development of Chinese characters to modern times seems very complicated: big word number, many forms of Chinese characters, some strokes are too many, making people hard to learn characters, to write and to use them. Therefore, Chinese characters underwent a necessarily simplification process. At the beginning of the 20th century, some intellectuals thought that Chinese characters are hard to learn and to use. In their opinion, the Chinese characters needed to be reformed, furthermore the best method was the simplification. The characters that went through simplification were known as Simplified Characters “简化字”, whereas the characters before being simplified were known as Traditional Characters“繁体字”..

The Chinese Reform Committee thinks there are two points for the reason why the Chinese characters appeared to be hard to learn and to use. Firstly, the structure of the Chinese characters was too complex and secondly, the number of Chinese characters was too big. In order to overcome these two problems, the Chinese Government has set a target to simplify the characters.

The first target was to reduce the number of strokes and afterwards, to reduce the number of Chinese characters. But how to reduce the strokes of Chinese characters? The approach adopted by the Chinese Government was to use relatively easy pre-Qin ancient characters and the widely popular nonstandard forms of characters and variant forms of Chinese characters, as well as the newly emerged character font style. Another method was to adopt the simplified writing method of the Cursive Script and the Semi-cursive Script. The creation, the mergence and the exchange of characters was the last method adopted by the Chinese Government. Through simplification, the Chinese characters were reduced from 15.6 to 10.3 strokes. In reducing the number of words in Chinese characters, the main method used by the Chinese Reform Committee was to sort out the variant forms of Chinese characters and at the same time to merge or to exchange the characters with the same pronunciation. In 1955, the variant forms of Chinese characters reduced to 1055.

The decrease of strokes and number of Chinese characters brought great convenience to Chinese people’s life, study and work.

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