**writing/书写(Shū Xiě)**

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**The writing of characters has sacred significance in China.** Legend has it that when Cangjie, an ancient sage, observed the footprints of bird and beast and invented Chinese Characters, the heavens and the earth shook. In the ancient text *Huai Nan Zi*, it is said that “In ancient times, when Cangjie invented writing, Heaven rained down millet and ghosts wailed at night.” People in the Han Dynasty explained that gods rained down millet because they believe once people mastered the written language, they would attend to the trivialities and neglect the fundamentals, and their minds become complex, treacherous and profit-seeking, therefore abandoning agriculture. In anticipation of people suffering from hunger, the gods rained down millet in advance. The ghosts were worried that humans would attack them with written words, so they cried. Cangjie, who invented the characters, is said to have four eyes and is also considered to be the first historian. Among the Chinese people, the cultural hero who invented the characters is regarded as a divine being. In particular, temples dedicated to Cangjie once spread all over the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, and there has also been a rich and long tradition of offering sacrifices to Cangjie.

In the rather chaotic Chinese mythological system, certain gods are related to the written language, such as Wenchang Dijun (Emperor of Flourishing Literature), Wenquxing (Star of Examination) and Wenchangxing (Star of Flourishing Literature). The folk image of Wenchang Dijun is a literati. The two boys who attends him in his studies, one holds a pen and the other holds a notebook. There is usually an incense burner at the gate of Wenchang Dijun Temple. According to folklore, any paper written with words is sacred and cannot be discarded at will. It must be taken to a Wenchang Dijun Temple for incineration, the so-called “esteeming and cherishing paper with written words.” The burned paper ashes should also be properly preserved and regularly scattered into the rivers and seas. This kind of paper incinerator became the Pagoda of Cherish Characters. This tradition began at the latest in the Song Dynasty, a Dynasty attaching great importance to the imperial examination system, and it even spread to Ryukyu. People also regularly held Cherishing the Characters Gaterings, printed and published the *Law on Word Cherishing*, and local governments sometimes gathered paper with words for organized incineration.

**The origin of Chinese characters has this sense of sanctity, so adoration of character can easily play a role in religious activities.** In Taoism, there are talismans that mainly rely on writing to suppress evil forces, as well as the use of peach wood or jade seals engraved with specific spells. Since the Eastern Han Dynasty, Taoism used a kind of repeated nine-fold seal script to write secret religious documents, which is called the “cloud seal script.” The “overlapping seal script” used on the official seal during the Song-Jin period stemmed from the "cloud seal script" of Taoism. Buddhists also uses copying scriptures as a way of mind cultivation, some monks even use blood to copy scriptures. In both China and Japan, the tradition of “one character one stone” emerged, that is, to write a Chinese character on each small stone. Some people even copy the entire Shurangama Sutra with 80,000 characters on 80,000 small stones and tuck them away in stone pagodas for worship. In Japan, *yakuyoke* and *yakubarai* (warding off evil) belong to the exorcism ceremony of Shintoism and Buddhism respectively. The Shutei Mandala written in frenzied calligraphy of the School of Nichiren has many similarities with the talisman tradition of Taoism.

Among Chinese folk, the tradition of auspicious characters emerged due to the worship of characters. Auspicious sayings and character drawings composed of phrases such as "ten thousand taels of gold,” “let riches and treasures come into the house,” and "earning large quantities of gold each day” appear in large numbers in architectural carvings, folk paper-cuts and other artistic forms. And in divination, Literomancy (fortune-telling by analysing the component parts of a Chinese character written to predict someone's future) has become a unique form.

From archaeological data, the earliest findings similar to characters can be seen at present is the Jiahu symbols (16 distinct markings on prehistoric artifacts found in Jiahu, a Neolithic Peiligang culture site found in Henan, China, dated to around 8000 years ago) engraved on oracle bones. These characters are alraedy very similar to the oracle bone inscriptions unearthed in Yin Ruins, both engraved with sharp tools and the basic stroke structures such as horizontal, vertical, horizontal turning are similar to those of modern Chinese characters. At this time, there are already characters components and composite characters, and these components are also the basis of the modern Wubi input method. What's more important is that the Jiahu symbols are based on principles matters, and there are many such characters in the oracle bone script.

This involves a widespread misunderstanding of Chinese characters, that is, Chinese characters are often regarded as a kind of pictogram. In fact, the *Book of Han* clearly divides Chinese characters into “Six Writings (six categories)” – pictographs, simple ideograms, compound ideographs, phono-semantic compounds, derivative cognates, and phonetic loan characters. China's first dictionary, *Shuowen Jiezi* (*Discussing Writing and Explaining Characters*), written by Xu Shen in the Eastern Han Dynasty, also follows this categorization. Among them, pictographs and simple ideograms are the basic rules of character invention, and compound ideographs and phono-semantic compounds are the basic rules of combination to create more characters. The most commonly used characters in modern Chinese are phono-semantic compound characters.

As a language with clearly distinguished syllables, each of which corresponding to a morpheme, the Chinese language has an important feature – Chinese characters can be combined in stacks, creating more characters with characters components. And most single characters can be used as independent vocabularies or combined into multi-charactered vocabularies, which brings some important characteristics to the rules and forms of classical poetic composition. And due to the Square-Block structure, Chinese characters can be written from left to right, from right to left and from top to bottom, which brings the possibility of couplets and other writing forms.

Since its birth, Chinese characters have been closely related to writing materials, Thus, it is inevitably closely related to artistic style, generating a unique artistic tradition of calligraphy – starting from the oracle bone inscriptions carved with a knife more than 3,000 years ago, to the characters cast on bronze wares in the Axial Age (Chinese bronze inscriptions). After Qin Shi Huang unified China, he also unified the characters that were different but still interoperable among the various vassal states of the Zhou Dynasty, and organized them into the standard “small seal script.” But at the same time, Silk Manuscript written on textiles began to explore new script styles.

This era is accompanied by the emergence of writing with flexible brush. Legend has it that Meng Tian, a general of the Qin Dynasty, invented the ink brush. However, complete sets of ink brushes and pen holders have been unearthed in Chu tomb No. 15, Middle Warring States Period, Zuogongshan, Changsha, and Chu tomb No. 2, Baoshan, Jingmen City, Hubei Province. Writing with flexible brush brought great changes in artistic style, especially on the slightly curved bamboo slips, which emphasizes the characteristics of *bozhe* (downward stroke slanting left and right). And calligraphy users of the bottom class affected the formal inscriptions on tablets in turn. The evolution process of Chinese characters from “small seal script” to “official script” is generally called the “transformation to official script.” Since then, the more roundish Chinese characters became more squarish, which was a feature completely preserved in the later regular script. The maturity of ink brush production and the popularity of papermaking made it possible to write swiftly and lightly with the flexible brush, which gave birth to the emergence of cursive and semi-cursive script. Calligraphy art developed rapidly from the Eastern Jin Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty, calligraphy artists had a strong creative consciousness. In the glorious age of Tang Dynasty, there were great calligraphy masters with great personality, and the history of calligraphy was in the making. The regular script of the Tang Dynasty basically laid the foundation of modern Chinese characters. To achieve a high level of calligraphy skill is regarded as the most important fundamental ability for a literati artist in China, which was also regarded as an element in the selection of officials in the imperial examination system.

Deriving from calligraphy, characters are widely used in various circumstances: there is the tradition of using characters on barrel tiles, plaques and couplets of buildings; The use of characters in letter packaging gave birth to the invention of seals and seal paste; The characters were engraved on the stone tablet, therefore the rubbing technique was developed. Characters were also carved on the cliffs of scenic spots, becoming cliff inscriptions. People put up Spring Festival couplets during the Chinese New Year, which is also a cultural activity derived from calligraphy.

In ancient China, calligraphy was practiced by emperors, officials from high range to low range, rural teachers and doctor. Even to this day, calligraphy is still an art of high status in China, when rules of etiquette apply, such as writing invitations, characters written with flexible brush are generally considered more polite than printed. Today, China's most famous universities and official publications mostly use Mao Zedong's calligraphy font for their titles, and many goods and merchandise still use calligraphy in their trademarks.

With phonetic symbols, people who can speak only need to learn certain number of letters to record the language, therefore, to write. In contrast, the pronunciation of Chinese characters is relatively separated from the scripts, which brought a lot of impact. The construction rules of Chinese characters lead to many components constituting characters, and there are hundreds of commonly used partial radicals alone. Stemming from a single character, the vocabulary range is huge, and there are tens of thousands of commonly used words. It is precisely because of this complexity of Chinese characters that the learning cycle of the Chinese writing system is prolonged. There were many illiterates in China's history. After the founding of he People's Republic of China, the government paid a great price to eliminate illiteracy. Generally speaking, it is easier for foreigners to learn spoken Chinese, but it is much more difficult to learn reading and writing.

Secondly, due to the large number of characters in Chinese language, although movable type printing first appeared in China in the Song Dynasty, the amount of movable type required by Chinese characters is large, which makes the cost of movable type printing higher than that of block printing, and movable type printing was not popularized on a large scale. The popularity of books brought by Gutenberg movable type printing did not appear in China. Large number of ancient books still relied on block printing with full page engraving. Block printing reached a very high level and a great economic scale in the Song and Ming Dynasties. The Song typeface and Ming typeface of today's Chinese character printed fonts stem from this era.

Although the cumbersome system of characters brings the cost of learning speed and popularization, it also has it advantages: because the characters do not change with pronunciation, the Chinese character system has become a stable and common written language for the diverse and rapidly changing dialect users in the vast land. Some researchers believe that in addition to the unique climate and river trend China has, Chinese characters, as a common written language, play a role of adhesive. So, China, which is similar in size to Europe, did not split into many nation states that use different languages. The use of Chinese characters spread to Japan, North Korea, Vietnam and other countries, forming an East Asian Chinese character cultural spherea.

Secondly, due to the long-term stability of Chinese characters, especially the close similarity between the Chinese characters after the clerical script and today's Chinese characters, young students who graduated from high school in China and students who have a certain knowledge of Classical Chinese grammar can easily read the inscriptions of the Han Dynasty and most ancient classics, which also brings long-term stability of cultural traditions.

Today, there are several thousands of commonly used Chinese characters. The *Jiyun*, a Chinese rime dictionary published during the Song Dynasty, has more than 50,000 character entries. The widely influential *Kangxi Dictionary* contains about 47,000 characters. Since the popularization of modern scientific knowledge, people have created many new Chinese characters, such as many chemical elements in the periodic table of elements.

However, Chinese characters have suffered several serious challenges in the 20th century. The New Culture Movement around 1918 advocated the use of written vernacular Chinese and the abolition of classical Chinese, which already happened in a large number of novels in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. This movement was a great success. But then, the radical anti-traditionalists put forward the slogan of "Abolishing Chinese characters.” Their reason was that the writing of Chinese characters was too slow to adapt to modern life. As a result, people put forward various plans for the Latinization of Chinese characters.

In 1935, the government of the Republic of China introduced a version of the table of first batch of simplified characters, which was discontinued the following year. In 1956, the People's Republic of China government issued The Chinese Character Simplification Scheme, and in May 1964, the General Table of Simplified Chinese Characters was approved. Simplified Chinese character tables are used in Chinese mainland, Singapore and Malaysia today. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, people use traditional Chinese characters that are different from each other. After World War II, Japan also simplified a number of Chinese characters used in the Japanese language.

One of the important reasons for the negation of Chinese characters in the middle of the 20th century is that the huge font library of Chinese characters is not compatible with modern typewriters. In 1980, due to the invention and development of Chinese character laser phototypesetting system and Chinese character input method in personal computer, today's Chinese characters have many input modes such as character pattern, voice and handwriting. The barrier between Chinese characters and modern information technology has disappeared.

In addition to the original Song typeface, the Chinese character font also draws inspiration from the Western typeface and develops a variety of styles, such as the East Asian Gothic typeface, Arial typeface and so on. At present, due to the large number of Chinese characters, the design cost of Chinese computer fonts is still higher than that of phonetic writing. However, artificial intelligence technology is being used to generate Chinese character fonts. In recent years, a large number of traditional calligraphy fonts have entered the computer font library.

Since the middle of the 20th century, the vertical composition of characters in books and newspapers has been replaced by horizontal composition essentially. Interestingly, most Chinese calligraphers still insist on the vertical writing system from right to left, although they have to practice the difficult method of writing with a raised wrist for this.