

BI WEI

## THE ORIGIN AND EVOLVEMENT OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

Writing, the carrier of culture and the symbol of human civilization, first appeared in Sumer<sup>1</sup>. Like other ancient languages of Egypt and India, ancient Sumerian symbols have been lost in the process of history, but only Chinese characters still remain in use today. They have played a significant role in the development of Chinese language and culture. This article intends to display how Chinese characters were created and how they were simplified from the ancient form of writing to more abstract.

### Origin of Chinese characters

Chinese characters, in their initial forms, were beautiful and appropriately reflected images in the minds of ancient Chinese that complied with their understanding of reality. Chinese people selected the way of expressing meaning by figures and pictures, and Chinese characters begun with drawings.

### Three Myths in Ancient Times

It is difficult to determine the specific time when the Chinese characters emerged. There are three old myths about the origin of Chinese characters. The first refers to the belief that Chinese characters were created by Fu Xi – the first of Three Sovereigns<sup>2</sup> in ancient China, who has drew the Eight Trigrams which have evolved into Chinese characters. The mysterious Eight Trigrams<sup>3</sup> used for divination are composed of the symbols “–” and “– –”, representing Yang and Yin respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> I.J. Gelb, *Sumerian language*, [in:] *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, Encyclopedia Britannica, retrieved 30.07.2011, [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com).

<sup>2</sup> *Worshiping the Three Sage Kings and Five Virtuous Emperors – The Imperial Temple of Emperors of Successive Dynasties in Beijing*, Beijing 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The Eight Trigrams is also called “八卦” (Pinyin: bāguà) in Chinese, which is used in Taoist philosophy.

Yin and Yang go together, constituting eight areas with three couples in one group, indicating different natural phenomena and things. But these basic symbols are very far from the oracle bone inscriptions (the inscriptions on animal bones and tortoise shells). Therefore, the first statement had been denied by most of sinologists. It's hard to believe that Eight Trigrams are the origin of Han characters.

The second one is that Chinese characters were created by the use of knots. It is said that recording events by knots started with Emperor Shen Nung (approximately 2838–2698 BC)<sup>4</sup>, so Chinese characters were invented by Shen Nung. Many experts thought that people made knots on ropes to remember something and knots could have been used by almost all primitive people, but it is not possible that they evolved into the writing or functioned as a language. That indicates, it is impossible that Chinese characters were created by the use of knots.

The last popular myth is that Cang Jie, historical chronicler of the Yellow Emperor (ancestor of the Chinese people) over 5,000 years ago, was the inventor of Chinese characters<sup>5</sup>. According to ancient writings, Cang Jie had four eyes and four pupils which could observe different things of the world<sup>6</sup>. When he raised his head he could understand the form of the stars in the sky; when he lowered his head he could distinguish the tracks of birds and animals on the ground. Therefore, he invented a lot of symbols to represent different objects and affairs, which were the oldest Chinese characters. When he invented the characters, the Heaven rained the grain and the ghosts cried at night<sup>7</sup>. *Xunzi* (the book collecting the elaborately argued essays by Hsun Tzu – a Chinese Confucian philosopher)<sup>8</sup> and other ancient books also recorded the myth of Cang Jie. Evidently, it is hard to accept that the characters were created solely by an individual. The characters have been, most probably, invented by a number of people, each of whom might have engraved some figures or draw some pictures. Cang Jie, if only he had existed, would be one of the very scholarly people who could collect and settle the different symbols and tell people the corresponding meanings so that people could remember something of importance in their lives. Furthermore, from the scientific perspective, the ap-

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<sup>4</sup> Cheng Yuzhen 程裕祯, 《中国文化要略》 (*Outline of Chinese Culture*), Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Zhang Shudong 张树栋, 《中华印刷通史》 (*A General History of Chinese Printing*), Taipei 2005, pp. Ch3, sec. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Huang Hui 黄晖, 《论衡校释》 (*Collation and Annotation of Discourse Balance*), China Book Store 2006. *Discourse Balance* was published in 80 CE, is a wide-ranging Chinese classic text containing critical essays by Wang Chong on natural science, Chinese mythology, philosophy and literature.

<sup>7</sup> He Ning 何宁, 《淮南子集释》 (*Annotation of The Philosophers of Huainan*), China Book Store 1998. *The Philosophers of Huainan* is a Chinese philosophical classic from the Han Dynasty that collects Taoist, Confucianist and Legalist concepts.

<sup>8</sup> P. Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 45–49.

pearance and forming of any kind of writing having to meet the needs of social life must surely have experienced a considerably long period of trial and development. Chinese characters are a huge and complicated system, and they could have come into being over a long course of laboring and living. However, the relationship between Cang Jie and creation of Chinese characters can not be completely denied. The most important information which we can discover from the previous records is that Chinese characters are ideographic and have originated from drawings<sup>9</sup>.

## Predecessor of Ancient Chinese Characters

The oracle scripts on the tortoise shells and animal bones in the Shang Dynasty (1711–1066 BC) were deemed the oldest characters. However, characters of the Shang Dynasty we can see today are mature and had been developed, so Chinese characters might have emerged long before that dynasty, perhaps as early as the New Stone Age during which period Chinese people carved and painted many symbols on pottery. These symbols had a significant relationship with Chinese characters and were the most important materials to research the origin of Chinese characters. Archaeological researchers discovered many geometric symbols on earthenware excavated from Banpo Village and Jiangzhai Village in Xi'an City, Shanxi Province. There etchings, consisting of lines, were carved during the Yangshao Culture period about 6,000 years ago<sup>10</sup>. They are too simple and abstract to figure out their meanings, although some of regular symbols repeated several times. It should be mentioned that there are similar symbols on unearthened relics in ruins of the same period of other cultures. These symbols, which have some certain similarities to the Chinese characters, might well be the predecessors of the ancient Chinese characters<sup>11</sup>.

The ruins of the Erlitou Culture, which had been generally identified by Chinese archaeologists to the site of Xia Dynasty (21<sup>st</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century BC, the first dynasty in China), were discovered in Erlitou, Henan Province<sup>12</sup>. More than 20 kinds of symbols, dating back at least 4,000 years, carved on pottery were unearthened. Some simple number symbols carved on the surface of pottery such as “一”, “二”, “三”, “M”, “X”, “个”, “十”, “ ” might be used to mark the capacity of earthenware. The forms of these symbols were very similar to those excavated from Banpo Village

<sup>9</sup> Xu Shen 许慎, 《说文解字》 (*An Analysis and Explanation of Characters*), Shanghai 1981. This book is an early 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Chinese dictionary from Han Dynasty.

<sup>10</sup> Wee Lee Woon, *Chinese Writing: Its Origin and Evolution*, Hong Kong 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Qiu Xigui 裘锡圭, 《文字学概要》 (*Chinese Writing*), Commercial Press 2000.

<sup>12</sup> S. Allan, *Erlitou and the Formation of Chinese Civilization: Toward a New Paradigm*, “The Journal of Asian Studies” 2007, 66 (2), pp. 461–496; Liu Li, Xu Hong, *Rethinking Erlitou: legend, history and Chinese archaeology*, “Antiquity” 2007, 81 (314), pp. 886–901.

and Jiangzhai Village, and some of them had a close similarity to the oracle bone inscriptions<sup>13</sup>. However, most of these geometric symbols appeared in single words but not phrases or sentences, so that we cannot say for certain that they are actually characters. But the specialists and scholars presumed from the consistent line structure with the simple characters used now that the geometric symbols carved on the pottery are probably the genesis of the Chinese characters.

## Evolution of Chinese Characters

Chinese characters from the earliest Chinese hieroglyphs to today's simple characters have undergone through a very long process of development which can be divided into two periods: ancient writing and modern writing. Associated with these two periods, Chinese characters had experienced several times of evolution into many different script forms. Oracle bone script of the Shang Dynasty (1711–1066 BC) is the earliest systematic form of Chinese characters inscribed on animal bones and tortoise shells. Then Chinese characters evolved through bronze script of the Zhou Dynasty (1066–256 century BC), seal script in the late Zhou Dynasty and Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), official script in the Qin Dynasty and the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) and regular script. Based on pictographs, Chinese characters gradually developed from the form of drawings to strokes and from complex to simple ones.

## Earliest Characters in China

Oracle bone script (Chinese: 甲骨文, Pinyin: jiǎgǔwén) is the inscription on animal bones and tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty (1711–1066 BC). It was first excavated by the local farmers in Xiaotun Village, Anyang, Henan Province and was sold as a kind of traditional Chinese medicine called “longgu” (dragon bones)<sup>14</sup>. In 1899, Wang Yirong, epigraphist of Qing Dynasty (1616–1911), who had a great interest in ancient characters, found many inscriptions on *longgu* when he bought traditional Chinese medicine, and he thought these inscriptions were ancient characters<sup>15</sup>. In 1910, the famous scholar Luo Zhenyu affirmed that Xiaotun Village was

<sup>13</sup> *Excavators of the Institute of Archaeology CASS. 《考古》* (“The Journal of Archaeology”). The Institute of Archaeology Press CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Science), 1965.

<sup>14</sup> Dong Zuobin, Hu Houxuan, 《甲骨文年表》 (*Oracle Chronology*), Shanghai Commercial Press 1937.

<sup>15</sup> Xi Weng 汐翁, 《华北画刊》 (*North China Illustrated* 89), 1931; “The Discovery of Oracle Bones and the Locating of Yinxu Site”. The Garden Museum of Yin Ruins. “The Discovery of Oracle Bones and the Locating of Yinxu Site. In 1899, Wang Yirong, the director of the Imperial

the capital of the Shang Dynasty, called “Yin”. Hereafter, these inscriptions were designated as Shang script from about 3,000 years ago, which was of great historical significance<sup>16</sup>.

Now 150,000 pieces of animal bones and tortoise shells have been unearthed from the ruins of Yin and other places, including more than 4,500 distinctive characters. As the oracle bone script had the strong features of pictograph and ideograph, some characters could still be recognized by people, although in an early stage of development. To that date, more than 1,700 characters have been interpreted<sup>17</sup>, most of them as prayers by Shang rulers at divination and sacrificial rites. Before going on a war or a big hunt, there would be a harvest to divine the outcome by animal bones and tortoise shells. Of course, there were a few inscriptions used as simple records<sup>18</sup>.

The oracle bone script from the ruins of Yin consisting of phrases and simple sentences, shows that a well-structured script with a complete system of written signs has been formed in the early age. In the past, it had long been thought to be the earliest Chinese characters discovered in China. However, the new archaeological findings proved that this script contains not the earliest characters in ancient China. From 1985 to 1986, Chinese archaeologists discovered a primitive village site from the Longshan Culture period in Chang’an district of Xi’an where 12 animal bones with carving inscriptions were unearthed. From 1996 to 1997, two bones with inscriptions were excavated in Hengtai, Shandong Province. At that time, few excavators believed that the discoveries might be related to characters or symbols. Unfortunately, most of excavators had not given enough attention to these inscriptions which are largely considered to be damaged by moth or grassroots<sup>19</sup>.

In 2005, Professor Liu Fengjun, a Chinese archaeologist and ancient characters researcher, found a small bone with inscribed pattern in Jinan. He affirmed that the bone was the Neolithic relic and the inscriptions carved on it were the early characters. In 2007, he discovered and verified a number of bones with inscriptions

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College and a well-known scholar of ancient inscriptions discovered dragon bones (known today as oracle bone inscriptions). He sent his assistants to Xiaotun village in Anyang, and enabled him to confirm that Xiaotun was indeed the Yinxu (Ruins of Yin) in the historical records. In 1917, Wang Guowei successfully deciphered the names in oracle bone inscriptions of Shang ancestors and from these was able to reconstruct the Shang genealogy. It matched the record in Sima Qian’s *Shiji* (Records of the Historian). Thus, the legend of Shang dynasty was confirmed as history and the importance of Yinxu was recognized by the academic world. The first excavations at Yinxu began in 1928”.

<sup>16</sup> Huang Dekuan, Chen Bingxin 黄德宽, 陈秉新, 《汉语文字学史》 (*The History of Chinese Philology*), Anhui Education Press 1990, pp. 188, 215.

<sup>17</sup> “甲骨文” (“Oracle Bone Script”), <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/甲骨文>.

<sup>18</sup> Qiu Xigui, *Chinese Writing*...

<sup>19</sup> Han Xin 韩新, 《考古中国》 (*Chinese Archaeological Secrets*), Tianjin Classics Publishing House 2006, pp. 696–724.

collected in Changle County, Shandong Province. He first made these bones public and announced the inscriptions above were the Dongyi writing from Longshan Culture period, dating back some 4,000–4,500 years. Compared with the oracle bone script of the Yin Ruins, these inscriptions without any divination traces were used to record events. After the further research, the inscriptions carved above these bones, called “bone inscriptions”, were identified as the earliest Chinese hieroglyphs by academia. And they were also regarded as the major source of the oracle bone inscriptions<sup>20</sup>.

## Ancient Chinese Characters

The following phase in the evolution of Chinese characters is represented by symbols inscribed on bronze bells and vessels from Zhou Dynasty (1066–256 BC), a writing known as “bronze script”. In addition, the characters casted in bronze ware are also called 金文 or 钟鼎文 in Chinese (Pinyin: jīnwén or zhōngdǐngwén, respectively) with “wén” meaning “inscription”, because bronze was called “jīn” at that time and Zhōng (bell) and Dǐng (tripodal vessels used for sacrifice) were the symbols of power and position<sup>21</sup>.

In the “Age of Bronze Ware” of China during the period of Shang and Zhou Dynasties, bronze ware was casted as a container, and most often as the sacrificial vessels to inscribe great events such as sacrifice, battle results, trade of slaves, etc. in a style just like the oracle bone script. In the Shang Dynasty, the inscriptions on bronze ware had very few characters, the form of which is extremely close to that of the oracle bone script. The size, complexity, formation of the characters are inconsistent. However, in Zhou Dynasty, the characters in bronze inscriptions were simpler, and the size and formation were more fixed. The bronze inscriptions, looked like drawings, but had made a significant progress from pictographic forms to block-shaped linear words we use today.

Toward the end of the Zhou Dynasty, a new script called the “seal script” (Chinese: 篆书, Pinyin: zhuànshū) began to be used in Qin State. This script was usually written on bamboo slips and pieces of silk or inscribed on rocks and stones. Owing to the regular and symmetric structure, rounded and graceful lines, it is deemed to be the most beautiful style of characters in ancient China by calligraphers. It is still used for inscribing names on a seal today. There are two kinds of seal script: large or great seal script and lesser or small seal script.

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<sup>20</sup> Liu Fengjun 刘凤君, 《龙山骨刻文》 (*Longshan Bone Inscriptions*), Shandong Literature & Art Publishing House 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Qiu Xigui, *Chinese Writing...*

The large seal script (Chinese: 大篆, Pinyin: dàzhuàn) is a traditional reference to all types of Chinese writing systems used before the Qin Dynasty. However, due to the lack of research achievements and precision, scholars often avoid the large seal script, instead of using more specified terms to the examples of writing. The large seal script was widely used in many vassal states in the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC). It was more regular and symmetrical than bronze inscription in writing system. From some unearthed artworks, the large seal script is generally represented by the stone drum inscription (in about 770–325 BC) which is now popularly recognised as referring to the stone inscriptions prevailed in Qin State during the Spring and Autumn period<sup>22</sup>. The stone drum inscription is considered to be a transitional form from the bronze inscription in the Zhou Dynasty to later lesser seal script in the Qin Dynasty. Now many scholars pay more attention to the stone drum inscription because it is one of the most important relics to research the development of characters and the stone-carving art.

During the new era – the Warring States Period (457–221 BC), Chinese characters used by seven states had different ways of writing. After the Qin State conquered the other six states and established the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), Emperor Qinshihuang<sup>23</sup> unified characters in order to strengthen his control. Based on the Large Seal script and rearranging the variant forms of characters in each state, the unified characters were decreed, called lesser or small seal script (Chinese: 小篆, Pinyin: xiǎozhuàn) which was the official style of characters in Qin Dynasty used for all the documents of the government. It was the result of the first extensive simplification and standardization of Chinese characters. Compared with the oracle bone script and bronze script, in the lesser seal script, the forms of characters were simpler, writing method was consistent, and the character pattern was more orderly. Furthermore, all the characters were rough block in shape. However, the lines composing of the characters were complicated and curved, although they were less similar to drawings. The Ancient Writing Period, from the earliest known oracle bone script to the development of the seal script, lasted about 1,160 years. And the lesser seal script marked the end of the ancient Chinese characters.

## Modern Chinese Characters

In the Qin Dynasty, scholars could not have imaged that great changes in form of Chinese characters had happened when they wrote the lesser seal script rapidly on

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<sup>22</sup> Cheng Yuzhen, *Outline of Chinese Culture...*

<sup>23</sup> Qingshihuang (260–210 BC) was the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty. After he unified China in 221 BC, he standardized weights and measures as well as the money and the system of writing.

bamboo slips or wood, i.e. clerical script or official script. After the unification of China, the seal script was still popular, but could not satisfy the needs of people because of its lengthened and curved lines being written were quite time-consuming, so another faster and convenient style of writing called “clerical script” (Chinese: 隶书, Pinyin: lìshū) appeared during the late of the Qin Dynasty and the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). “Li” meant a slave or prisoner in servitude, thus some scholars inferred that the new style of character was created by the slaves or prisoners serving the state which dealt with a large number of relatively official documents. In order to save time, they changed the rounded lines into straight ones which became the officially approved formal way of writing. There is also historical legend which attributed the creation of clerical script to Cheng Miao<sup>24</sup>, who was said to have invented it on the orders of Qinshihuang. However, according to archaeological evidence, all stages of Chinese writing had taken a long course and could not have been invented by an individual. In fact, the clerical script, as well, was created in accumulated work of many people. Furthermore, archaeological discoveries clearly showed that, besides the lesser seal script in the Qin Dynasty, the clerical script found favor among ordinaries at that time. Till the Han Dynasty, the clerical script developed completely mature form and became in common use not only by ordinary people but also by government officials. Recently, “Li” was noted to have the meaning of “affiliate”, so the clerical script might be the derivative of the seal script.

The Silk Books in tombs of Han Dynasty unearthed at Mawangdui substantiates the origination and formation of the clerical script and supplies a gap of calligraphy history<sup>25</sup>. We could observe from the books that the form of the clerical script totally broke away drawing and was very different from the seal script. There have been made several modifications and simplifications to make the Chinese writing convenient and tidy: the curved lines became somewhat straight strokes; the overall number of lines were reduced; some complex components merged into one; the forms of characters were simplified. Above all, Chinese characters were no longer pictographic, but became more abstract ideographic symbols composed of strokes. The largest transformation from the seal script to the clerical script is often referred as the “clerical change”, after which there have been few enormous changes to present characters we see today in general. This change allowed people to write the characters easier and faster. Thus, the emergence of the clerical script had an important significance in the evolution of Chinese characters, which marked that the Chinese characters begun to enter the modern writing period.

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<sup>24</sup> Xu Shen, *An Analysis and Explanation...*; Yang Yanjun 杨燕君, Yu Jia 俞伽. 《汉字与书法艺术》 (*Chinese Characters and Calligraphy Art*), Jiangxi 2009, pp. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Chen Songchang 陈松长, “从湖南出土简帛看秦汉之际的隶书风貌”, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/collection/2005-06/21/content\\_3114110.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/collection/2005-06/21/content_3114110.htm) [18.02.2014].



From the clerical change to the present, it has been more than 2,200 years. This period in the historical development of Chinese characters is still called modern because the structures of Chinese characters have remained the same until today. Although there has not been any change about the structures of Chinese characters since the clerical change, the strokes of Chinese characters have undergone two main stages: regularization and normalization.

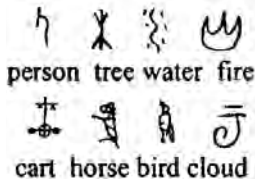


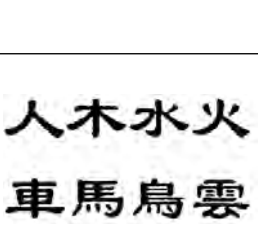

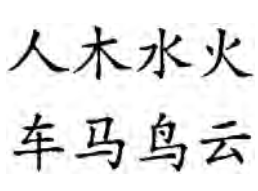
Toward the end of the Han Dynasty, the strokes with the wavy endings and some thick curvy lines seen in the clerical script became smooth and straight. This change is known as “regularization” after which the characters called the regular script (Chinese: 楷书, Pinyin: kǎishū) appeared at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) and replaced the clerical script to be the major font of daily writing. The regular script could serve as an example for learning by the people generation after generation even up to present days because it is much simpler and easier to be written than the clerical script. So many calligraphers like Zhong Yao in the Three Kingdoms Period (220–280 AD), Wang Xizhi in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420 AD), Ouyang Xun, Yan Zhenqing, and Liu Gongquan in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), Su Shi in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) contributed to the regular script as the standard for students to admire, imitate and learn. It has been the standard and formal writing style for more than 1,800 years with the widest and longest usage.

Also born in the late Han Dynasty, the cursive and running styles were the result of the regular script rapidly. The cursive script broke the block-shaped forms of characters. The lines are vibrating and strokes are connected with each other. It is hard to identify and read although it is written in a quick way and the characters are elegant and vigorous. The running script is a writing between the regular script and cursive script. It is easy to recognize and is extremely fluent and practical. However, these two styles have never been thought as the standard writing because of the many variations. Instead, they have been used as a form of art.

## Reform of Modern Chinese Characters

We can see from the evolutionary process of Chinese characters in the past thousands of years that the general trend is moving towards simplicity. The Chinese characters abandoned complicated and difficult forms and adopted simpler and easier forms. In this way the same character has not only changed the shape in various ways but also simplified the pattern although its rudimental meaning stayed relatively unchanged. However, many characters still remained complicated and were difficult to learn. Some have variations caused by many centuries of use, others arose from a lack of uniformity. Therefore, from the end of Qing Dynasty, more

Table 1. Historical Evolution of Chinese Characters

Major Periods	Major Forms	Most Popular Times	Characteristics	Examples	
Ancient Writing Period	Oracle Bone Script 甲骨文	The Shang Dynasty (1711–1066 BC)	Character size and textual format are not consistent. Character form is complicated with pictographic and directive compounds.	 <p>人 木 水 火 車 馬 鳥 雲</p>	
	Bronze Script 金文	The Zhou Dynasty (1066–256 BC)	Character size and formation are more fixed. Strokes are fuller and more rounded. Characters are more simplified.	 <p>人 木 水 火 車 馬 鳥 雲</p>	
	Seal Script 篆书	The late Zhou Dynasty and the Qin Dynasty (221–106 BC)	Character form is more simplified. Writing method is consistent, and the Character pattern is more orderly. Many of the strokes are lengthened, curved and complicated. All characters are roughly square in shape.	 <p>人 木 水 火 車 馬 鳥 雲</p>	
Modern Writing Period	Traditional Form	Clerical Script 隶书	The Qin Dynasty and the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD)	Characters are no longer pictographic, but more abstract ideographic symbols. Strokes are less curved, and their amount is reduced. Many of the components are simplified.	 <p>人 木 水 火 車 馬 鳥 雲</p>
		Regular Script 楷书	From the late Han Dynasty to 1955	Characters strokes are straighter and smoother. Characters are clear and easy to write and read.	 <p>人 木 水 火 車 馬 鳥 雲</p>
	Normalized Form	From 1955 to the present	1,027 variant characters are abolished. The number of strokes in 2,235 of the characters is simplified.	 <p>人 木 水 火 车 马 鸟 云</p>	

Source: [http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/languages/pdf/Yin\\_chapter1.pdf](http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/languages/pdf/Yin_chapter1.pdf) [18.02.2014].

and more scholars started to explore the Chinese character reform, such as adopting the Latin alphabets, digit symbols or Ryakuji. But these attempts have failed because of the specificities of the Chinese characters which were considered as a kind of visual symbols, strong at conveying meaning and aesthetics and could inspire the imagination and creation. In order to continuously overcome the shortcoming of Chinese characters being difficult to be remembered, written and identified, a special government organization, first called the Committee for Chinese Language Reform and later the National Language Commission, was established in 1954, and was devoted to the normalization of the Chinese characters<sup>26</sup>.

In 1955, the “List of the First Group of Standardized Forms of Variant Characters” was officially published. 1,027 variant characters were abolished, and the remaining characters have been considered as the “the standard forms of characters”. In 1956, the “Scheme for Simplifying Chinese Characters” was officially published. In 1964, the “Complete List of Simplified Characters” was published, and it was republished in 1986<sup>27</sup>. 2,259 complex characters were abolished, and 14 components of characters were simplified. The list has 2,235 simplified characters in total, and 482 of them are basic. Among these 482 simplified characters, 20 percent were invented in the 1950’s, while the other 80 percent were created over several thousand years ago. In 1988, the “List of Generally Used Characters in Modern Chinese” including 7,000 characters, was officially published, and later in the same year, the “List of Frequently Used Characters in Modern Chinese”, was also officially published. The second list contains 3,500 characters, which essentially conforms to the use of words in modern Chinese<sup>28</sup>.

The original forms of Chinese characters, before being simplified, are often known as “complex characters”, which together with the characters that were created before the 20<sup>th</sup> century and had the same structure since the “clerical change” without being simplified, constitute the traditional forms of Chinese characters. And they are still in use in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. While after almost 50 years of simplifying, systemizing and standardizing work, Chinese characters are considered normalized. The normalized forms of Chinese characters referring to the modern Chinese characters, consist of those Chinese characters having been simplified or standardized since the 1950’s and the Chinese characters without simplifying until today. They are officially recognized and used in Mainland China, Singapore, and Malaysia. The students in Chinese schools now are required to write the modern Chinese characters as the regular script.

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<sup>26</sup> Zhangshuyan, Wang Tiekun, Li Shuyan, An Ning, 《简化字溯源》 (*Origin of Simplified Characters*), Language Publishing House 1997, pp. 19–25.

<sup>27</sup> Wang Jun 王均, 《当代中国的文字改革》 (*Reform of Contemporary Chinese Writing System*) Beijing 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Yao Xiaobo 姚晓柏, 《汉语言与文学》 (*Chinese Language and Writing*), Tsinghua University Press 2006, pp. 13–18.

## STRESZCZENIE

### POCHODZENIE I EWOLUCJA CHIŃSKICH ZNAKÓW

Starożytni Chińczycy podczas długiego okresu harmonijnego współżycia z naturą stworzyli pismo graficzne poprzez zastosowanie różnych elementów ze świata przyrody zgodnych z chińskim tradycyjnym spojrzeniem na naturę – „człowieka jako integralnej części przyrody”. Chińskie znaki są ideograficzne. Ich formy są ściśle związane z ich znaczeniem. Najwcześniejsze znaki chińskie były obrazkami, które odzwierciedlały prawdziwe elementy świata. Stopniowo ewoluowały, przekształcając się w pismo obrazkowe, uproszczone, oznaczające kontury obiektu lub charakterystyczną jego część. Wraz z rozwojem historii formy chińskich znaków ulegały dalszemu uproszczeniu i stawały się bardziej abstrakcyjne. Od czasu starożytnych skryptów wróżebnych na kościach do współczesnego pisma uproszczonego wiele piktograficznych, skomplikowanych znaków zostało przekształconych w bardziej abstrakcyjne i proste symbole. Jednakże fascynujące i unikalne znaki chińskie pozostały charakterystyczne, służąc jako podstawowy nośnik chińskiej cywilizacji, pokazując światu, jak bardzo Chiny cenią piękno.