Chapter 1 第一章
The History of Chinese Characters 汉字的历史

To learn the Chinese language seriously, to understand it precisely, and to appreciate it fully, one needs to learn its written forms: Chinese characters.

To learn Chinese characters well, it is helpful to know the ways in which characters were constructed and the historical developments characters have undergone.

I. The Ways in Which Characters Were Constructed 汉字的创制

Chinese characters, unlike the writing system of any alphabetical language, are formed with no letters or combination of letters to represent the sounds of the Chinese language. Rather, they are symbols constructed and used to convey meanings as well as sounds that indicate meanings. Although we still do not know exactly how long Chinese characters have been in existence, we do know that Chinese characters have had a history as a highly developed writing system for no less than 3,300 years.

In the earliest known stages of written Chinese, there were six kinds of Chinese characters: 1) pictographic characters, 2) indicative characters, 3) associative characters, 4) picto-phonetic characters, 5) explanatory characters, and 6) phonetic loan characters. The first five kinds (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) are categorized according to the ways characters were created, and the last one (6) complemented the other methods by borrowing existing characters to refer to things that no characters had been created for.

The following table summarizes the six categories of Chinese character construction:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Explanations</th>
<th>Examples*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Pictographic Characters</td>
<td>Characters created by drawing a sketch to depict a material object</td>
<td>人  person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>木  tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Indicative Characters</td>
<td>Characters created by 1) drawing an abstract sign to indicate an abstract concept or 2) adding or changing a stroke to an existing pictographic character to indicate a new concept</td>
<td>上  upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>本  root</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Associative Characters</td>
<td>Characters created by combining two or more pictographic components to infer a new meaning</td>
<td>木 + 木 = 林  tree + tree = woods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>人 + 木 = 休  person + tree = rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Picto-phonetic Characters</td>
<td>Characters created by combining a pictographic component that represents a meaning category and another component that indicates the sound of the whole character</td>
<td>沐 + 林 = 淋  water + (sound) = shower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>沐 + 木 = 沐  water + (sound) = wash</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Examples are approximate due to differences in character stroke order and shape.
These six kinds of Chinese characters, which were summarized and exemplified by Xu Shen in his *An Analysis and Explanation of Characters* (《说文解字》) at the beginning of the first century AD, reflect the earliest stages of the creation and use of Chinese characters.

The first major way of creating Chinese characters that came into use was the pictographic method. The human body or body parts as well as things that can be observed in nature were depicted in simple drawings based on their most conspicuous and differentiated traits. However, an abstract concept is not expressed easily by drawing a picture, so the indicative method, in which a symbol was added to a drawing to indicate the concept, was adopted. When a meaning could be sensed or deduced by combining two existing pictographs, a combined form was produced to save the trouble of creating a new pictograph. This method of combing two existing pictographs is called the associative method. When a meaning could not be expressed by creating a character with the associative method, then the picto-phonetic method was deployed. The picto-phonetic method forms a character with a pictograph as one part to indicate the major category of meaning and another part to indicate the pronunciation of the whole character. When a pictographic component representing both the sound and the meaning could not express the meaning clearly enough, another pictographic component was added to clarify or differentiate the meaning of the whole character from others. This method is the explanatory method. The explanatory method was also deployed when a character was borrowed (but never returned) to mean something else simply because this borrowed character had the same pronunciation as the new idea, which as yet had no character to express it. These borrowed characters are called phonetic loan characters.

The picto-phonetic method has been the most productive in creating characters. Because the explanatory method has not been clearly understood for many years and because a lot of work to distinguish explanatory characters from picto-phonetic characters has still not been satisfactorily done, many explanatory characters are confused with picto-phonetic characters. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that over 90 percent of the characters used today are picto-phonetic in a broad sense. Of course, because of developments and changes in the language over the past few thousand years, in modern Chinese no more than 30 percent of the picto-phonetic characters contain a phonetic component that can accurately represent the pronunciation of the whole character.

Regardless of how a character was created, when created it almost always had the trait of a pictograph one way or another. Over thousands of years, the pictographic
essence slowly faded and is no longer visually obvious in modern Chinese characters.
Now, formed with various kinds of lines, dots, and hooks, Chinese characters are highly
symbolic. They mostly appear as logographs rather than pictographs. In other words,
they look more like symbols than drawings.

II. The Development of Chinese Characters 汉字的发展

The history of the Chinese characters can be divided into two major periods:
ancient writing and modern writing. Associated with these two periods, there are six
major writing styles, starting from the earliest systematic form of Chinese characters
inscribed on oracle bones from about 3,300 years ago.

During the ancient writing stage, characters we can still see today were inscribed
on tortoise shells and animal bones and cast or inscribed on bronze bells and vessels.
Chinese characters inscribed on tortoise shells and animal bones are often referred to as
"oracle-bone inscriptions," and those cast or inscribed on bronze bells and vessels are
often called "bronze inscriptions." Oracle-bone inscriptions date to the Shang Dynasty
(1711-1066 BC) in China while bronze inscriptions were common in the Zhou Dynasty
(1066-256 BC). The characters’ size, positioning, complexity, and textual format in the
oracle-bone inscriptions are inconsistent, but the size and the textual format in the bronze
inscriptions are more fixed. In bronze inscriptions, the characters are more symmetrical
and the strokes are simpler.

Toward the end of the Zhou Dynasty, the Qin State began to use a new script both
to write on bamboo strips and pieces of silk and to inscribe onto rocks or precious stones.
This script is called the "seal script," which is still used for inscribing names on a seal.
After the Qin State conquered the other six states during the Warring States Period (475-
221 BC), unified China, and established the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), the seal script
was decreed as the standard of writing for the whole country. In the seal script, the
positioning of characters and complexity of forms became consistent, and all the
characters were roughly square in shape. However, the character strokes became
lengthened, curved, and complicated.

Because a large of number of documents had to be written or copied as part of the
administrative work after the unification of China, the seal script with its lengthened and
curved strokes was quite time-consuming and cumbersome. Among local officials at the
lower levels of the government who dealt with relatively unimportant documents, a new
script was created to save time. This new script continued to be developed in the Han
Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) and became the officially approved formal way of writing.
This script is now referred to as the "official script" or "clerical script" (隶书).

The clerical script is very different from the seal script as there are four basic
simplifications and modifications for convenience and speed of writing as well as for
 tidiness: 1) the curved strokes in the seal script became somewhat straighter, 2) the
overall number of strokes was reduced, 3) some different components were merged into
one, and 4) some components were modified and simplified. The change from the seal
script to the clerical script is often referred to as the "official change" or "clerical change"
(隶变). This change, the largest transformation of Chinese character structure, dropped
the pictographic appearance of Chinese characters almost completely and established the
foundation of the structures for the modern Chinese characters. Thus, in the history of
Chinese character development, the clerical script is viewed as the turning point dividing ancient writing and modern writing.

The Ancient Writing Period (古体字时期), from the earliest known oracle-bone inscriptions in the late Shang Dynasty to the development of the seal script, lasted about 1,160 years, and the Modern Writing Period (今体字时期), from the time of the clerical change to the present, has lasted more than 2,200 years. This period of time in the history of Chinese character development is still considered modern because the structures of Chinese characters have remained the same from the clerical change until today.

Although the structures of Chinese characters have not changed since the clerical change, the strokes of Chinese characters have undergone two major changes: regularization (楷化) and normalization (规范化).

Toward the end of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), strokes with an undulate end, which was a common feature of characters in the clerical script, became smooth and straight in the regular script (楷书), and some thick curvy lines seen in the clerical script changed to hooks in the regular script. This change is known as “regularization” (楷化). As the strokes were relatively smoother, straighter, and clearer in the regular script, it was easier to read and write and became widespread. The invention of printing helped the regular script, used as one of the major printing types, become widely accepted as the standard form of Chinese writing. Such calligraphers as Zhong Yao in the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280 AD), Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 AD), Ouyang Xun, Yan Zhenqing, and Liu Gongquan in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, and Mi Fu in the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD), and Zhao Mengfu in the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368 AD), among others, also contributed to making the regular script the standard for young students to admire, imitate, learn, and master. The regular script has been the standard of Chinese writing for more than 1,800 years, with the semi-cursive and cursive styles developing concurrently. However, as there are many variations of the semi-cursive and cursive styles, they have never become standardized printing types. Instead, they have been used for everyday communication and appreciated as a form of art.

Although the regular script changed the appearance of strokes in the clerical script, many characters remained complicated. Some characters have variations resulting from many centuries of use, during which time character variants with fewer strokes and simpler structures were created for convenience. Other characters have variations arising from a lack of uniformity among printing types after the invention of printing. Although these alternative forms of characters were popularly used for years, they were never officially recognized or accepted as the “standard forms of characters” (正体字) up to the 1950’s.

In the first three and half decades of the 20th century, attempts to accept these “nonstandard forms of characters” (俗体字) officially and to continue to simplify more Chinese characters were made, but they failed. However, these efforts laid the foundation for the language reform that took place in the second half of the 20th century. After World War II and the civil war in China in the late 1940’s, the systemization, simplification, and standardization of Chinese characters was finally on the agenda of the Chinese government. A special government organization, first called the Committee for Chinese Language Reform and later the National Language Commission, was established in 1954 to direct and oversee the normalization of Chinese characters.
Table 2: Historical Development of Chinese Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Periods</th>
<th>Major Forms</th>
<th>Most Popular Time</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Writing Period</td>
<td>Oracle-Bone Inscription</td>
<td>The Shang Dynasty (1711-1066 BC)</td>
<td>Character size, positioning, form complexity, and textual format are not consistent.</td>
<td>person tree water fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>甲骨文</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>cart horse bird cloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bronze Inscription</td>
<td>The Zhou Dynasty (1066-256 BC)</td>
<td>Character positioning and form complexity are inconsistent, but the size and the textual format are more fixed. Strokes are simpler, and characters are more symmetrical.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>金文</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seal Script</td>
<td>The late Zhou Dynasty and the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC)</td>
<td>Many variant forms of characters are eliminated. Character positioning and form complexity become consistent. Many of the strokes are lengthened, curved, and complicated, and all the characters are roughly square in shape.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Writing Period</td>
<td>Clerical Script</td>
<td>The Qin Dynasty and the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD)</td>
<td>Character strokes are less curved, the number of strokes is reduced, and many of the components are modified and simplified. Pictographic shapes are completely dropped. Characters have become writing symbols.</td>
<td>人木水火 車馬烏雲</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>隶书</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular Script</td>
<td>From the late Han Dynasty to 1955</td>
<td>Character strokes are smoother and straighter than those in the clerical script. They are clear and easy to read and write.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>楷书</td>
<td>From 1955 to the present</td>
<td>1,027 character variants are eliminated. The number of strokes in 2,235 of the characters is systematically reduced. The forms of characters for printing types and the stroke order are standardized.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1955, to systemize Chinese characters, the “List of the First Group of Standardized Forms of Variant Characters” was officially published. Among the 810 sets of characters, with 2 to 6 variants in each set, 1,027 variant characters (异体字) were abolished, and the remaining characters have been referred to as “the standard forms of characters” (正体字) since then.

In 1956, after several years of discussion, revision, and consultation, the “Scheme for Simplifying Chinese Characters” was officially published. In 1964, the “Complete List of Simplified Characters” was officially published, and it was republished in 1986. The list has 2,235 simplified characters in total, and 1,116 of them are frequently used today in daily life. In fact, among the 2,235 simplified characters, only 482 of them are
basic. The remaining 1,753 characters in the list are all derivatives of these 482 basic simplified characters. Among the 482 basic ones, about 20 percent were newly created in the 1950's, while the other 80 percent were created beginning over several thousand years ago.

In 1964, in an effort to standardize the printed forms of Chinese characters, the “List of Chinese Character Forms for General Printing” was officially published. The list has provided the standardized printed forms for 6,196 generally used characters.

In 1988, the “List of Frequently Used Characters in Modern Chinese,” which includes 3,500 characters, was officially published, and later in the same year, the “List of Generally Used Characters in Modern Chinese” was also officially published. This second list contains 7,000 characters, which include the 3,500 frequently used ones contained in the first list.

In 1997, “Standard Stroke Order for Generally Used Characters in Modern Chinese” was officially published.

After 50 years of simplifying, systemizing, and standardizing work on Chinese characters, they are considered normalized. The “normalized forms of Chinese characters” consist of two major types: 1) the inherited characters, that is, the Chinese characters that were created and officially accepted before the 20th century and had the same structure since the “clerical change” without being simplified until today, and 2) the simplified characters, or those Chinese characters that have been simplified, systemized, or standardized since the 1950's. The original forms of the characters, before being simplified or replaced by today’s simple forms, are often referred to as “complex characters” (繁体字). The complex characters together with the inherited characters constitute the “traditional forms of Chinese characters” (传统文字).

Modern Chinese characters, which is another term referring to the normalized forms of Chinese characters, are officially recognized and used in Mainland China, Singapore, and Malaysia as well as the United Nations, while the traditional forms of Chinese characters are still in use in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao as well as among some Chinese communities outside China.

Among modern Chinese characters, about 75 percent are inherited characters, about 5 percent are newly created characters or characters that have been borrowed to represent new modern meanings, and about 20 percent are simplified characters.

The history of the development of Chinese characters in terms of the evolution of forms over the past several thousand years has demonstrated three general trends in the process.

First, Chinese characters used to be drawings depicting objects and have slowly become more-abstract writing symbols. Second, Chinese characters started with the pictographic method as the major way of character construction and have ended up using more and more abstract symbols developed from pictographs as phonetic symbols in new characters. Third, Chinese characters used to have a lot of pictographic symbols that were complicated to write, but they have now become logographs that are much easier to write than before.

In this book, we will focus on the inherited characters, but we will also look at the simplified characters and their counterparts in the traditional forms.
### Table 3: Definitions for Terms About Chinese Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inherited characters</td>
<td>Characters that were created and officially accepted before the 20th century, the structures of which have remained the same since the “clerical change”</td>
<td>日月水火 (sun, moon, water, fire)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplified characters</td>
<td>Characters that have been simplified, systemized, or standardized since the 1950’s and have been officially accepted</td>
<td>車馬它泪 (cart, horse, it, tears)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex characters</td>
<td>Characters that have been replaced by the simplified characters</td>
<td>車馬牠淚 (cart, horse, it, tears)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Chinese Characters</td>
<td>Characters that consist of a) inherited characters and b) complex characters that have been simplified</td>
<td>a) 日月水火 (b) 車馬牠淚</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalized Chinese Characters</td>
<td>Characters that consist of a) inherited characters and b) simplified characters</td>
<td>a) 日月水火 (b) 車馬它泪</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Chinese Characters</td>
<td>Another term for “normalized Chinese characters”</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### III. Chapter Review Exercises 本章复习

Choose the best answers to fill in the blanks.

1. Chinese characters became a mature writing system ________.
   a. at least 3,000 years ago  
   b. about 2,000 years ago  
   c. about 1,000 years ago  
   d. about 500 years ago

2. _________ is not one of the six categories of character construction.
   a. Pictograph  
   b. Associative  
   c. Simplification  
   d. Indicative
3. A character that was constructed with the associative method would combine
   a. a phonetic component and a pictographic component
   b. two phonetic components
   c. a pictographic component and another abstract symbol
   d. two pictographic components

4. Ninety percent of modern Chinese characters are considered
   a. picto-phonetic compounds
   b. pictographs
   c. associative compounds
   d. phonetic loans

5. The formula that can best represent the explanatory method is
   a. a semantic component + another semantic component
   b. a semantic component + a phonetic component
   c. a semantic component that is also phonetic + another semantic component
   d. a pictographic component + an abstract symbol

6. Modern Chinese characters are
   a. mostly picture-like, and their meanings can be figured out from their shapes
   b. highly symbolic, and their meanings can only be understood through learning
   c. mostly phonetic symbols
   d. all simplified in the second half of the 20th century

7. The earliest form of Chinese characters recognized as a mature system is
   a. the oracle-bone inscription
   b. the bronze inscription
   c. the seal script
   d. the clerical script

8. The development of Chinese characters entered the Modern Writing Period from the Ancient Writing Period when
   a. the seal script
   b. the bronze inscription
   c. the regular script
   d. the clerical script

9. The Modern Writing Period started as early as about 2,000 years ago, but it is still considered modern because
   a. the history of Chinese characters is so long that 2,000 years or so is a relatively short period of time
b. the basic structures of Chinese characters have remained the same since then, although the shapes of strokes have changed a lot
c. the shapes of strokes in characters have remained the same since then, although the basic structures of characters have changed a lot
d. most of the characters still mean the same today as they did 2,000 years ago.

10. One prominent difference between the clerical script and the regular script is
   
   a. the meanings expressed by characters
   b. the structures of characters
   c. the number of strokes in characters
   d. the shapes of strokes in characters

11. ________ of the officially accepted simplified characters in the 1950’s are the creations of that time, and the rest were the creations of the past few thousand years before the 1950’s.
   a. None
   b. 20 percent
   c. 50 percent
   d. 80 percent

12. The normalized forms of characters mainly consist of ________.
   a. traditional characters and simplified characters
   b. traditional characters and inherited characters
   c. inherited characters and simplified characters
   d. inherited characters and complex characters

13. Another term that has been used to refer to the normalized forms of characters is ________.
   a. "modern Chinese characters"
   b. "traditional Chinese characters"
   c. "simplified Chinese characters"
   d. "inherited Chinese characters"

14. The simplified characters are widely used ________.
   a. in mainland China only
   b. in Taiwan only
   c. in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao as well as some Chinese communities outside China
   d. in mainland China, Singapore, and Malaysia as well as the United Nations

15. ________ of modern Chinese characters are inherited characters.
   a. 50 percent
   b. 60 percent
   c. 70 percent
16. The transition ________ is not a general trend in the history of the development of Chinese characters.
   a. from concrete visual symbols depicting material objects to abstract writing symbols
   b. from phonetic symbols to ideographic characters
   c. from complicated pictographs to simple writing symbols
   d. from pictographs expressing concepts to picto-phonetic symbols indicating meanings and sound