Introduction to Chinese Characters 2: The History

Legendary origins

According to legend, Chinese characters were invented by Cangjie, a bureaucrat under the legendary Yellow Emperor. Inspired by his study of the animals of the world, the landscape of the earth and the stars in the sky, Cangjie is said to have invented symbols called zì (字) – the first Chinese characters. The legend relates that on the day the characters were created, people heard ghosts wailing and saw crops falling like rain.

Early sign use

In recent decades, a series of inscribed graphs and pictures have been found at Neolithic sites in China, including Jiahu (c. 6500 BC), Dadiwan and Damaidi from the 6th millennium BC, and Banpo (5th millennium BC). Often these finds are accompanied by media reports that push back the purported beginnings of Chinese writing by thousands of years. However, because these marks occur singly, without any implied context, and are made crudely and simply.

Oracle bone script

Ox scapula with oracle bone inscription

The earliest confirmed evidence of the Chinese script yet discovered is the body of inscriptions carved on oracle bones from the late Shang dynasty (c. 1200–1050 BC). The oracle-bone script is a well-developed writing system, suggesting that the Chinese script's origins may lie earlier than the late second millennium BC.

Bronze Age

Seal Script

Based on studies of these bronze inscriptions, it is clear that, from the Shang dynasty writing to that of the Western Zhou and early Eastern Zhou, the mainstream script evolved in a slow, unbroken fashion, until assuming the form that is now known as seal script in the late Eastern Zhou in the state of Qin, without any clear line of division.

Unification

Seal script, which had evolved slowly in the state of Qin during the Eastern Zhou

Dynasty, became standardized and adopted as the formal script for all of China in the Qin dynasty (leading to a popular misconception that it was invented at that time), and was still widely used for decorative engraving and seals (name chops, or signets) in the Han dynasty period. However, despite the Qin script standardization, more than one script remained in use at the time. By the Warring States period, an immature form of clerical script called "early clerical" or "proto-clerical" had already developed in the state of Qin based upon this vulgar writing, and with influence from seal script as well.

Han dynasty

Clerical script

Proto-clerical script, which had emerged by the time of the Warring States period from vulgar Qin writing, matured gradually, and by the early Western Han period, it was little different from that of the Qin. Recently discovered bamboo slips show the script becoming mature clerical script by the middle-to-late reign of Emperor Wu of the Western Han, who ruled from 141 to 87 BC. Later, it evolved into Neo-clerical

and various cursive styles.

Wei to Jin period
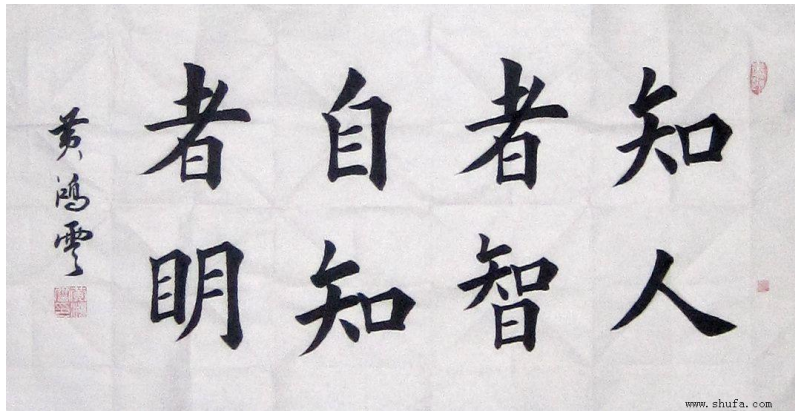
Regular script

Regular script has been attributed to Zhong Yao, of the Eastern Han to Cao Wei period (c. 151–230 AD), who has been called the "father of regular script". This new script, which is the dominant modern Chinese script, developed out of a neatly written form of early semi-cursive, with addition of the pause (頓/顿 dùn) technique to end horizontal strokes, plus heavy tails on strokes which are written to the downward-right diagonal.

It was not until the Northern and Southern dynasties that regular script rose to dominant status. During that period, regular script continued evolving stylistically, reaching full maturity in the early Tang dynasty. After this point, although developments in the art of calligraphy and in character simplification still lay ahead, there were no more major stages of evolution for the mainstream script.

Modern history

龟　龜　guī
　　　turtle

汤　湯　tāng
　　　soup, surname

忆　憶　yì
　　　to remember

Simplified　　　Traditional

Simplified and traditional characters

Although most of the simplified Chinese characters in use today are the result of the works moderated by the government of the People's Republic of China in the 1950s and 60s, character simplification predates the republic's formation in 1949. In the years following the May Fourth Movement in 1919, many anti-imperialist Chinese intellectuals sought ways to modernise China. In the 1930s and 1940s, discussions on character simplification took place within the Kuomintang government, and many Chinese intellectuals and writers have long maintained that character simplification would help boost literacy in China. In many world languages, literacy has been promoted as a justification for spelling reforms. The People's Republic of China issued its first round of official character simplifications in two documents, the first in 1956 and the second in 1964. In the 1950s and 1960s, while confusion about simplified characters was still rampant, transitional characters that

mixed simplified parts with yet-to-be simplified parts of characters together appeared briefly, then disappeared.

(Adapted from threads on www.wikipedia.org)