Dr. K.Y. Chen's Laboratory - Oracle Bone Inscription

Chinese Writing from 5000 B.C. to Present

The Evolution of Chinese Writing

Pottery writing 陶文 (3000 to 1600 BC): Pottery scripts are likely the precursors of Chinese writing. Fig. 1 shows Yangshao pottery wares. Fig. 2 shows Incised marks on pottery from Banbo site, Xian, Yang-shao culture (4800-4200 BC). Fig. 3 shows pottery writings from Er-li-tou culture (c. 1600 BC).

Fig. 1

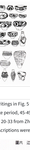


Fig. 2

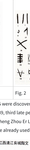


Fig. 3

Pottery writings in Fig. 5 were discovered in Qing Jiang County, Jiang Xi Province. 1-33 belong to early period, 34-44, second late period, 45-49, third period (1530-1395 BC). Ei-li geng type is shown in Fig. 6. 1-19 were from Gao City (1520 BC), 20-33 from Zheng Zhou Er-Li Gang (1620-1595 BC). During these periods, oracle-bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions were already used by Shang people, particularly the royal house.

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 7 shows more ancient pottery writings, top from Da Wen Kou (3605-2340 BC), Center from Ban Bo (4770-4290 BC), Bottom from Jiang Zhai (4675-4545 BC). In addition, there are many vivid pictographs painted on pottery.

Fig. 7

Oracle-bone writing 甲骨文 (1600 to 1100 BC): The oracle-bone inscriptions are the earliest body of writing we yet possess for sure. They were written in a script (Shang dynasty script) that was ancestral to all subsequent forms of Chinese writing. The degree of maturity of this truly archaic writing (1600 to 1100 BC) indicates that even earlier writing in China dated before 1600 BC remains to be discovered. Although the survived documents were all inscribed on animal bones and turtle shells, other media such as bamboo sticks, wood tablets and silk must be used at that time or earlier.

Bronze writing 金文 (1400 to 700 BC): Literally "Gold writing", it refers to the formal script engraved in Shang and Zhou bronze vessels. Their styles were somewhere between oracle-bone writing and Da-zhuan.

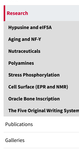
(1045 BC)

(1230 BC)

小篆 (221 BC)

Da-zhuan 大篆 (1000 to 200 BC): The Chinese writing in the late Shang and early Zhou dynasties underwent stylistic change. Most of the Da-zhuan inscriptions were discovered in bronze vessels. Da-zhuan literally means "greater seal" is also called Zhou. This was the style of writing used in the numerous inscriptions cast into the bronze vessels, both secular and sacred, of the Late Shang and, in far greater numbers, the Chou dynasties. Since the inscriptions are generally intaglio in the body of the vessels, one can see that skillful carving of clay was required to produce these results. Various methods were employed, but in general, designs were first written with brush and ink on a clay surface; the graphs were then cut into the clay to produce an intaglio mold; from that mold, a negative clay cast of the inscription, in relief, was made, and that clay, bearing the "negative" of the inscription, was inserted into the outside of the clay model which was to form the central core about which the outer piece molds were then placed. The calligraphy of these greater-seal inscriptions, accordingly, as we see it in the bronze vessels, betrays its carved, seal-like, ceramic origins, again manifesting, as the lesser seal was to do, rather stiff and mechanical qualities. The form was a product of the technology.

Xiao-zhuan 小篆 (200 BC to present): The development of the Xiao-zhuantyle of writing was attributed to Li Si, the famous and controversial prime minister of Qin Dynasty. It literally means "lesser seal". This style writing was used all the way to Han and later dynasties. "Seal" refers to the fact that its graphs were engraved or cast on the seals or "chops" of wood, ceramic, or bronze by which administrators, in particular, would sign their documents and letters. The characters look carved, the strokes being unmodulated, of uniform width, and rather mechanical and geometric in appearance. The austerity, dignity, balance, and symmetry of the graphs is well captured in the traditional appellations for the script: t'eih hsien, "iron wires," or yu chin, "jade muscles." The lesser-seal calligraphy reproduced here a late copy, supposedly of the inscription on a stele, erected by Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, the First Emperor, two years after he unified China in 221 B. C.; the stele was one of six "propaganda posters" he erected in various parts of China, praising his benevolent rule. Political unity was reinforced by the unification of many aspects of culture, involving the various regional writing systems that had flourished during the Eastern Chou. Ch'in Shih Huang Ti's prime minister, Li Sou 李斯, is, in fact, credited with inventing the lesser-seal script and standardizing both the size and the shape of its characters. The Ch'in state in general and Li Sou in particular relied heavily on totalitarian methods of social control, and one can understand how critics of the Ch'in have seen these totalitarian qualities reflected in the rigidity of its graph forms. Such retrospective prejudices aside, hsiao chuan remained the script for formal official writing during the Han dynasty. It continues in use to this day in certain consciously archaicizing contexts, such as posters, greeting cards, and even in advertisements with cultural pretensions.



Li chu 隸書 (200 BC to present): Literally "Clerkly script" or script of people of lower status. Li chu was probably started in 500 BC and became popular after Qin dynasty. The so-called li shu, "clerkly script" or script of people of low status, was characterized by its rapid, flowing strokes that were suited to the needs of the clerks who staffed the growing imperial bureaucracy of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). The marked differences in the width of those strokes gave the graphs a varied and aesthetically pleasing appearance and promised future calligraphers considerable freedom of expression. The li shu was not invented all at once; it probably existed in rudimentary form as far back as the time of Confucius in the sixth century B. C., if not earlier.

行書 (1000 AD)

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