

Cultural China

A Reader On China



Shuyang Su

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Managing Editors: Naiqing Xu, Youbu Wang, Ying Wu

Executive Editor: Ying Wu

Interior and Cover Design: Yinchang Yuan, Jing Li

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Exactly when language first came into use, is still a mystery. Language distinguishes human beings from animals.

The birth of written characters was another great leap forward: this development enabled humans to name and explain things, to capture and pass down human feelings and thoughts. The history of a nation's written characters is a monument to its cultural heritage.

Block characters are the very symbols — and records — of Chinese civilization.

A History of Square-Shaped Chinese Characters

The oracle bone inscriptions were characters used in the Shang Dynasty, more than 3000 years ago, and were a systematic set of written symbols.

Left: A tortoise shell



This bell remains an
enigma to us

Approximately 5000 inscription characters have been discovered, and about 2000 of them have been deciphered. The characters have been placed in categories such as associative compounds, hieroglyphs, phonetic loan words and others. There are such parts of speech as nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, numerals and others. The structure and word sequence of sentences were much the same as those of later ages. In the oracle bone inscriptions, there are such sentences as "it would be safe and ill-free to travel both ways," "it does not rain today," "there is gusting wind today," and so on. These sentences are virtually the same as ones used by the Chinese today, and serve as proof that before the oracle bones were inscribed, the written Chinese language must have had evolved for a long time. The discovery of carved marks on artifacts unearthed in Jiahu, Wuyang County, Henan Province in 1983 — these marks date back about more than 7000 years — indicates that Chinese characters might have been taking form more than 6000 years ago.

There are six ancient categories of Chinese characters, sorted according to the way they were created: pictographic characters, self-explanatory characters, combined meaning characters, characters adopted to represent homophones, mutually explanatory characters and pictophonetic characters. These are the six ancient categories of Chinese characters. Examining them helps to explain the development of the Chinese characters.

In a pictographic character or pictograph, a picture was drawn of the thing the character stood for, and the picture became the word. For instance, the sun was

Comparison of Ancient styles of Calligraphy

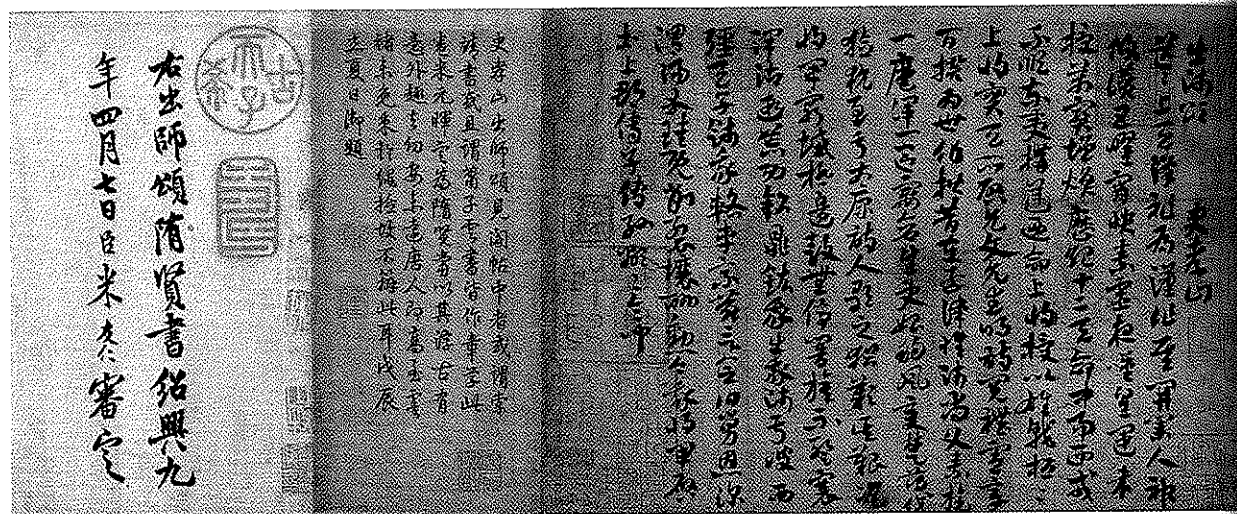
	small seal script	Western Zhou Dynasty (1100BC-771BC)	Warring States Period (475BC-221BC)					
			Qin	Chu	Qi	Yan	Three Jins	Zhongshan
马	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔
者	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔
市	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔
年	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔

written as ☉ or ☾, the moon as ☾ or ☾. And numbers such as one, two, three and four were drawn as 一, 二, 三, 四 respectively. Self-explanatory symbols, such as 日 or 月, were sometimes added to pictographs to form new characters. For instance, the edge of a knife was written as 匕, roots of a plant as 艸, the end of a tree branch as 杪, the color red as 朱, the word inch as 寸, and the word "also" or "too" as 亦.

The self-explanatory characters such as "上 (above), 下 (below)" are said to be the most primitive of Chinese characters and the number of self-explanatory characters is the smallest in Chinese. In *Origin of the Chinese Characters*, an early Chinese dictionary, there were only 129 words that belong to this category.

A combined-meaning character is formed by putting together existing, related characters. For instance, the word "信 (faith)" is a combination of "人 (person)" and "言 (word)", which means "keeping one's word".

There are characters adopted to represent homophones. In early times, frequently there was no written word to represent the spoken word. To solve the problem, a word with the same or similar pronunciation was borrowed to denote it. Linguists of the past noted this, and described the word invention in this way: "There is not such a word existing at all and a word of the same sound is borrowed to substitute it." The word "求 qiu", meaning "beg or petition" is a good example. The small seal hand of the character is 𠂔, which is a hieroglyph

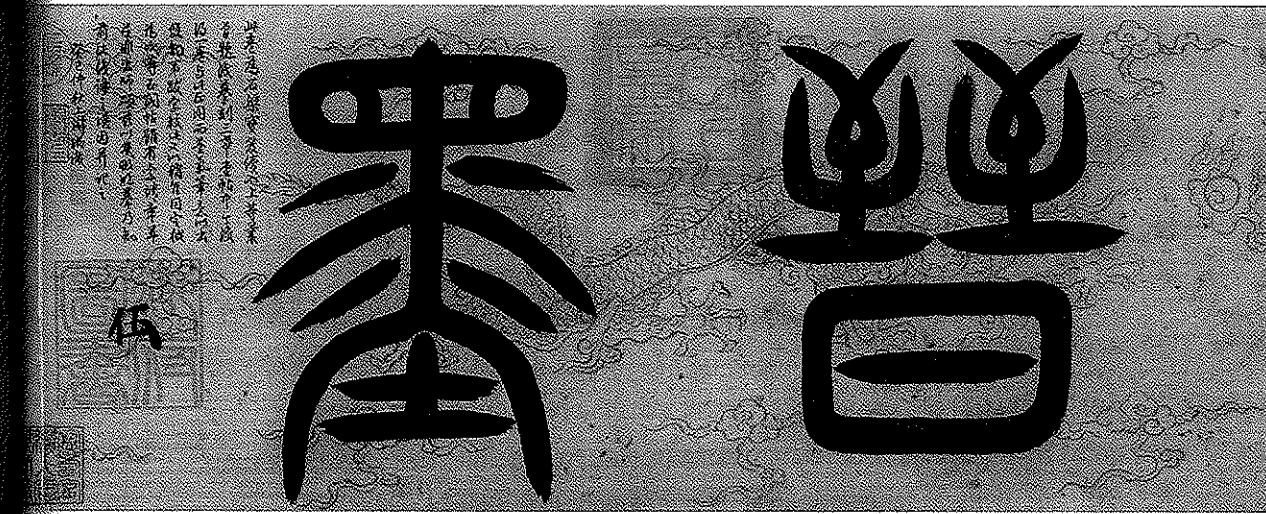


originally meaning "fur" or "hide". It happens to share the same pronunciation with the word "beg". This word was borrowed, and it took on new meanings in such compounds as "to ask for", "to demand", or "to pursue". These words are so popularly used today that the original meaning of the word, "fur" or "hide" has been forgotten. A new word, 裘, had to be created to mean specifically fur or hide.

A mutually explanatory character is created by adding a radical to an existing character. The radical denotes a meaning and usually defines the category of the word. For instance, the Chinese word "snake" was written as 𪛗 in the small seal script, which later evolved to 它. The simplified form of the word lost its hieroglyphic feature, as was its ability to represent the animal it originally denoted. Thus the radical 虫 (animal) was added to link it to its original meaning.

A pictophonetic character is made up of two elements. One indicates the category of the meaning of the character, and the other the sound — the same or similar pronunciation to give the word its phonetic feature. The words 江 and 河, meaning big river and river respectively, are good examples. They share the same component "氵", which stands for water. The other half 工 or 可, denotes the sound of the word. There are many such words, for example: 铜 (copper), 烤 (roast), 领 (collar), 箭 (arrow), 煮 (boil), 闻 (hear), 园 (garden), 岛 (island), and 房 (house).

Chinese characters have evolved from their primitive forms to their modern



A Sui Dynasty Scroll of calligraphy

styles through many phases. The major styles include oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions during the Western and Eastern Zhou, scripts popular during the Warring States Period, and the seal script characteristic of the Qin Dynasty. These are the archaic forms and styles. Modern styles include the official script, regular script, the cursive hand and the running hand. Bronze inscriptions were those marked on bronze objects. The large and small seal scripts are characteristic of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Period. After Qin had unified China, the chancellor, Li Si, sorted out the various scripts, and the small seal hand was designated the standard written script style. History has called this the "unification of characters". The regular script appeared later, and came to be the popular and standard style of the Chinese written language, and is the one still in use today. As for the running and cursive hand, both styles were created for efficiency in writing, and as a form of art; they are supplemental to the regular hand. The Chinese characters have undergone processes of both complication and simplification during their evolution. Changes were effected in such aspects as the creation of new words, morphology, structure, the number of words, pronunciation, and connotation. Today, the language has developed to such a stage that both its linguistic efficiency and convenience for study and application have reached a historically high level. The Chinese people have always sought to perfect their language system, and the square-shaped characters are the result of their collective efforts.

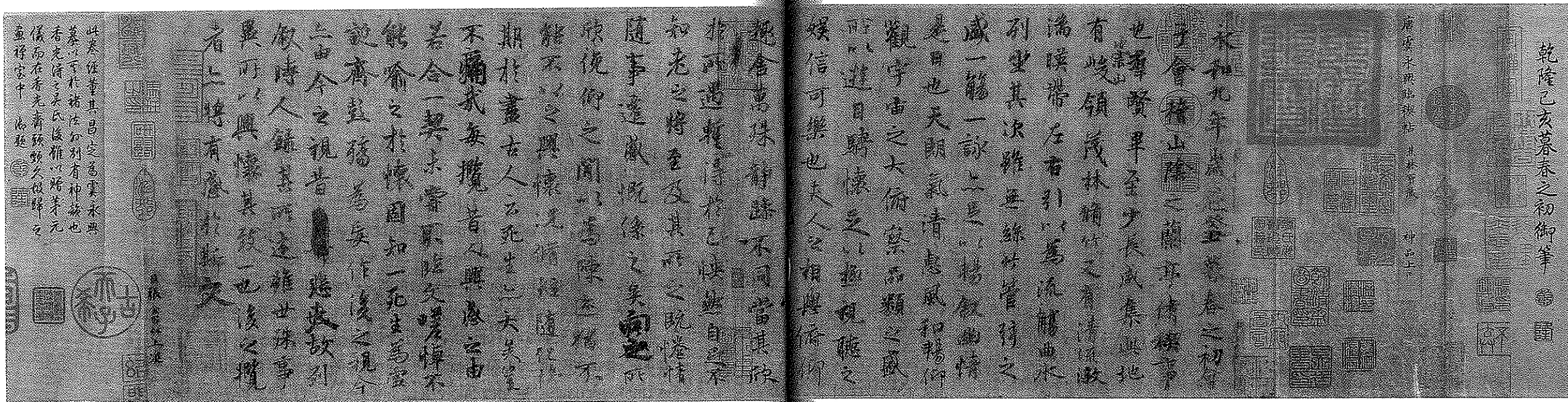
Merits of Chinese Characters and Their Historic Contributions

The world's most ancient characters are all hieroglyphs, of three known types: the first are the cuneiforms created by the Sumerians on the Mesopotamia Plain; they appeared at approximately 3,000 BC. The second are the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt — and they had become mature by 3,000 BC. The third are the square-shaped Chinese characters, which appeared approximately 3,000 years ago.

Of all three types of characters, only the Chinese characters remain in use. The other two were lost over time as they fell into disuse, and now they are understood only by few scholars. Why, under the impact of so many changes in Chinese culture and the impact of foreign ones, could only Chinese characters keep developing? What is the source of their long-lasting sturdiness and vitality? Of all the main written languages of the human race, the Chinese characters are the only ancient ones still actively used in modern times.

First, Chinese characters are the only characters that have been able to transcend time and individual dialects.

Alphabetic languages currently have the leading role on the stage of world language and characters. The European languages are good examples. After the fall and disintegration of the ancient Roman Empire, the old Latin language gradually followed suit, and people in every part of Europe started to form their own dialects using the Roman alphabet. Then the Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian languages (all of which belong to the three language families, Teutonic, Rome and Slav) were gradually formed. Different dialects in the Latin language split into many separate ones, as Europe became some 30 different countries. Today, it is very difficult for a Spanish who doesn't understand English to live in Britain, while their ancestors and those of the British spoke a common language, Latin. Without the help of translation, an Englishman not knowing ancient Latin is not able to understand *Oedipus* or *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* in the original, although all these books were written in the language used by his ancestors. Indeed, even today, books written in English 500 years ago can be understood only by English scholars, while a Chinese middle school student can basically understand novels like *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Heroes of the Marshes* and *Pilgrimage to the West*, all written in Chinese characters 500 years ago. With the help of reference books, a qualified Chinese high-school student can basically understand books such as *Historical Records*, which was written 2,000 years ago. Because the relationship between the pronunciation and the form of Chinese characters isn't as close as those in alphabetic languages, the pronunciations of ancient and modern characters have continued to change but the form and meaning of the characters have remained comparatively stable. A contemporary Chinese could communicate with the sages of antiquity. This characteristic of the Chinese language in transcending the ages, expressing



A calligraphy masterpiece by Yu Shi'nan

both the ancient and contemporary meanings in its characters, has made the language indispensable in propagating Chinese culture.

Though the ethnic and regional groups of China have had many oral languages and there are seven major dialects in everyday use today, by utilizing only Chinese characters one can communicate with any other Chinese. A literate Guangdong person can easily get around in Harbin, and a Beijing person not knowing Cantonese, as long as he knows the Chinese characters, can get along in Hong Kong and Guangzhou. The Chinese characters continue to play a very important role in China's ability to maintain a multi-ethnic and unified country. The Chinese writing system is the Great Wall of the people's culture.

Second, Chinese characters are scripts that are very rich in conveying meanings.

Chinese words are made up of morphemic syllables, and combine pronunciation and meaning in one. This feature makes each square-shaped character a unit, in which all linguistic information is contained. Each character has three-fold significance — morphology, pronunciation and meaning, presented as one.

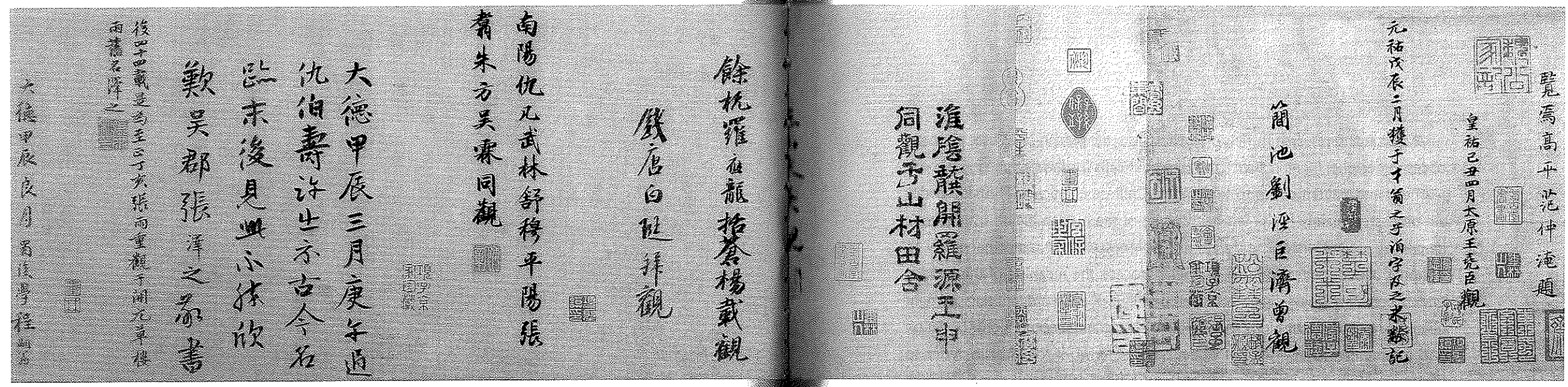
Another reason why Chinese words are rich in meaning is the country's long and diverse history. The evolution of the Chinese characters followed the people's

accrual of information and understanding of their society and the world that surrounded them. All the names of woody plants have a radical component of 木 usually on the left side, while all those of herbs have 艹 on the top. This is an illustration of the early knowledge of plant taxonomy.

As a written language, Chinese is much simpler than other ones. A survey showed that among all the printed translations of the United Nations' resolutions (Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish), the Chinese version was always the slimmest.

Third, the Chinese characters have enormous potential for generating derivatives, and forming new words.

There are estimated to be all together 415 syllables in Mandarin, or the standard language, Putonghua. Considering the four tones, the number of syllables is still only around 1300 — this number is much smaller than the number of English syllables, more than 10,000. However, Chinese have many more morphemes and most of them are monosyllabic ones, so there are many morphemes with the same pronunciation. This created the necessity to make more new words. The many radicals and components made it possible to construct enough new shapes — so each morpheme has a unique morphology and structure.



A calligraphy masterpiece

This has helped to guarantee the precision of the written language, since very early times, and of course, it has also resulted in the creation of a huge number of Chinese characters. Thanks to the proliferation of Chinese words, the richness of the Chinese culture has been preserved, and has been passed from generation to generation.

Many monosyllabic words evolved to become disyllabic ones later. Today, disyllabic words make up the bulk of Chinese words. Many disyllabic compounds are created by either putting together two characters with basically the same meaning, or by using one to modify another, or forming a verbal or noun phrase. These words were created out of the necessity to represent new thoughts. This flexibility, the ability to extend to accommodate new and related ideas, gives the Chinese language its strength.

Fourth, the shapes help to differentiate characters from one another, making them easy to read and memorize.

There are all together eight strokes (一, 丨, 丿, ㇏, 丶, ㇀, ㇁, ㇂) that are used to write Chinese characters. There are, however, thousands of ways of employing these strokes to form characters and these characters can in turn form tens of thousands of combined characters. This feature makes Chinese characters easy to recognize, and to read their meanings. Researchers have conducted

experiments, demonstrating that people in a car moving at a speed of 80 kilometers per hour could pick up Chinese characters on a signpost on the roadside while they could not see clearly the Roman numerals under them. Japanese scholars have shown that it takes less than one thousandth of a second for one to recognize a Chinese character — so Chinese characters enjoy the advantages of condensed information and easy recognition. During the same time period, the reader of Chinese can absorb more information than can a reader of text written in an alphabetic language. In modern science and research, about 30%-40% of one's time is spent in reading, so it appears that the potential of a wider application of the Chinese language will be increasingly recognized.

Many square-shaped characters look like drawings that stimulate quick recognition - this fact makes it easy for them to be understood and retained. In fact, many Chinese characters have such vivid and suggestive structures that the imagination of the reader is stimulated with a mere glance. For instance, such words as 孕 (pregnancy), 岩 (rocks), 跳 (jump), all have evocative shapes. This is an advantage not found in other written languages.

Fifth, reading Chinese characters engages both hemispheres of the brain - serving as a tool to develop the right side of the brain.

According to research by neuro-psychologists, the human brain uses phonetic codes in deciphering alphabetic languages, but calls for the deciphering of both phonetic and pattern codes to understand Chinese characters. Phonetic codes are processed mainly in the left hemisphere of the human brain — alphabetic languages are understood only after this process. But it is not necessary to decipher pattern codes with the phonetic process: the meaning of the word is understood through reading the shape or pattern of the word, utilizing the right hemisphere of the brain. Since each Chinese character represents a pronunciation and a meaning, it requires both hemispheres to work together in order to understand it. It is believed that practicing Chinese calligraphy demands more intense involvement of the right hemisphere of the brain, so some scholars regard this as an advantage, in that it helps to balance the work of the two hemispheres of the brain.

Sixth, the calligraphy, the art of writing Chinese characters is unique among languages.

It is an art that was developed during the evolution of the Chinese written language. In both handwriting and printing, Chinese characters may be lined horizontally or vertically on the page, starting from the left or the right. This freedom is not generally available in alphabetic languages.

In ancient times, calligraphic works were usually written or inscribed on animal bones, bronze ware, bamboo or silk. In modern times, they are rendered on paper. A brush pen, Xuan paper and water-soluble ink are the three essential elements for Chinese calligraphy, and artists have developed various techniques in their writing, to harmonize the effects of the three elements. Many a masterpiece has been created, and some are passed down, well preserved, to today. Besides those anonymous writers of inscriptions on oracle bones and bronze ware, there were such great calligraphers from the Han and Wei periods as Wang Xizhi in the Jin Dynasty, Yan Zhenqing, Liu Gongquan, Ouyang Xun,

Yu Shi'nan, Chu Suiliang, Zhang Xu and Huai Su in the Tang Dynasty. After the Sui and Tang periods, there were Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, Mi Fu and, Cai Xiang in the Song Dynasty, Zhao Mengfu in the Yuan Dynasty and Dong Qichang in the Qing Dynasty.

There are four artistic features of Chinese calligraphy — structure, strength, rhythm and spirit.

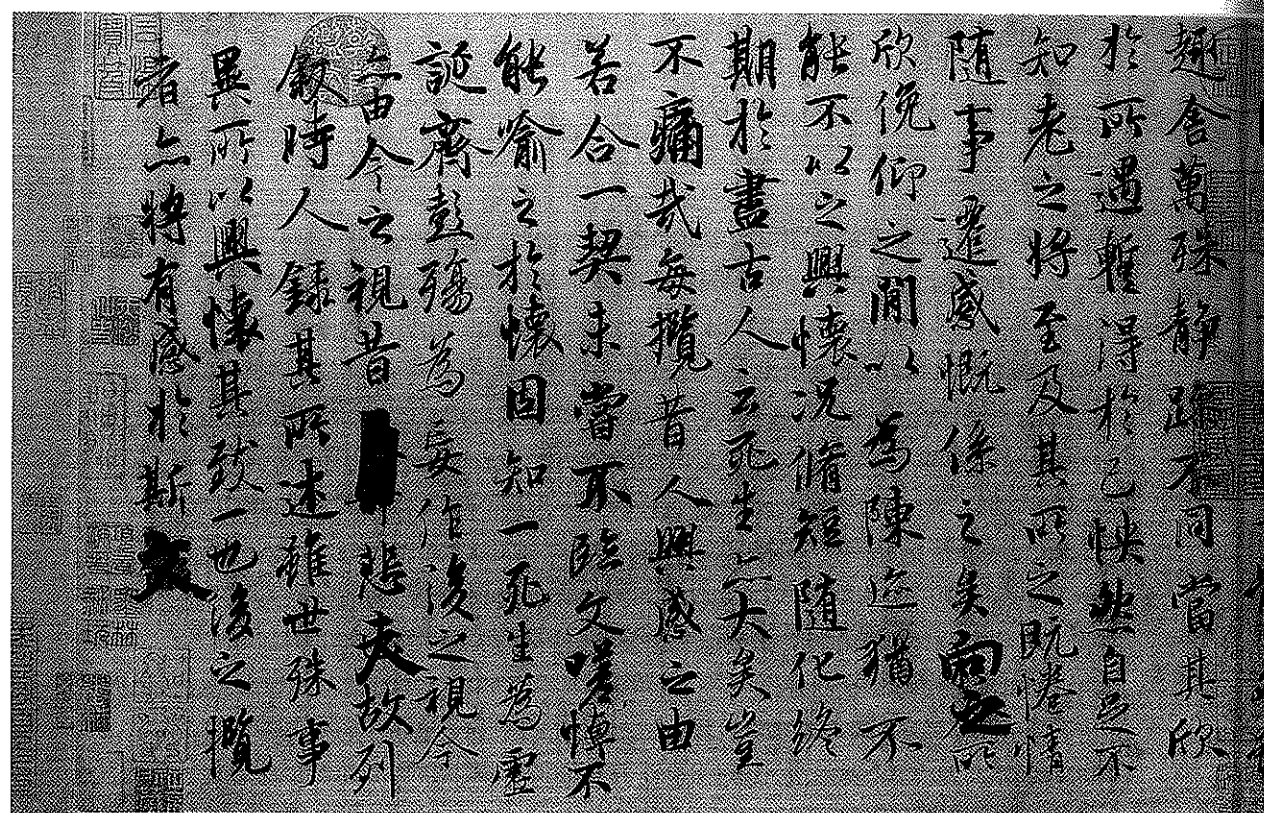
"Structure" refers to the overall layout of one piece of work and the shape of each individual character. A good piece of work should have a character of its own and inspire a sense of beauty. Looking at "a piece of calligraphy by a scholar", the audience should be able to read from it the character and personality of the calligrapher.

"Strength" or "force of strokes" is the requirement for forming the lines and strokes of a piece of work. It is regarded as inferior calligraphy if the lines and strokes are loose, thin or unbalanced. A kind of inherent strength must be conveyed by the brush. This conforms to the Chinese ethic that stresses uprightness and strength in personality and personal character, so it is an important criterion for evaluating a piece of calligraphy.

"Rhythm" denotes a harmonious relationship between individual words, lines and the whole piece. All these elements must be connected with one another, forming one integrated body. A character must stand alone, but it is never isolated from the rest of the piece. The space between lines may be wide or narrow, but the connection is always there. It rises and falls and has a well-modulated rhythm.

"Spirit" is the overall message conveyed by the other elements — it is the overall impression created by the piece of work. It allows him or her to identify — and resonate — with the artist.

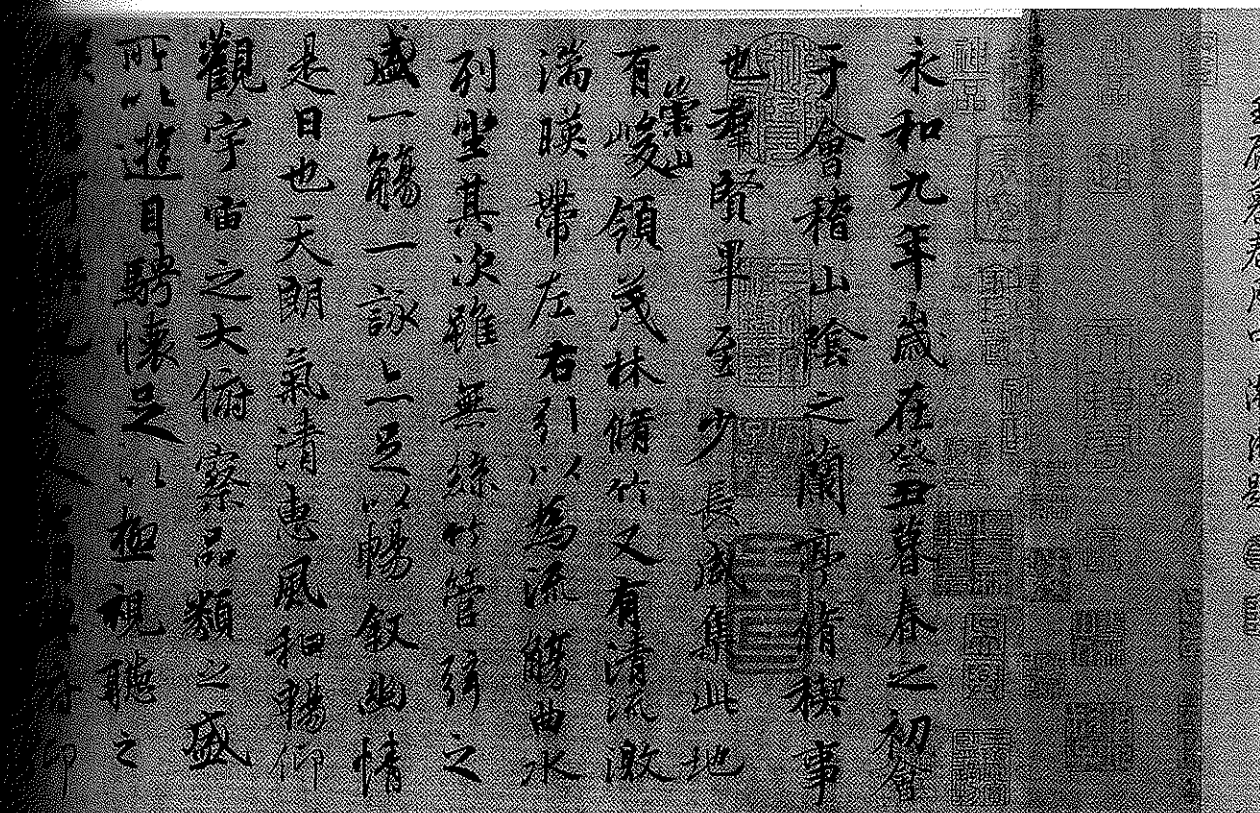
The beauty of Chinese calligraphy lies also in the education, personality, and attitudes to life of the artist. The calligrapher expresses himself without drawing attention to himself. And it must not be overdone and aimed to impress and



flatter the audience. The artist does it purely out of a love for the Chinese characters themselves. It also demands a high level of technical skills. It is not easy.

In fact, Chinese calligraphy has much in common with its philosophy and ethics — love of nature, simplicity and strength. It serves as a mirror of their inner minds and spiritual pursuits. Calligraphy is not merely a writing skill, but becomes a means to perfect one's moral quality.

Of course, this magnificent language has shortcomings. For instance, the sheer number of characters is daunting. There are 2500 of the most commonly used Chinese characters in the *Everyday Chinese Character List*. Another 1000 characters are often employed too — this is not a small number for anyone who wants to study the language. The complicated shapes and structures frequently intimidate the beginner. Pronunciation is not easy. The pronunciation of only one fourth of the mutually explanatory and pictophonetic characters is readily suggested by its shape and structure. Things are made worse because of



the abundance of homophones. Also, the meanings of words are frequently obtuse. Because of its long history of evolution, one word may have picked many extended meanings — this fact sometimes makes it difficult to understand in a given context.

But the four shortcomings related above are often intertwined with the advantages of the characters. For instance, if not for the complexity in structure and shape, Chinese would not be able to metamorphose into new characters so easily. If the pronunciation of all the characters were determined solely by its component parts, one word would have many pronunciations, with each for one dialect. If this were true, the written language would not have remained basically stable over the ages. And more importantly, while building on this basic stability, the language continues to evolve. It is clear that the language's advantages override the shortcomings. The future of the Chinese written language characters remains positive, inspiring optimism.

A calligraphy
masterpiece by
Feng Chengsu

III

The Future of Chinese Characters

The Chinese characters have existed for thousands of years of changing conditions. During their long history, they were regarded as near-sacred items, respected by all. More than a hundred years ago, the Indo-European languages were introduced to China. In modern China [i.e. from mid-1800's to 1919] when education was ignored, science lagged behind, the national power declined and the country suffered many disgraces, there arose a popular view that the character-based writing system was one of the root causes for all that. It was said that the system was outdated, and sooner or later, would be replaced by alphabetic language. The advent of the wide use of computers appeared to support this argument. It appeared that Chinese characters were facing the fate of extinction.

But even before the end of the 20th century, major breakthroughs in software development permitting the input of information with Chinese characters gave the lie to that argument. The character-based language is definitely not moribund nor inadequate to the needs of the "computer revolution".

That Chinese characters are more legible than alphabetic characters is a well-

recognized fact. One recent test of reading ability carried out among first, third and fifth grade elementary school students in both Beijing and Chicago showed that because Chinese students had learned Chinese characters, their reading ability was, in general, higher than American students of the same age who learned English. The initial process of Chinese children learning their language is difficult at first and easier later, while the process of American children learning English is almost the opposite. This bi-cultural investigation demonstrated the advantage of the Chinese language in being more easily read than another language. This writing system is surely capable of meeting the requirements presented by the information age now, and in the future. This highly stable system has passed the test of time, and is fit to continue to preserve China's history and culture far into the future. The characters' powerful ability to produce derivative characters has made them uniquely adaptable to describing future scientific developments.

Linguistic scholars assert that first, because Chinese characters employ a single syllable, as opposed to alphabetic languages, they have a strong ability to retain the integrity of their meanings. That is why the sound of Chinese characters is readily susceptible to spectral analysis and processing. Second, as a single Chinese character can be written in a thousand styles, it is easy to identify technically. Third, the logic of the combining of Chinese characters to form new words easily accommodates modern science: the characters possess an unlimited ability to combine new words, to express new scientific thoughts and discoveries. Fourth, Chinese characters, which have only 415 syllables, appear to be more suitable than the English language, with its 10,000 syllables, in computer-based voice-recognition programs. No matter how science advances, and no matter what new morphemes appear, the Chinese language will always be able to adapt to, and express them. The written Chinese language holds a vast amount of information inside the configuration of its strokes. Its advantage in transcending the different dialects is unique.