

The Evolution of Chinese Characters and Scripts

The earliest Chinese pictographs were no more than stylized symbols, which did not yet qualify as a true written language.



Jiaguwen

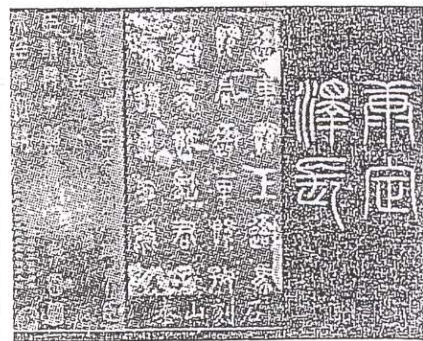
(甲骨文)



The first actual system of Chinese writing appeared about 3000 years ago and consisted of characters inscribed on tortoise shells and animal bones, known as *jiaguwen* (oracle bone script). This was followed by *jinwen* (metal script) that were inscriptions cast or engraved on bronze vessels.

Then, in 221 B.C., King Ying Zheng of the State of Qin unified China and established the Qin Dynasty. He assumed the title of “Shi Huangdi” or the First Emperor, and one of his major contributions is to unify the Chinese written language by establishing *xiaozhuan* (small seal script) as China’s official form of writing. *xiaozhuan* incorporated the popular characters and styles into a standardized writing system, but still utilized curving and intricate strokes and was quite difficult to write.

Lishu (official script) was developed to provide a more simplified writing system than *xiaozhuan*. During the Qin Dynasty, *xiaozhuan* was the standard form of writing employed for government mat-



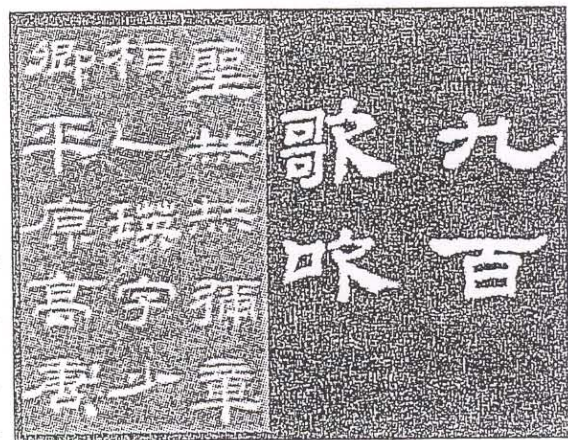
Zhuanshu

(篆书)

ters, while *lishu* was more commonly used among the general population. *Lishu*, characterized by straighter strokes and flattened characters, provided the basis for modern Chinese writing. Engraved or written on bamboo slips, wood and silk, *lishu* was designated China's official form of writing in 175.

Not long after *lishu* became China's official form of writing, a new style known as *kaishu* (regular script) appeared. *Kaishu* maintained the general structure of *lishu*, but was more symmetrical, using vertical and horizontal strokes and square characters. The popularization of *kaishu* led to the term "square writing" to refer to Chinese characters. Around the fourth century A.D. *kaishu* gradually replaced *lishu* and became the most commonly used form of writing.

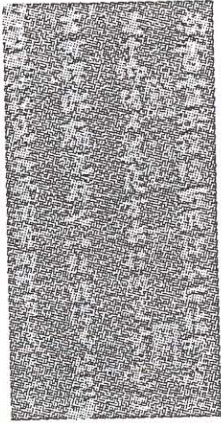
However, *lishu* (official script) and *kaishu* (regular script) were time-consuming forms of writing, requiring each stroke to be individually and carefully drawn. As a result, the faster and more casual *xingshu* (running hand or semi-cursive script) and *caoshu* (grass style or cursive script) were commonly used for writing unofficial documents and letters.



Lishu
(隶书)

Caoshu is an expressive, informal style of writing that uses flowing, linked brushstrokes. As a result, the appearance of *caoshu* can be quite different from a printed Chinese character. Ying

shu, on the other hand, preserves the basic form and structure of *lishu* and *kaishu* although it also utilizes connected strokes. Unlike *caoshu*, the strokes of *xingshu* are relatively distinct, making it quite easy to understand.



Kaishu
(楷书)

Today, most Chinese handwriting is still done using *xingshu*. Actually, there are no strict rules for this style of semi-cursive writing, and it can be quite variable. When it tends more towards the square structure of *kaishu*, it is referred to as *xingkai* (running regular script). When it resembles the flowing and expressive forms of *caoshu*, it is referred to as *xingcao* (running cursive script).