Chinese calligraphy is an art form based on the handwriting of Chinese characters. From the earliest oracle bone script to today's simplified characters, Chinese writing has been evolving. In a recent interview with CSST, Liu Shuangang, a research fellow from the Chinese Academy of Cultural Heritage, shared his views about Chinese calligraphy and the development of Chinese characters.

**CSST:** The structure of Chinese characters is of high aesthetic value. Can you introduce the artistic features of Chinese characters in terms of calligraphy?

**Liu:** Shouwen Jizi, a Han Dynasty dictionary compiled by Xu Shen (100–150 AD), lists the manners in which characters are formed or used, known as liushu—pictograms (xiangxing), simple ideograms (zhibi), characters difficult to visualize shown by a single abstract symbol), compound ideographs (hugui), characters combining two or more pictographic or ideographic characters to suggest a third meaning), semantic-phonetic compounds (shengxie), characters that contain two parts usually one represents the pronunciation and another explains the meaning), mutually explanatory characters (zhutong), and phonetic loan characters (zhishi), and phonetic loan characters (zhishi). The first four categories refer to ways to compose Chinese characters; the last two describe ways to use characters. A character is therefore a combination of a pictogram, an ideogram, and phonetic elements. This multilayered composition is important in maintaining China's cultural unity.

Writing Chinese characters is also a rich art form. Chinese calligraphy has varied with the times, displaying different styles that correspond with different periods in China's history. For example, it is said that the "natural rhyme" of calligraphy was admired most during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties (220–581), when people were deeply influenced by academic ideas such as being freed from worldly desires and concerns. The Tang Dynasty (618–907) featured economic prosperity, cultural vibrancy, and efficient state government. The Tang era had magnificent, luxurious, and solemn artistic features. Different from the Tang, people from the Song Dynasty (960–1279) emphasized freehand brushwork, an unrestrained unconventional style that expressed personalities or moods. Influenced by trends that followed and imitated Jin Dynasty (266–420) calligraphy, people from the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–581) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties attracted general attention to the form and appearance of handwriting.

**CSST:** Chinese calligraphy evolved over a long history. What were the major changes in script? What character changes were developing?

**Liu:** From the Shang (c. 1600–1045 BCE) and Zhou (c. 1045–256 BCE) dynasties to the Spring and Autumn Period (770–475 BCE) and the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE), Chinese characters gradually developed from hieroglyphic forms to line drawings. The "ancient clerical script" (shizhu), which was developed and used in the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE), marked the beginning of Chinese characters' transition from the form of line-drawings to brushstrokes. Clerical script matured in the middle of the Western Han era (206 BCE–8 CE), meaning that Chinese characters' stroke-form entered a new development stage. After the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the running script and regular script were commonly used in daily life. However, seal scripts and clerical scripts could still be found in calligraphic artworks, and were favored as a form of art with unique aesthetic value. There is a script style featuring "great freehand brushwork," or abbreviated brushwork, known as cursive script (caoshu). In cursive script, the strokes are reduced to abstract abstractions of curves and dots. This script style is not bound by rules. Without a given context, the characters written in cursive script would be difficult to read. Therefore, cursive script is an abstract art form of Chinese characters. The artistic and aesthetic quality of Chinese characters gives cursive script an important place in the development of Chinese characters.

**CSST:** In our modern era, numerous historical written materials have been unearthed. What new discoveries and topics did these materials bring to the study of Chinese calligraphy?

**Liu:** Thanks to the large number of unearthed handwritten manuscripts, we have a new understanding of the origins and evolution of clerical script. Before the discovery of these manuscripts, most of the characters written in clerical script were found on stone inscriptions from the Han Dynasty. Hence, Kong Yuyi (188–197) and other scholars doubted accounts that clerical scripts came into being during the Qin Dynasty. The unearthed bamboo texts from the Shihuibai Tomb in Hubei Province, and from the Lijia Ancient City in Hunan Province, offered early forms of clerical script that were in use before and after the Qin state unified China as a centralized political power. Today, clerical script used during the Qin era, and the period preceding the reign of Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141–87 BCE), is called "ancient clerical script" in academia. Meanwhile, it is widely accepted that "after clerical script," an expressive style characterized by an exaggeration of sweeping strokes that is visually similar to the tail of a wild goose, matured between the reigns of Emperor Wu of Han and Emperor Xuan (r. 141–87 BCE). The unsought bamboo texts from Zoumalou in Changsha, Hunan Province, dated to the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, proved that clerical script had been widely used as a new form of calligraphy during the Yuanshou Era (149–142 BCE). Therefore, traditional accounts about the origin of clerical script should be updated according to new archaeological discoveries. Since the pre-Qin period more than 2,000 years ago, Chinese characters had experienced the most dramatic changes until stabilizing at the end of the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties. The extant wooden slips and silk manuscripts are all dated from this period. In order to write faster, the Qin people started to improve seal script, which led to the birth of "ancient clerical script." The "ancient clerical script" finally matured into standard clerical script in the Han Dynasty, which was called "Han clerical script" (huan). After the reign of Emperor Wu of Han and Emperor Xuan of the Western Han Dynasty, a new form emerged out of clerical script, known as "neo-clerical script," which became the dominant script. From this neo-clerical script, running script was developed. As people wrote in running script in a more and more dignified and tidy fashion, regular script was created. The wooden slips and silk manuscripts clearly exhibit the evolution of Chinese characters and scripts.

**Chinese calligraphy**

Edited by REN GUANHONG

Chinese calligraphy is the stylized artistic writing of Chinese characters, including several major styles. Oracle bone inscriptions used during the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE) are identified as the earliest form of Chinese characters. This writing style was followed by a form of writing found on bronze vessels mainly cast during the Shang and Zhou (c. 1046–256 BCE) dynasties. These bronze inscriptions are known as jinhua (bronze inscriptions). Zhuanhua, or seal script, evolved out of bronze inscriptions toward the end of the Zhou Dynasty. There are two kinds of seal script: dazhuan (large-seal script) and xiaozhuan (small-seal script). Dazhuan is a traditional reference to all types of Chinese writing systems used before the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE). After China was united for the first time, xiaozhuan was developed and adopted as the formal script for the whole country. This script features an even line-weight, many curves, and circles. The following demand for record-keeping gave rise to the fourth stage of development in Chinese calligraphy, liu, or clerical script, which was most widely used in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Characters transcribed in clerical script style tend to be square or rectangular, with a greater width than height. They often have a wavelike flaring of isolated major strokes.

The birth of kaishu, or regular script, marked the fifth stage of development in Chinese calligraphy. This script was developed during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties (220–589), simplifying the clerical script into a more fluent and easily written form. Regular script remains the standard script in use today.

Also born during the Han Dynasty is xiaozhuan (running script) and caoshu (cursive script) were the results of rapidly writing. The cursive script features vibrating strokes that are connected with each other. It is hard to identify without a given context. The running script is a style between regular script and the cursive script. It is easy to recognize and is fluent and practical. However, these two styles have never been thought of as standard. By comparison, because of their many variations, instead, they have been used as a form of art.