

# BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

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**Abstract:** This article introduces seven forms of script in Chinese calligraphy, aiming to provide basic information to people interested in Chinese calligraphy or Chinese culture. This article delves into the fascinating world of Chinese calligraphy by introducing seven distinct forms of script. Each form has its own unique characteristics, historical background, and artistic value. From the ancient and elegant seal script (Zhuanshu) to the fluid and dynamic cursive script (Caoshu), and from the structured regular script (Kaishu) to the free-flowing running script (Xingshu), each style reflects different periods of Chinese history and the cultural ethos of its time. The article also touches on the tools and techniques used in calligraphy, such as the traditional Four Treasures of the Study—brush, ink, paper, and inkstone. By providing detailed descriptions and examples of these scripts, the article aims to offer a comprehensive overview for those who are interested in Chinese calligraphy or Chinese culture. Whether you are a beginner looking to understand the basics or an enthusiast eager to deepen your knowledge, this article serves as a valuable resource to explore the beauty and complexity of Chinese calligraphy.

**Keywords:** Chinese calligraphy; Oracle bone script; Bronze script; Seal script; Clerical script; Regular script; Running script; Cursive script

## 1 THE ROLE CALLIGRAPHY PLAYS IN CHINESE CULTURE

Chinese calligraphy is an integral part in Chinese culture. Its status in Chinese culture is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

### (1) Calligraphy is an Important Recorder of Chinese History

In calligraphy lies the evidence of Chinese history. For example, through the study of oracle bone calligraphy, we can learn about the politics, economy, sacrificial activities and warfare of the Shang Dynasty (about 1600 BC---1046 BC)[1-3].

### (2) Calligraphy is an Important Carrier of Chinese Culture

Ancient Chinese historical books and classics were mostly recorded and passed down through calligraphy. The preservation and dissemination of classic works such as *Records of the Grand Historian* were inseparable from calligraphy in ancient times[4-6].

### (3) Calligraphy is a Mirror of Chinese Philosophical Thoughts

Chinese philosophical thoughts can be reflected in its calligraphic works. For example, Confucianism emphasizes harmony and order, which are manifested in the requirement of the writing of regular script. Another case in point is : Taoism worships nature, and the cursive script, with its free, lively, flowing brushwork, perfectly embodies the Taoist idea of pursuing naturalness and non-action[7-8].

### (4) Calligraphy has a Profound Impact on Chinese Aesthetics

Chinese calligraphy is primarily expressed through lines. This pursuit of line perfection has led Chinese people to pay great attention to the fluidity and rhythm of lines in their aesthetics. Also, the sense of rhythm in calligraphy lines influences Chinese aesthetics, especially in architectural decoration and sculpture[9-11].

There are spatial relationships between characters and lines in calligraphy works. This concept of spatial balance and the interplay between solid and void has inspired Chinese painters in their painting compositions.

Chinese calligraphy emphasizes harmony with nature. This admiration for natural beauty makes Chinese people more inclined to appreciate natural and unpretentious beauty.

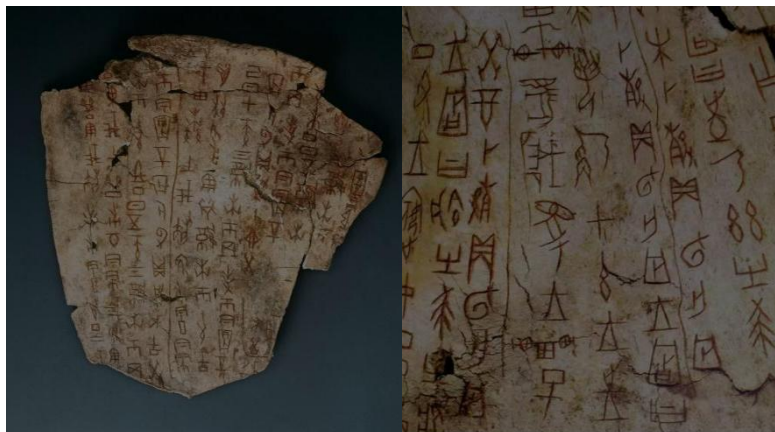
## 2 BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

Generally speaking, there are 7 main forms of character writing in Chinese calligraphy, as introduced respectively in the following.

### 2.1 Oracle Bone Script

Oracle Bone Script is the earliest known systematic writing in China. It was mainly inscribed on turtle shells and animal bones, thus acquiring the name “Oracle Bone Script.” It was used for divination and sacrificial activities during the late Shang Dynasty (around 16<sup>th</sup> century BC to 11<sup>th</sup> century BC) and the early Western Zhou Dynasty (around 11<sup>th</sup> century BC to 8<sup>th</sup> century BC). Its brushwork already has variations in thickness, speed and rhythm. Its structure is spontaneous according to the number of strokes, spatial limitations, overall layout of the text, and the engraver’s immediate

inspiration. Due to engraving, this type of writing is sharp and strong in style, as shown in Figure 1:



**Figure 1** Oracle Bone Script

## 2.2 Bronze Script

Bronze Script is carved mainly on Chinese ritual bronze vessels, such as bells and tripodal cauldrons. It was primarily popular during the late Shang Dynasty to the Western Zhou period and continued to be in use during the Eastern Zhou period (around 8<sup>th</sup> century BC to 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC). These inscriptions often recorded significant incidents, such as praise accorded to ancestors, historical events and sacrifices. Bronze Script is diverse in style, with some being grotesque and solemn, some bold and unrestrained, and some simple and plain. Generally speaking, they are more standard, regular and orderly than Oracle Bone Script, as shown in Figure 2:



**Figure 2** Bronze Script

## 2.3 Seal Script

Seal Script was primarily popular during the Qin Dynasty (221 BC --- 207BC) and continued to be in use during the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC --- 9 AD).

The writing speed of seal script is relatively slow, because its strokes are required to be smooth and regular and the writer needs to carefully control the movement of the brush tip. This slow-writing feature makes seal script pay more attention to the quality of the strokes and the stability of the structure during the writing process.

The strokes of seal script are relatively uniform in thickness and have no sharp corners at the turns but rather a rounded shape. When writing seal script, the brush tip always runs in the middle of the stroke, giving the lines a three-dimensional feel. Moreover, the start of seal script is usually made by reversing the brush, and the end is often made by returning the brush, rendering seal script reserved and restrained in style. The smoothness of the lines is an important feature that distinguishes seal script from other calligraphic styles such as clerical script (which has wave-like strokes) and regular script (which has rich variations in stroke forms), as can be seen in Figure 3:



**Figure 3** Seal Script

Seal Script reflects the early Chinese aesthetic concepts. Its smooth and regular style reflects the ancient people's pursuit of harmony and balance. In ancient times, Seal Script was often used in solemn occasions such as ancestral temple sacrifices and inscriptions on monuments, which also gave Seal Script a solemn and dignified aesthetic quality.

## 2.4 Clerical Script

Clerical script was the main official script during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 AD--- 220 AD) and played a pivotal role in the development of Chinese calligraphy. It evolved from Seal Script and laid the foundation for the emergence of Regular Script.

There is a clear variation in the thickness of Clerical Script strokes. Generally, horizontal strokes are thinner, while vertical strokes are thicker, which makes Clerical Script appear wider and flatter compared with the narrower-taller structure of Seal Script.

The phrase “Silkworm Head and Wild Goose Tail”, which is an imaginary description of Clerical Script, vividly captures the characteristics of some strokes in Clerical Script. The “Silkworm Head” refers to the round shape at the beginning of some stroke, while the “Wild Goose Tail” depicts the extended form at the end of some stroke, resembling the tail of a wild goose.

Clerical Script possesses the aesthetic characteristics of being ancient and elegant, with its stroke shapes and character structures imbued with a strong ancient atmosphere. Because of the use of wave-like strokes, Clerical Script also has a lively and energetic element within its ancientness. Figure 4 is an example of Clerical Script.



**Figure 4** Clerical Script

## 2.5 Regular Script

Regular script, also known as formal script or true script, means good examples for standard writing. It is said to emerge



in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 AD --- 220 AD), develop rapidly during the Wei and Jin periods (220 AD --- 420 AD) and become popular in the Tang Dynasty (618 AD--- 907 AD).

Regular script is simpler in form, fewer in the number of strokes and straight in line, and its shape is generally square or nearly square. In regular script, the center of gravity of each character is positioned in its center, rendering it a sense of stability and balance.

Without the connected strokes found in running script or the simplified strokes in cursive script, the strokes in regular script are clearly distinguishable. Both beginners and ordinary readers can easily recognize the strokes and structure of each character. This standardization has led to its widespread use in daily writing, book printing, official documents, etc. In regular script, there are various ways to start and end strokes, with the most common being hidden tip and exposed tip. Hidden tip means starting with a reverse stroke, making the stroke appear reserved and restrained. Exposed tip means the brush tip directly touches the paper, with the tip exposed at the beginning or end of the stroke, giving the stroke a sharp look.

Regular script requires clear square turns at the corners, where the brush tip must clearly change direction to form a distinct angle. It also emphasizes the variation of pressure to show the thickness changes of the strokes, thus giving the characters a sense of rhythm. Two examples of Regular Script are shown in Figure 5.

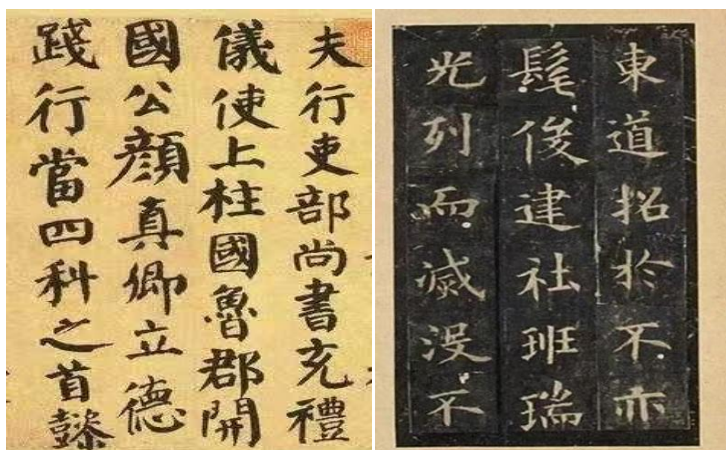


Figure 5 Regular Script

## 2.6 Running Script

Running Script originated in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 AD --- 220 AD), with its purpose to simplify the writing of Regular Script to make writing more convenient, and reached maturation in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317 AD --- 420 AD).

Running script simplifies writing by omitting strokes and merging lines, and increases the connection between strokes to make writing more convenient. Its structure, though based on regular script, is simplified and different.

Combining the neatness of regular script with the liveliness of cursive script, running script possesses a unique artistic charm that is neither too rigid nor too unrestrained. Besides, due to its faster writing speed, the connection and variation between the running script strokes are more natural, which can better express the calligrapher's emotions and personality and reflect the calligrapher's creative intentions. Being both practical and artistic, running script has always been loved widely by calligraphers and calligraphy enthusiasts. Figure 6 is an example of Running Script.

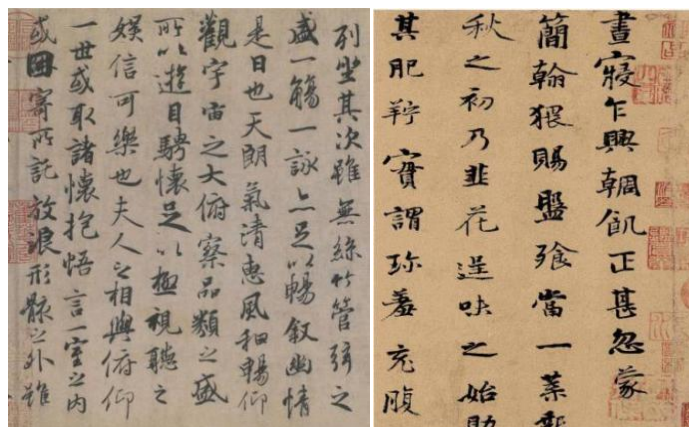


Figure 6 Running Script

## 2.7 Cursive Script

Cursive script originated in the early Han Dynasty and evolved from the clerical script. The emergence of cursive script predates that of regular script and running script.

Contrary to most people's literal understanding of "cursive" script, cursive script is no hasty or careless way of writing, but rather a writing style with a strict system of cursive symbols. Understanding this system of symbols is crucial for the correct reading of cursive script. For readers who are not familiar with the system, or when encountering cursive works not following strictly with the system, it is very difficult to identify the content of the cursive script.

Cursive script, with its continuous lines and free structure, is one of the most expressive forms of calligraphy for conveying the writer's emotions. The writer can express different feelings through the weight of the strokes, the speed of writing, and the looseness or tightness of the structure, etc. Figure 7 is an example of cursive script.

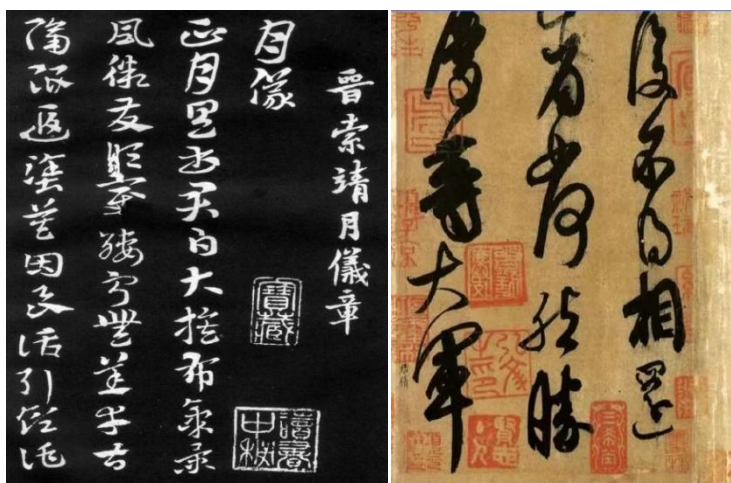


Figure 7 Cursive Script

## 3 CONCLUSION

For people interested in Chinese culture, calligraphy is one effective way to gain insight of it. However, the taste of apple lies in tasting it. No matter how much you know about Chinese calligraphy in theory, you have to try your hand at it to truly appreciate its significance in Chinese culture and its subtle beauty as an art.

This article hopefully will bring people closer Chinese calligraphy. For people who are really intrigued by it, I encourage you to try practicing Chinese calligraphy, the benefits of which, I promise, will go way beyond your imagination.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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