

Yan Tong – A tale of Chinese characters

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Biographical note

Dr YAN Tong has an MA in Applied Linguistics from the Institute of Education (IoE), London University, and a PhD in Applied Linguistics from King's College London. He is the author of 'Confidence Chinese' series (2006, 2007) and 'Chinese Crosswords' (2005). He has nearly 40 years of experience in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, having worked with a diverse group of learners from university students, British diplomats, to local communities.

Edited transcript

Hello everyone!

Thank you very much for coming to this talk. I'm aware some of you are actually in America where it's now early in the morning. And some people are in Asian countries where it is late in the evening. I really, really appreciate your kindness in coming to support me. Thank you so much. Thank you.

As you can see, my title is 'A tale of Chinese characters'. I'm going to be a storyteller today, not present an academic research paper. I'm going to tell the stories of the characters - and lots of other stories. The stories I'm going to tell may not be so very funny that they make you laugh, but I think you may find something interesting by the end of the story.

The stories will follow two storylines: one is the story of the evolution of characters, the other is the stories of individual characters.

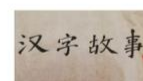
We know written forms of languages can be divided into two types: pictographic/ideographic, or 'alphabetic'. Chinese is pictographic. The English language is alphabetic. Historically speaking, there have actually been four types of pictographic characters. Chinese was one of them. There were Sumerian cuneiform characters, Egyptian pictograms, and ancient Indian characters. Unfortunately, three of those were lost a long time ago in history, but Chinese characters have survived, and have continued to develop up to today. So, we might ask the question, why the other three were lost, and how have Chinese characters survived. I have been thinking about this question for some time, but I haven't really found any clues or answers to this question. Hopefully, the stories of the characters I'm going to tell may give us some clues to the question.

This is the content I'm going to cover today.



A tale of Chinese characters

YAN Tong 严彤



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In the first part, I'm going to provide some basics about Han characters. I'm aware that some of our friends here who have come to the talk haven't learned Chinese, so I'll go through the very, very basics of Chinese characters. I'm going to use my own name as an example.

My name is Yang Tong and below you can see the character and some information about, its components, and how to pronounce it. As you can see, here are two forms of the character: the one on the left is the 'simple' form, the one on the right-hand is the 'full' form or 'old' form. Tong, by the way, means 'red'

Part One: Some basics of Han characters

严 (嚴)

Yán

彤: form
Tóng: sound (initial 't' + final 'ong' + second tone)
Given name: meaning "red" = 红色
丹, 彡: structure/components
Radical: 彡

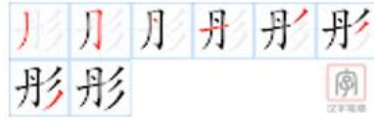
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There are two parts, two components, that make up my given name Tong. On the left-hand side is 'Dan'. Dan, is actually my birthplace, the city of Danyang. That's why my grandfather chose this name for me. On the right-hand side is the 'three' stroke, which indicates that I'm the third child in the family. I've got two older brothers. So, what this shows is that if you don't know, or don't learn Chinese characters, you won't understand the meaning of these names.

This slide shows how many strokes are needed to form this character (seven) and the order they are made in.

Strokes: 7 strokes
Stroke order:



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This slide shows the original form of my name, Tóng'

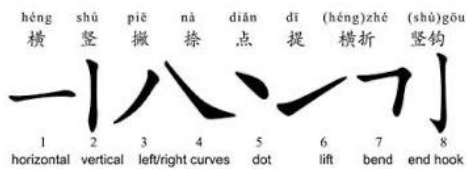


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And here you can see the character has eight basic strokes.

Eight basic strokes



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So, my name has lost five of them.

Now for the second part of my talk: the origins and evolution of Chinese characters.

The evolution of the Chinese character forms

Earliest characters in China

- Jiaguwen (甲骨文): oracle bone script 1711- 1066 BC

Ancient Chinese characters 1066-256 BC

- Jinwen (金文) : scripts on bronze
- Dazhuan (大篆) : large seal script
- Xiaozhuan (小篆) : small seal script

Modern Chinese characters 206 BC – 1279 AD

- Lishu (隶书) : clerical script
- Kaishu (楷书) : standard script
- Caoshu (草书) : free cursive script
- Xingshu (行书) : running script

Reform of modern Chinese characters

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I'm going to start with a myth or legendary story about these characters' creations. Then I'll go through three phases of Chinese character evolution.

Cangjie created characters 仓颉造字



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First, we come to 'Cangjie' who is regarded as the creator of Chinese characters. As you can see in the image, he has four eyes. This meant, he could see things, objects in the world, more clearly and because of this he was chosen to work for the Yellow Emperor. Cangjie followed all the objects he saw and drew the signs as a way of expressing their meaning. This is the brief story of Cangjie.

Since then, more and more characters have been invented, we have so many characters. thousands of characters. It was impossible for them all to be created by only Cangjie himself. So, it must have been the work of many, many people. All these characters were created over so many years.

Now we come to the first phase of evolution and the earliest characters in China.

Major Periods	Major Forms	Most Popular Times	Characteristics	
Ancient Writing Period	Oracle Bone Script 甲骨文	The Shang Dynasty (1711–1066 BC)	Character size and textual format are not consistent. Character form is complicated with pictographic and directive compounds.	
	Bronze Script 金文	The Zhou Dynasty (1066–256 BC)	Character size and formation are more fixed. Strokes are fuller and more rounded. Characters are more simplified.	
	Seal Script 篆书	The late Zhou Dynasty and the Qin Dynasty (221–106 BC)	Character form is more simplified. Writing method is consistent, and the Character pattern is more orderly. Many of the strokes are lengthened, curved and complicated. All characters are roughly square in shape.	
Modern Writing Period	Traditional Form	Clerical Script 隶书	The Qin Dynasty and the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD)	Characters are no longer pictographic, but more abstract ideographic symbols. Strokes are less curved, and their amount is reduced. Many of the components are simplified.
	Normalized Form	Regular Script 楷书	From the late Han Dynasty to 1955 From 1955 to the present	Characters strokes are straighter and smoother. Characters are clear and easy to write and read. 1,027 variant characters are abolished. The number of strokes in 2,235 of the characters is simplified.

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This can be traced back to 1711 BC.

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Jiaguwen were seen as the first characters before the BC era. They were discovered when they were unearthed, dug out of the ground. Let's have a look at what Jiaguwen looked like!

Jiaguwen – Oracle bone script



What you can see here, this 'jiagu', is an oracle bone on which characters have been carved. This is known as 'jiaguwen' - oracle bone script. The earliest one was discovered in the 19th

century in Hunan province, in a small village they later discovered had been the capital of the Ying Dynasty.

Villagers found this stone in the ground, in the earth. They thought it was a bone and they sold these bones to Chinese medicine shops. One of the Chinese scholars went to the medicine shop, took the 'herbs' back home and suddenly realised, discovered: 'Ah! This looks like a character.' So, he went back and found out where it had first been discovered. This is the origin of oracle bone script or signs.

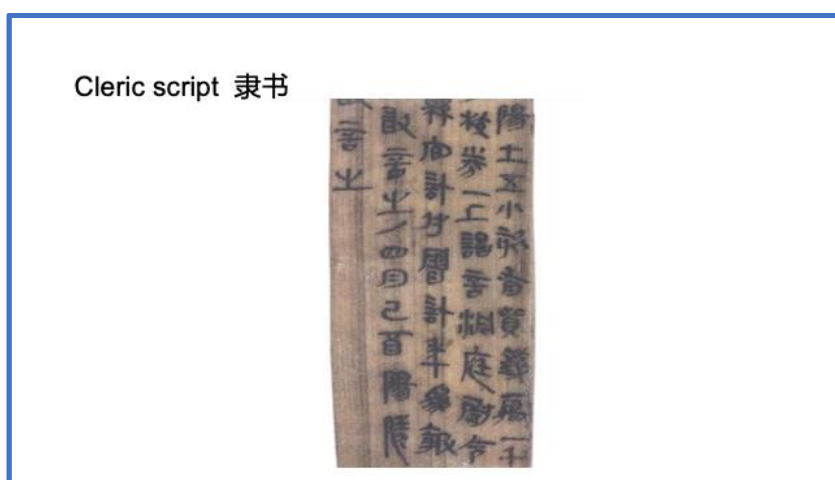
From the picture you can see that oracle bones are pictographic. The lines are very sharp, straight, not very cursive.

After the oracle bones came bronze script. This emerged in the Qing Dynasty.



You can see the characters were carved on the surface of the bronze. Dating from this time, we have two types of characters: *Da Zhuan* and *Xiao Zhuan* steel scripts. They look neat, more tidy, and the sizes are more equal than in the oracle bone script. The sizes are not even: some are small, some are thick.

Then we come to the next one: Cleric script.



Cleric script is very cursive, round.

After this, there is a division; we come to the modern characters. Before bronze, we call them 'ancient' characters and after cleric script appears we call them 'modern' characters. You can

see here how the lines look cursive, round. They used this form for official work. They wrote this poem on bamboo, The oracles are on bones, animal bones.

Then we have regular script.

Evolution of character forms

甲骨文	日	月	車	馬
金文	日	月	車	馬
小篆	日	月	車	馬
隶书	日	月	車	馬
楷书	日	月	車	馬
草书	日	月	車	馬
行书	日	月	車	馬

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We have cursive script. Following this, we have new forms of characters. The top row is oracle form. The character in the fifth column is 'horse'. Then you can see it develop through seven different forms. Basically, the evolution of characters follows a line from drawing - 'picture-like' - to abstract - lines, dots, strokes. And the other thing you can see, is the move from complicated to simple.

So, that was a brief introduction to the evolution of character forms. Now we come to the next part.

Modernization of Chinese characters

- Sound system for characters: Zhuyin 1913; Pinyin 1958
- Typewriter: 1915 祈暄才 (QI Xuancai)
- Digitalization : 1976, 朱邦复 (ZHU Bangfu)
- "Kingdom of Characters" by Jing Tsu
- "How the Chinese Language Got Modernized" by Ian Buruma

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With all these forms, from ancient to the earliest, to the modern characters, there is a big question about how do we know their sounds. The sound can only be heard. People are always asking, from ancient times, how can you know how to read them? When you read the character you can't read their pronunciation. That's why the modernization of characters started in the early 20th century. First, a sound system was created for characters. Starting first with Zhuyin.

Have a look at this chart.

This process of modernization, of course, developed over quite a long time period. I can't go into too much detail because of the time constraints, but here re is a book I'd thoroughly recommend you to read, *The Kingdom of Characters* by Jing Tsu.

:



This book gives a really good, insightful account of how Chinese characters were modernized. Now, I am coming to the third part of my talk: The second part was about the evolution of character forms. In this section I will discuss the formation of Chinese characters, how each character was formed. There are, of course, different theories. I favour one of the theories named after Xu Shen. It's known as 'liù shū' - the 'six categories'.

Part Three: Formation of the Chinese character forms

Xu Shen and his 'six category theory'

- pictographic characters 象形 xiangxing
- indicative characters 指事 zhishi
- associative compounds 会意 huiyi
- phonetic load characters 假借 jiajie
- mutually explanatory characters 转注 zhuanzhu
- pictophonetic characters 形声 xingsheng

(The fourth should actually be 'phonetic loan characters' – there's a typo on the slide.)
Let's look at them in more detail.



The pictographic character is easy to understand because it looks like a sun or moon. And cloud is in the shape of it. The fourth one says 'xià yǔle'- the dots tell you: 'it's raining'. This pictographic way of forming characters is easy to follow.

The next category is 'indicative characters'. It involves adding signs to those pictographs, pictures, drawings, to create the characters. Take this example:

Indicative characters: adding signs to drawings

- People added indicative signs to some pictographic characters and made a new character (only 129)

一 二 三 本 刃 甘 上 下

- Associative-compound characters: combine already existing characters

same characters are combined and

木 林 森

人 从 众

different characters are combined.

休 明 见 灾 相 朝 尘

There are one, two, three lines. Then 本 'ben', meaning 'book'. It's based on 'wood'. A little line is added at the root. So 'běn', meaning 'the root', 'origin'. This is one type.

The second example in the associative compound characters is based on the same character. If I take the first character – 'people' and put two of them together, then this means 'follow'. And three people together means a group of people - many people.

If we look at the characters in the first row, and assuming you haven't learned Chinese and I asked you to guess the meaning, you won't know this character's meaning, but you can try to guess. The character means is 'wood', so two 'woods' together - what does that mean? And three 'woods' together - what does that mean? Have a go. Have a guess.

The bottom row shows what happens when we put the two characters together. Combine the two and you have a new meaning. This one here 休, means 'rest' - 'xiū' The radical is 'people' leaning against a 'wood', so that means 'rest'.

- Mutually explanatory characters: mutual explanation

它 - 蛇 州 - 洲 然 - 燃

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The original meaning of the first character is 'snake'. But later, this part referred to something else, to identify it's an animal, so they added another symbol to the right of it. This is a 'radical' used to indicate it's an animal, in this case an it's an insect animal, or animal radical. So from here we can see we have radicals, which is a category of one meaning.

What about dictionaries and categories? We follow the categories to list all the words or characters. So far, using the system devised by Xu Shen, we now have over five hundred radicals, but in our dictionaries, we actually use between 250 and 300.

Because of radicals, we have the next boom - pictophonetic characters: a combination of form and pronunciation.

Pictophonetic characters: combination of form and pronunciation

A pictophonetic character is a character composed of form (which indicates meaning/radical, and sound which tells its pronunciation. With this method, many more new characters were created.

河 湖 江 汤

吃 喝 唱 叫

妈 她 奶 姑

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This is really, really useful. You can see here that all these characters have a radical and the radical shows the meaning. The right-hand character here is for the sound. When put together they give the meaning. For example, 河 is a river (hé) and 湖 (hú) is a lake. The one thing they share in common is water - liquid. The next one is chi, he, chang, jiao - all 'oral': to do with the mouth. The next group is the female radicals., they are all related to 'female', or 'woman'.

So, that was a brief overview of the six types and, of course, my introduction is very, very short because there are just too many examples I could show. If you want to know more, you have a look at the references section.

I am going to move on to Part 4.

Part Four: Chinese history and culture embedded in characters

- People and nature

天(tian) sky 地(di) earth 人(ren) person

- Concept of state

国(guo) state

- Moral standards

信(xin) trust

义(yi) respectful behaviour, duty

- War

战争(zhanzheng) war, battle

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Characters are interesting and important in themselves. More important than the characters' formation and evolution is that these characters are embedded in lots of other meanings, history, culture, morals. All these concepts are actually embedded in these characters, because their origin is in pictures. How do you draw a picture? Pictures reflect reality, objects. That's why.

I've selected several examples here and I'll choose one. Let's take the second one, 地(di) - the earth. This 'earth' can show how Chinese people, ancient Chinese people see, saw, or understood.

地(di) earth



The concept for them is the earth or ground. You can see this is the old form, this is pictographic. The left-hand side represents earth. The right-hand side is 'she', which is actually an abstract drawing of a vagina. It's a symbol of 'mother'. What this tells us about their understanding, their concept of 'land' or 'earth', is that they saw it - 'earth' - like a mother that gave birth to everything around the world, in the universe. They show this respect. So from this character, we can see how people in ancient China viewed the meaning of land, or earth.

Let's look at the next example, 国 'guo' - state. What is the concept of 'guo'? Is it state or country?

国 (guo) state/country



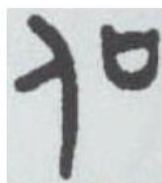
In earliest times, they saw the second element of the first character, as 'a weapon'. The first element means 'people', so they saw 'country' as a people with weapons. 'To protect the people' - that's the meaning of 'country'. The earliest concept of 'state'.

The second character emerges hundreds of years later, in the bronze, Jiaguwen, period. This weapon element is still there and there's still a small 'mouth' in the first element. We can see they added one big square, and add lines to the first element. So now they see a country needs a border. The small line you can see added below the mouth element represents 'land'

So by now the concept is much broader: as a state you have people, you have weapons, or an army, to protect people within their land, inside a safe border. The concept of the country, or state, improves - changes.

The next character we're going to choose is 信 'xin'. This means 'message' or 'trust'. We always say 'trust' or 'trustworthy'.

信 (xin) message/trust



Originally, this character is 'people', a person. The right-hand element is a mouth. In olden days, how did people send a message? Normally, they would pass a message orally. They would have to tell someone to tell another person in another place Can you imagine? We have the game, 'Chinese whispers'. You start by saying a sentence to one person at the beginning, and by the time it has been passed on to the last of possibly 10 or 20 people, the message has massively changed. So, if you want to pass on a trustworthy, real message, you have to make sure you pass on that message with 100% certainty. That's why later - nowadays - this character 信 'xin' also means trust.

Through these examples, you can see that all the characters are narratives - different stories. There are so many, many examples!

Now for another modern interpretation of the characters. I found this on the Internet recently.

Some interesting characters with modern interpretations

- 路 (lu) road: 足 + 各自 = take your own way
- 舒 (shu) comfortable: 舍得 + 给予 = comfortable
- 劣 (lie) poor : 少 + 力 = being poor because you made less effort
- 债 (zhai) debt: 人 + 责 = it' s people' s responsibility to pay back
- 忙 (mang) busy: 心 + 死 = when you are busy, your heart is lost
- 停 (ting) stop 人 + 亭 = rest and continue
- 患 (huan) suffer 串 + 心 = too much worry and suffer
- 夸 (kua) exaggerate 大 + 亏 = too many big words and you'll make a loss

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Very interesting, very interesting!

This is not a linguistic explanation, but different people, all people, make use of this. So, for example, this first one: they say 'lu' is a road. What is a road? The explanation? 'Take your own way.' The left-hand side is your foot. The next one is 'gè', which means 'each one of us'. So, the road is under your feet. Under your feet you can find your own way: that's called 'road'.

The next one is 'shu'. What is 'shu'? It's 'comfortable'. How are you going to be comfortable? The explanation: the left-hand is 'shu' - 'willing to', 'willing to give' - the next part is 'give'. So, if you are willing to give something, willing to help other people, you will feel comfortable.

Here's the next then I found:

Chinese thoughts and philosophy

- 儒 (rú) Confucianism = 人 (rén) people + 需 (xū) needs
 - 仁 (ren) benevolence
 - 义 (yi) righteousness
 - 礼 (li) courtesy
 - 智 (zhi) wisdom
 - 信 (xin) faith
- 道 (dào) Taoism/road/road = 首 (shǒu) head + 走 (zǒu) walk/do
 - 顺其自然 (shun qi ziran) follow the laws of nature
- 佛 (fó) Buddhism/Buddha = 人 (rén) people + 弗 (fú) not
 - 修心 (jingxin) cultivate minds 顿悟 (dunwu) achieve enlightenment

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It's my understanding of Chinese thought and philosophy. Sometimes I give talks on Chinese culture. The one key, core thing, important thing, is a discussion about Chinese thought and philosophy. Inevitably, we have to introduce 'rū' – Confucianism and Daoism - 'dào'. I use the three characters above to explain.

What is Confucianism? The left-hand character is 'people'. The right-hand is 'xü' – needs: 'what people need.' We need to become human beings living in society. So we need social life, social order: people's relationships. So that's why Confucius follows those five core concepts listed above: 'ren' (benevolence); 'yi' (righteousness); 'li' (courtesy), 'zhi' (wisdom), and 'xin' (faith). This is where it comes from; we need all these.

The next one is Daoism. What is Daoism? We see the character 道 dào here. This character 道 dào means road - the way. You can see this is made up of a combination of, 'shou' - 'head' and 'walk'. So, if you want to find your way, you have to make use of your head, use your brain. To walk, to find your way. The key concept in how to do this is to follow the laws of nature: shun qi ziran. This is the concept of Daoism. Follow nature. Do things naturally.

The next one is 佛 'fó': Buddhism, Buddha. Now, here is 'all of the people' plus 'walk'. As to the meaning of fó: Buddhism doesn't believe in God, there is no God. A person can be a Buddha if you follow spiritual cultivation. So this character 'jingxin' has two parts. If you want to reach final enlightenment you have to go through a really, really long time and hard work to cultivate your mind, and achieve enlightenment. Go this way and go straight. This is a winding road, not a straight road. Hopefully, I've made myself understood about these three characters!

Now I come to my final section: calligraphy: the writing of Chinese characters. I use two quotes about calligraphy:

Part Five: Calligraphy: Writing of the Chinese characters

- "Calligraphy refers to characters written creatively with vigorous strokes, and is a specific art form. The Han characters are the basis of calligraphy. The aesthetics of calligraphy actually exceeds its practical value." (*Han Jiantang*)

- "Calligraphy has traditionally signalled many things: the mark of being steeped in the classics and wisdom of the ancients; a meditative craft through which to cultivate a higher self; an elite medium through which to express one's inner character, thoughts, and emotions." (*Jing Tsu*)

➤ Practical value
➤ Aesthetic value
➤ Power value

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The first is by Professor Han Jiantang, the second is by Jing Tsu; they provide a very good explanation of calligraphy.

My understanding of calligraphy is that there are two types. One is, to write characters with a 'máobǐ' - a brush pen. This is what I do. The other part is an art form. The art form is really serious calligraphy.

I would say calligraphy has three values, practical values. In the old days it was used to record documents. The second one is its aesthetic value: it's beauty, you enjoy yourself. The third one is its power value. It's about power; calligraphy carries power. It depends on who is going to use this calligraphy. Let's see, this is an example here.

You see this newspaper masthead here Rénmín rìbào - People's Daily.:



Do you know who wrote this one? It was Chairman Mao, Mao Zedong. So that's why it's so powerful here: it's the official newspaper.

This is one is Beijing University:



Can you guess who wrote this title? Yes, Mao Zedong again. That's why it's well-known, so well-known. That's why this country is prestigious.

Here is Deng Xiaping:



He demonstrates his inscriptions in lots of places. This is power. How is it power? It depends on who is going to use it. First of all, we have these politicians: high-level authorities. Other people are really high-level artists. Very powerful,
Then comes calligraphy practice.

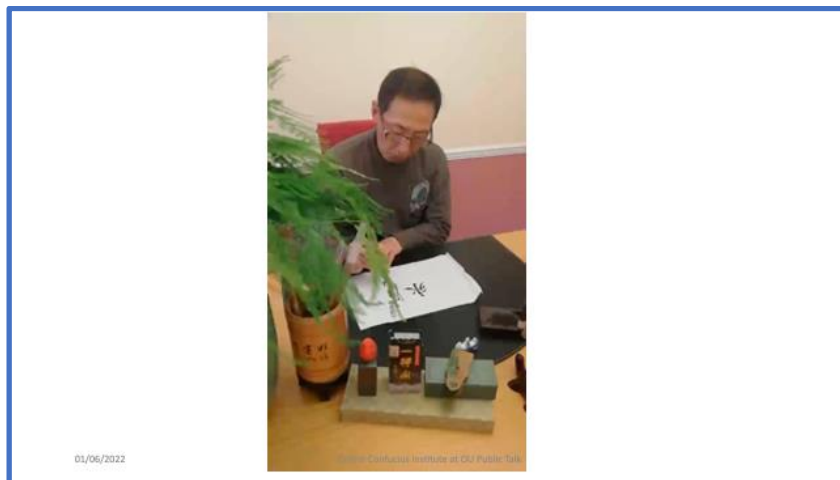
Calligraphy practice

- Writing tools: 文房四宝 (wen fang si bao) four treasures for calligraphy
笔 (bi) brush
墨 (mo) ink
纸 (zhi) paper
砚 (yan) ink stand
- Methods: 心正 (xin zheng) be concentrated
身正 (shen zheng) sit straight
笔正 (bi zheng) hold brush upright
字正 (zi zheng) achieve a good character
- Square form: 对称 (duichen) symmetry
平衡 (pingheng) balance

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This is what I do, writing characters with a pen. With a brush pen. A lot of you will already know about 'wen fang si bao'. It's made up of 'bi' - [brush], 'mo' [ink] and 'zhi' - the paper. And the last element I need is 'yan' [ink stand].

And the other question is, how do you write? Now, this is how I practise:



The first thing you see is that I'm sitting straight, calm, shoulders relaxed. And the front of the pen is straight.

Drawing this character 'yong', involves eight basic strokes. You follow a strict order and you write easily – you feel more comfortable.



You have to think about these eight basic strokes for each character.

Now here is a task for you. How many strokes do these need?

笔画 strokes

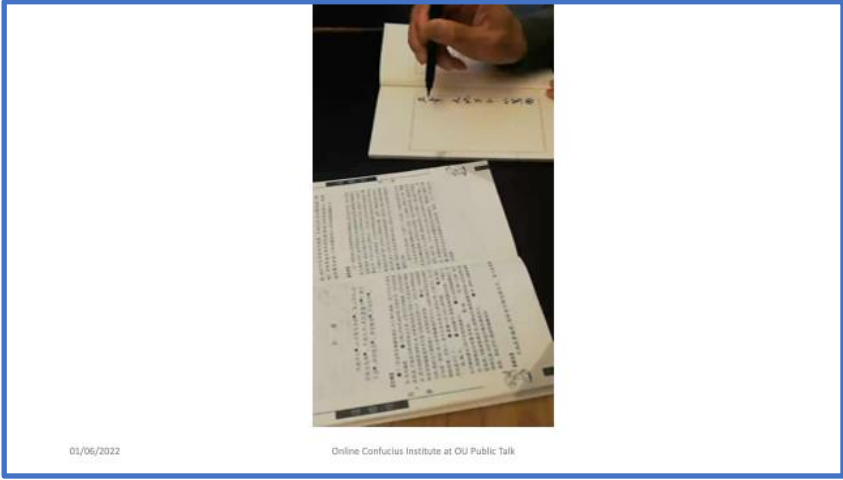
- 反
- 长
- 皮
- 那
- 巨
- 凹



Those of you who have learned Chinese can have a think and I will put the answer at the end.

Now in terms of the characters, some are big, some are medium, some are really, really small.

I personally like the small ones, like this so I can copy these texts quickly.



There are five styles for calligraphy: seal script, clerical script, semi-cursive script, cursive script, which is a very free, rolling one. I can't do it myself, the style of calligraphy is closely related to your personality.

Five calligraphy styles

- Seal script 篆体



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Clerical script 隶书 (lishu)



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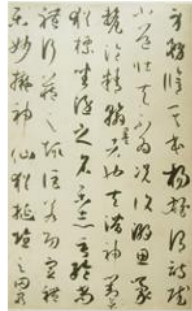
Semi-cursive script 行书 (xingshu)



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Cursive script 草书 (caoshu)



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And this is regular script; I practise this one.

Regular script 楷书 (kaishu)



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What are the benefits of doing this? These are the six reasons that I feel are good reasons for practising calligraphy.

Benefits of character writing practice

- Concentration
- Observation
- Memory
- Better understanding
- Breathing exercise
- Wellbeing

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It is especially good for practising concentration, your observation and memory. In general, it will improve your wellbeing, because you train your mind. Calligraphy, Tai-Chi, and Qigong all together will help you keep yourself calm

Right! I think this is the end of my talk! Thank you very much. Thank you!

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How many brush strokes? The answer

- 反 (4)
- 长 (4)
- 皮 (5)
- 那 (6)
- 巨 (4)
- 凹 (5)