

## The Chinese script

### 3.1 The beginnings of Chinese writing<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese script appears as a fully developed writing system in the late Shang dynasty (fourteenth to eleventh centuries BC). From this period we have copious examples of the script inscribed or written on bones and tortoise shells, for the most part in the form of short divinatory texts. From the same period there also exist a number of inscriptions on bronze vessels of various sorts. The former type of graphic record is referred to as the oracle bone script while the latter is commonly known as the bronze script. The script of this period is already a fully developed writing system, capable of recording the contemporary Chinese language in a complete and unambiguous manner. The maturity of this early script has suggested to many scholars that it must have passed through a fairly long period of development before reaching this stage, but the few examples of writing which precede the fourteenth century are unfortunately too sparse to allow any sort of reconstruction of this development.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of available evidence, however, it would not be unreasonable to assume that Chinese writing began sometime in the early Shang or even somewhat earlier in the late Xia dynasty or approximately in the seventeenth century BC (Qiú 1978, 169).

From the very beginning the Chinese writing system has basically been morphemic: that is, almost every graph represents a single morpheme. Since the overwhelming majority of Old Chinese morphemes were monosyllables, this means that, at the phonological level, every graph represents a single syllable. The Chinese script differs from purely syllabic scripts (like Japanese *kana*) in that homophonous syllables are represented by different graphs when they have different meanings. For example, *shǒu* 'head' (MC *śjəu.*, OC *\*hrjəgwɣ*) and *shǒu* 'hand' (MC *śjəu.*, OC *\*hrjəgwɣ*) are represented by different graphs, even though they are homophonous as far back as they can be traced.<sup>3</sup>

The earliest Chinese writing shows that it had a basically pictographic origin. At the earliest stages of its development, it is quite clear that the chief device for creating graphs was to draw a picture of what was to be represented. Examples

### 3.1 The beginnings of Chinese writing

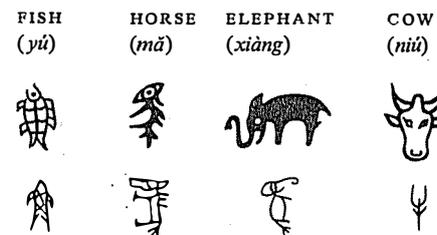


Figure 3.1. Pictographs in early Chinese writing



Figure 3.2. The graph for *quǎn* 'dog'

of this sort of graph are shown in Figure 3.1. The more truly representational a graph is, the more difficult and time-consuming it is to depict. There is a natural tendency for such graphs to become progressively simplified and stylized as a writing system matures and becomes more widely used. As a result, pictographs gradually tend to lose their obvious pictorial quality. The graph for *quǎn* 'dog' shown in Figure 3.2 can serve as a good illustration of this sort of development.

Not all the elements of language could be easily represented in pictorial form. Faced with this problem, the early creators of the Chinese script resorted to various other devices. One was to use a more abstract representation; for example, to write *shàng* 'above' they drew a horizontal line and placed another shorter horizontal line above it (see Table 3.1 below); *xià* 'below' was written similarly, but with a short line below a longer horizontal line. The word *wéi* 'surround' was written by depicting four small graphs for 'foot' around an empty square, probably representing a walled city. In all these cases the graphic representations are linked directly to their corresponding morphemes without any reference to the sound or pronunciation of the word in question. But these devices also proved inadequate to represent early Chinese in a complete fashion. Ultimately, as in all fully developed writing systems, the pronunciation of elements to be written had to be taken into account. One way to do this was to use the *rebus* principle, that is, to employ a pictograph or other non-phonetic representational graph for its sound value alone; for example, the word *lái* 'come' would be difficult to represent relying on the pictographic or other purely representational devices. One solution to this problem was to borrow the graph for a homophone or a near-

homophone. In this particular case a pictograph representing *lái* 'wheat' was chosen; in the subsequent history of the language this word for 'wheat' became obsolete and the graph in question now survives only in its "borrowed" sense of 'come'.<sup>4</sup> Grammatical elements were particularly hard to represent in pictorial form; as a result, virtually all the early graphs for such elements are based on this "phonetic borrowing" principle.

In addition to the types of characters described above, a very small number of early graphs were apparently purely arbitrary signs bearing no representational or phonetic relationship to the word depicted. An example of this sort of graph is that for *wǔ* 'five' which is written with an X, or the word for *qī* 'seven', written with a simple cross.

In early China another device for character formation was developed which in subsequent centuries was to become progressively more important: this was the device of phonetic compounding. A character of this type consists of a semantic element combined with a second element used to indicate the pronunciation of the new graph; for example, the word *láng* 'wolf' was written with the graph for *quǎn* 'dog' on the left and a graph pronounced *liáng* (meaning 'good') on the right. The phonetic element here is generally used for its sound value alone, independent of its meaning. The original impetus for creating characters of this type may have been the need to distinguish graphs that looked alike and could easily be confused. The numerous characters for types of birds, for example, could be distinguished more clearly if such phonetic elements were added to them. Another impetus was probably the increased borrowing of simple graphs for their phonetic values to write words otherwise difficult to depict. As this device was used more and more, the danger of ambiguity and confusion undoubtedly increased. This ambiguity could be resolved by adding semantic indicators. An example of this is the very early use of the pictograph for *jī* 'winnowing basket' for the word *qí*, a modal particle denoting probability or futurity; since the grammatical word *qí* had a much higher textual frequency than *jī*, the graph *zhú* 'bamboo' was eventually added to *jī* to distinguish it from *qí*.<sup>5</sup> The Shang script then contained characters of two basic types; one type was semantically representational without any indication of the pronunciation of the words represented, and the other type was in some fashion tied to the pronunciation of the words. In both cases it is essential to keep in mind that the individual graphs or characters of the Shang writing system represented specific words in the Shang language, each of which had its own semantic and phonological characteristics. The notion which is sometimes encountered that Chinese characters in some platonic fashion directly represent ideas rather than specific Chinese words is patently

Table 3.1. Examples of Shang dynasty characters

1. ☉ (日, <i>níjiet</i> /* <i>njit</i> ) 'sun'	4. 二 (上, <i>zhang</i> -/* <i>djangh</i> ) 'above'
2. 𠩺 (休, <i>xjəu</i> /* <i>xjəgw</i> ) 'rest'	5. 𠩺 (其, <i>gī</i> /* <i>gjäg</i> ) 'modal particle'
3. 來 (来, <i>lái</i> /* <i>lög</i> ) 'come'	6. 𠩺 (鸡, <i>kiei</i> /* <i>kiġ</i> ) 'chicken'

absurd, and leads to gross misunderstandings concerning both the Chinese script and the nature of writing in general. For this reason, the term ideograph, which has often been used to refer to Chinese characters, is best avoided. Chinese characters represent Chinese words, and an understanding of the semantic and phonological make-up of these words is essential to an understanding of how the Chinese writing system works.

The characters in Table 3.1 illustrate some of the various categories of Shang graphs. Following each graph, in parentheses, the modern form of the graph along with its Middle Chinese reading and F. K. Li's Old Chinese reconstruction are given. Example 1 in Table 3.1 is a clear example of an original pictograph; it is the picture of the sun. Example 2 shows the character *rén* 'person' next to *mù* 'tree'; the conjunction of these two elements is used to express the word *xīu* 'to rest' since presumably people often rest in the shade of a tree. Example 3 is the word *lái* 'come' alluded to above; in origin a pictograph for a word meaning 'wheat', it was borrowed to write *lái*, which at that time was either a homophone or a near-homophone. Graph 4 is an abstract relational character; it is the word *shàng* 'above', showing one horizontal stroke above another. Example 5 shows the word *qí* whose origin was described above. The last graph shown is that for *jī* 'chicken'; this word was also written with a simple pictograph, but here a phonetic element *yiei*/\**giġ* is added at the left of the pictograph to indicate its pronunciation; at the same time, the original pictograph has been somewhat simplified.

Whereas in the Shang dynasty the major sources for the study of the script are the oracle bones and shells, in the Western Zhou dynasty (eleventh century to 771 BC) and the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC) the chief sources are bronze inscriptions. These inscriptions, found on bronze vessels of various shapes and functions, range from a few characters up to several hundred. The script of this period in its basic structure and style is very similar to that of the late Shang, and is clearly derived from it. It shows a general tendency toward

Table 3.2. Graphic development in Western Zhou and the Spring and Autumn periods

Modern graph	Early Western Zhou	Late Western Zhou	Spring and Autumn period
tiān 'sky'			
bèi 'shell'			
huǒ 'fire'			
mǎ 'horse'			

a greater linearity and regularity of form, as can be seen in Table 3.2. This tendency becomes even more pronounced in the Spring and Autumn period.<sup>6</sup>

From these representative examples it is obvious that the script, as it matured, became simpler, and progressively began to lose some of its pictographic quality. This was due to the growing importance and use of writing as society became more complex, and to a need to simplify and rationalize the linear structure of the graphs as their use became ever more prevalent. In general a tendency to straighten out the strokes and to convert earlier rounded strokes to sharper angles can also be observed.

In the era after the Spring and Autumn period, the use of the script spread to virtually all levels of society; this popularization of writing led to the development of many drastically simplified graphs, accelerating the movement away from obvious pictographic forms even more, and indeed imparted a wholly new visual aspect to the script. This development of what one might call (after similar developments in Ancient Egypt) "demotic" forms of the script was especially widespread in the states of eastern China. The script of the western state of Qin, by way of contrast, generally tended to preserve the earlier pictorial aspect of the script more faithfully. The main tendency observable in the Warring States period (475–222 BC) is a further development toward simplification, although here and there some examples of greater elaboration can also be observed. No doubt chiefly as a consequence of political fragmentation, a growing diversity among the scripts of the various states and regions can also be observed; thus, on the eve of the first great imperial consolidation under Qin Shǐ Huáng in 221 BC, the Chinese script in the course of its history of over a millennium had evolved far away from its primitive pictorial roots and, owing to the cen-

trifugal forces created by political disunity, was undergoing a process of rapid diversification.

### 3.2 Codification of the script under the Qin dynasty

The Qin dynasty is a great watershed in the history of Chinese script. The two or three centuries preceding the unification of the entire country under Qin Shǐ Huáng saw a rapid development of writing in virtually all areas of the country. Not only did the script develop steadily toward a simpler and less pictographic form, it took on markedly different forms in the different independent principalities of the Warring States period. The new Qin empire, as a part of a policy of standardization of such things as weights and measures, currency and legal statutes, also put into effect a policy of script reform. In practical terms, this meant that they made the use of the Qin script mandatory throughout the empire, and as a result the various local scripts which had been in use up to that time fell into disuse. It is the Qin script, then, that is ancestral to all later forms of Chinese writing. As pointed out in the preceding section, the writing system of the old (pre-imperial) Qin state tended to be considerably more conservative than that of the states of eastern China; this means that by definitively adopting the Qin script forms, China preserved the maximum degree of continuity with the past.

The script which was adopted under the Qin dynasty existed in two different forms, a more complex standard form and a simplified demotic form. The former script is known as *zhuànshū* or 'seal script' from its widespread use on seals. The Qin seal script is directly descended from the bronze inscriptional script of the late Western Zhou dynasty (see above). In the course of its development the seal script had taken on a more regular and balanced appearance without, however, changing to such a degree that its ultimate pictographic origins became totally obscured. Traditionally the invention of the Qin seal script has been attributed to the Qin Prime Minister Lǐ Sī (*ob.* 208 BC), but modern research has shown that the Qin seal script in its essential details was already in existence before the Qin dynasty; it is of course possible that Lǐ Sī played some role in standardizing the official form of this script.

More important than the seal script in the subsequent history of Chinese writing was the second variety of script used during the Qin dynasty. This latter demotic form of writing came to be known as *lishū* 'clerical script' from its association with various types of clerks employed by the government. In origin it was nothing more than an organic continuation of the old Qin state's demotic script. The clerical script in its graphic form was highly evolved, and represented a much simplified version of the standard seal script.

### 3.3 The varieties of ancient script and its nomenclature

The forms of Chinese writing used up until the end of the Qin dynasty are referred to as *gǔwénzì* 'ancient script'. Since the script up to this time underwent many transformations, it will be useful at this point to list and explain what the major types of ancient script were.

(1) Shang dynasty script. The representative script of this period is *jiǎgǔwén* 'the oracle bone script'. This is the earliest variety of script known to us in purely chronological terms. It appears inscribed (or occasionally written with a brush) on bones and shells. The texts are almost always of a divinatory or oracular nature. Although most examples of this script are from the Shang dynasty, recently some Zhou dynasty *jiǎgǔwén* has been discovered. Inscriptions on bronze vessels, referred to in Chinese as *jīnwén*, are also found from the late Shang dynasty. Shang dynasty bronze inscriptions are generally very short, consisting of only a few characters. Chinese scholars believe that the writing brush (*máobǐ*) was already used at this period; unfortunately, the materials on which the writing brush was employed were mostly perishable, and very few examples of actual brush writing have come down to us. The bronze inscriptional script, however, preserves a style of script closely modeled on brush-writing techniques. *Jiǎgǔwén*, on the other hand, being incised on various hard materials with some sort of sharp tool, presents a more angular and linearized style of writing.

(2) Western Zhou and Chunqiu periods. This era saw a great flowering of bronze vessel production. Many of these vessels were cast with long inscriptions, numbering in hundreds of characters in some cases. *Jīnwén* consequently has come to be considered the representative script of this period. Early Western Zhou bronze script is quite similar to that found on vessels dating from the Shang. Subsequently it shows a tendency toward greater regularity, as well as a further development in the direction of sharper angles and thinner lines.

In connection with the bronze script, another sort of writing called *zhòuwén* 'Zhou script' (sometimes also called *dàzhuàn* 'great seal') should be mentioned. According to the Han dynasty dictionary *Shuōwén jiězì*, it is said to have been invented by an official historiographer named Zhòu. Although some controversy still surrounds the origin of this script form, recent scholarship tends to identify it as basically the same as Western Zhou bronze script.

(3) Script of the Six States period. This term (*liùguó wénzì* in Chinese) is used to refer to the scripts of the various independent principalities of eastern China during the Warring States period. This script, which existed in many local varia-

tions, is known from a number of sources, the most important of which are bronze vessels and texts written on bamboo strips and silk. The *Shuōwén jiězì*, in addition to *zhòuwén*, also preserves another form of writing which it refers to as *gǔwén* 'the ancient script'. Its immediate origin was from a corpus of pre-Qin texts discovered in the Han dynasty; these texts were written in a type of script which was clearly in use some time prior to the Qin dynasty. A comparison with various graphic materials predating the Qin period shows it to have close links with the script of eastern China in the Warring States period.

(4) Seal script, *zhuànshū*. This script is also frequently referred to as *xiǎozhuàn* 'the small seal' to distinguish it from the so-called *dàzhuàn* 'the great seal' which is an alternate designation of the *zhòuwén* mentioned above in connection with the Western Zhou bronze script. *Zhuànshū* is the official and more formal variety of Qin dynasty script. It is the basic script described in the Han dynasty graphic dictionary *Shuōwén jiězì*.

To give the reader an idea of Chinese script evolution up until the beginning of the Han dynasty, the development of twelve characters is traced in Table 3.3. An example of each character is given in its Shang oracle bone, Zhou bronze, Warring States, seal and clerical forms.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.4 Developments in the Han dynasty

With the end of the Qin dynasty and the beginning of Han, the period of the ancient script effectively came to an end. During the Han dynasty the demotic clerical script became the official form of writing employed for all purposes, including inscriptions. In the early Western Han (206 BC–AD 24) the clerical script was, as one might expect, still very similar to the clerical script of the Qin dynasty; but by the first century BC a new form of this script begins to appear, characterized by a rather more undulant and regular style of brushwork. This new, modified script form which, like the earlier Qin script, was mainly a creation of the clerks and lower-level officials of the government chanceries, quickly spread to all levels of society and became the standard Han form of writing. This somewhat more evolved Han version of *lìshū* is the classic form of the clerical script, and is still widely practised by modern calligraphers.<sup>8</sup>

The transition from the seal script to the clerical script and the subsequent universal adoption of the clerical script in the Han dynasty probably represents the most important transition in the entire history of Chinese writing. It marks the change from the ancient form of writing in which, despite a progressive tendency toward a more stylized and abstract representation, the essentially pictographic roots of the script could still be discerned, to a more purely con-

Table 3.3. Development of the Chinese script

	Shang bone script	Zhou bronze script	Warring States script	Seal script	Clerical script (Han)
1. 'child'					
2. 'cloud'					
3. 'water'					
4. 'year'					
5. 'silk'					
6. 'be born'					
7. 'eye'					
8. 'fruit'					
9. 'tripod'					
10. 'deer'					
11. 'wise'					
12. 'buy'					

ventionalized form of writing. This change took several forms. In the clerical script, all attempts to preserve the pictorial nature of graphs are abandoned and convenience becomes the overriding principle. Rounded and circular strokes are straightened out and linearized to make graphs easier to write: the graph for sun, for example, in *zhuànshū* was a circle with a short horizontal line through it; now it becomes a small square crossed by a short horizontal stroke, thereby losing its earlier pictorial aspect. Character components are simplified and consolidated; a number of components, distinct in the seal script, are merged, and commonly recurring components are given variant shapes depending on what position they occupy in the whole graph. The overall impression one gets is of a drastically

pruned version of the more ancient script forms. The clerical script in its classical Han form is already well on its way to becoming *kǎishū*, the 'standard' script still in use today. For a contemporary person, it takes specialized training and a great deal of practice to read a text written in seal script, whereas the clerical script can for the most part be read by anyone who has a good knowledge of the standard modern script.

The other important development in the history of Chinese writing which took place at this time is the emergence of the cursive script. The roots of this development can already be observed in the Qin demotic script, where some individual characters are written in an especially flowing and abbreviated fashion strongly reminiscent of the later cursive forms. A fully-fledged independent cursive script does not seem to have come into being, however, until the latter part of the first century BC, only shortly after the mature development of the classical Han clerical script. Both these scripts, the clerical and the cursive,<sup>9</sup> were widely used during the Han dynasty; the former being the formal and official script, with the latter serving chiefly as an auxiliary and informal means of writing drafts and letters. The Han cursive was developed on the basis of the older, early Han clerical script rather than the more fully developed mature classical form of this script. It was a radically simplified system of writing, in which strokes were freely joined together in order to obtain maximum speed and convenience.

The Han dynasty also saw the beginnings of the systematic study of the Chinese script. With the appearance of Xǔ Shèn's dictionary, the *Shuōwén jiězì*, China possessed for the first time a systematically elaborated theory of script development and analysis. Even when one takes into account shortcomings attributable to contemporary cosmological speculation, Xǔ Shèn's work remains a remarkable accomplishment, whose principles were to guide graphic analysis for almost two millennia, and whose relevance to contemporary research in this area is still considerable.

Xǔ Shèn based his analysis of Chinese characters on the small seal script, this being the oldest variety of writing known to most of his contemporaries. Where older forms such as *zhòuwén* or *gǔwén* (see section 3.2) were known, and differed appreciably from the seal forms, they were also given and analyzed. Xǔ Shèn divided all graphs into two broad categories – *wén* or simple non-composite graphs, and *zì*, composite graphs. The title of his dictionary reflects this important division, *shuōwén jiězì* meaning something like 'explanations of simple graphs and analyses of composite graphs'. *Wén* cannot be broken down into smaller components; *zì*, on the other hand, consist of two or more components which themselves are generally *wén*. Xǔ further classified all characters into six categories which he called *liùshū* 'the six principles of writing'.<sup>10</sup> Of the six cate-

gories, only four are concerned directly with the structure of graphs. The first two, *zhīshì* and *xiàngxíng*, refer to simple graphs (*wén*) and are non-phonetic in nature. *Zhīshì* graphs are non-pictorial, often rather abstract representations of words; words belonging to this category generally do not refer to physical objects but to various relational and abstract concepts; examples are the graphs for numerals, position words ('above', 'below') and certain other words difficult to depict in a more concrete form. The number of such graphs is small, and this process of graphic formation ceased being productive at a very early date. *Xiàngxíng* graphs are pictographs; in one sense or another they are visual representations of the things denoted by the words they stand for. This category of graphs is much larger than the *zhīshì* category, but it too ceased to be productive at a relatively early date in the history of graphic development.

The overwhelming majority of Chinese characters belong to the *zì* or composite graph category; *zì* in turn consist of two basic types, *huìyì* and *xíngshēng*.<sup>11</sup> The former category is non-phonetic: a *huìyì* ('joined meanings') character generally has two graphic components whose meanings taken together suggest another word; for example, according to Xǔ Shèn, *wǔ*, the word for 'military' consists of two simple graphs, one meaning 'dagger-ax' and one meaning 'to stop' – the composite notion 'stop dagger-axes' suggests the word *wǔ* 'military'. *Huìyì* characters form a fairly large category; the process, although not nearly as productive as the *xíngshēng* process, has continued to be employed in the formation of new characters throughout Chinese history and is still used today.

*Xíngshēng*, phonetic compounds, formed by far the largest category of graphs in Xǔ Shèn's time, as they still do today.<sup>12</sup> A *xíngshēng* character consists of two elements, one of which gives a clue to the semantic category of the word represented and the other a clue to its sound; Xǔ Shèn cites as an example of this category the word *hé* (OC \**gar*) 'the Yellow River' which consists of the graph for 'water' on the left and a graph pronounced *kě* (OC \**kharx*) on the right; this right-side component is used to suggest the pronunciation of the new composite graph. In modern nomenclature the semantic component is referred to as the *signific* and the part which concerns the character's sound is called the *phonetic*. Phonetics only occasionally coincide perfectly with the pronunciation of the composite graph in which they are used; nonetheless, the parameters of phonetic usage are sufficiently narrow to prove valuable information about the phonological make-up of Han and pre-Han Chinese (see section 2.5). The category of phonetic compounds has remained the most productive process of graphic formation for more than two millennia.

The remaining two categories of the *liùshū* classification strictly speaking do not refer to graphic structure. *Jiǎjiè* or 'loan characters' are graphs originally devised to write one word which later are borrowed to represent the sound of

another, often totally unrelated word. This process has already been described in the previous section. The meaning of the category called *zhuǎnzhù* has been debated by Chinese scholars for many centuries, but its precise significance is still controversial.

The *Shuōwén jiězi* contains 9,353 characters (Liú 1963). Xǔ arranged these characters under 540 radicals or graphic classifiers. These radicals are elements which a number of characters have in common, and which can thus be used as a means of classifying those characters' graphic shapes; frequently they correspond to the characters' significs, but this is not necessarily always the case. By placing all characters under one of his 540 radicals, Xǔ Shèn showed that the great majority of Chinese characters were not purely arbitrary graphic symbols bearing no clear-cut relationship to one another but were rather made up of a relatively small number of components, and that, by using his radical system, characters could be arranged in a reasonably logical fashion.

In his definitions of individual graphs, Xǔ Shèn took into account the fact that every character had a shape (*xíng*), a meaning (*yì*) and a sound or pronunciation (*shēng*). A typical entry in his dictionary will refer to one or more of these three concepts. For example, the word *shuō* 'relate, explain' which occurs in the title of Xu's dictionary is defined thus:

說 說釋也从言兑聲

First of all, the small seal form of the graph is given; next is the meaning: *shuō* means 'to explain'. The next phrase explains the graphic form: "it (*shuō*) is from *yán* with *duì* as its phonetic." *Yán* 'to speak' is the signific, and is also the radical under which the word *shuō* is classified. In terms of the modern language, it is hard to see how *duì* could be phonetic in a word pronounced *shuō*, but this is simply because almost two millennia of phonological change have obscured the original similarity of the two sounds. In F. K. Li's reconstruction of Old Chinese, *shuō* is \**hrjuat* and *duì* is \**duadh*; in these forms the original similarity in sound is much more evident. The graphic shape of the two components of *shuō* (*yán* and *duì*) are explained under their respective entries elsewhere in the dictionary.

### 3.5 Post-Han developments in the script

The standard form of the script called *kǎishū* which is still in use at the present time began to take form in the latter part of the Han dynasty. *Kǎishū* represents a further evolution toward a more regular and convenient form of writing in which the smooth, wavelike strokes of the clerical script are transformed into straighter lines and sharper angles. In its evolution it was also no doubt influ-

enced by new writing techniques developed in conjunction with cursive forms of writing. Forms transitional between the classical clerical script and the new standard script are to be found already in certain late Han sources, but a fully mature *kǎishū* does not appear until about the time of the famous Eastern Jin calligrapher Wáng Xīzhī (AD 321–79). By the Nanbeichao period, *kǎishū* emerges as the standard form of the Chinese script and replaces the clerical script for all ordinary purposes. It is this form of writing that has been in unbroken use since that time, and which forms the basis of all modern forms of writing in China.

Cursive forms of the Chinese script (*cǎoshū*) began to develop as early as the third century BC as indicated above. These early forms of cursive were closely associated with the evolving clerical script, and in their mature form came later to be known as *zhāngcǎo* ‘regulated cursive’. In the century after the fall of the Eastern Han dynasty, as the new standard script (*kǎishū*) was taking form, the classical form of the cursive script (the so-called *jīncǎo* ‘modern cursive’) was also developing. In this cursive form, older elements reminiscent of the clerical script were eliminated and further simplifications and abbreviations were adopted and a number of characters were given wholly different graphic forms; in general, *jīncǎo* has more connected strokes than the older cursive forms, giving it an even more flowing appearance. The extreme simplification effected by this script made it difficult to read, and thus reduced its practicality. This is undoubtedly the reason why another form of writing intermediate between *cǎoshū* and *kǎishū* became popular. This script, called *xíngshū* ‘running script’, while adopting many of the features of cursive writing, remains in its basic outlines much closer to *kǎishū*, making it more useful to the average person as a means of drafting documents and writing personal letters.<sup>13</sup> Forms of writing very close in spirit to the running script can already be seen in materials from the late Eastern Han dynasty and it seems to have been formed in tandem with the standard script. In comparison to both *kǎishū* and *cǎoshū*, *xíngshū* is much less codified; at the hands of some writers it comes close to *cǎoshū* while for others it remains much closer to standard forms.

By the Tang dynasty *kǎishū* and *xíngshū* had become the two prevalent scripts; if the small seal and clerical scripts survived at all, it was as a form of specialized historical knowledge. Examples of the various types of script discussed in this section and the preceding section are shown in Table 3.4.

### 3.6 The number of Chinese characters

After the Han dynasty the overall number of Chinese characters greatly proliferated as the script became ever more widely used. There were a number of

Table 3.4. Varieties of Chinese script

Zhuànshū	Lishū	Kǎishū	Zhāngcǎo	Cǎoshū
秋收冬藏 閏餘成歲 律呂	秋收冬藏 閏餘成歲 律呂	秋收冬藏 閏餘成歲 律呂	秋收冬藏 閏餘成歲 律呂	秋收冬藏 閏餘成歲 律呂

reasons for this. In earlier forms of the script it was quite common to use the same graph to represent two or more words which, although frequently close in both sound and meaning, carried the possibility of confusion. At an early date, such words began to be differentiated, generally by means of adding an extra semantic or phonetic component. Some examples of this process were given in section 3.1. In the centuries following unification under the Qin dynasty, an ever increasing number of new characters were created on the basis of the principle which required that each word have its own separate graphic representation.<sup>14</sup> It is estimated that at the end of the Shang dynasty there were between 4,000 and 5,000 separate graphs in common use; the *Shuōwén jiězi* in the Eastern Han contained 9,353 different characters; by the Northern Song dynasty (AD 960–1127) the rhyme dictionary *Jìyùn* was able to bring together a grand total of 53,525 characters.

How is this tremendous increase in the number of characters to be explained? There were several different factors involved. One important reason for the great

Table 3.5. Number of characters in Chinese dictionaries

Date (AD)	Dynasty or period	Name of dictionary	Number of characters
100	Eastern Han	<i>Shuōwén jiězì</i>	9,353
6th c.	Liang	<i>Yùpiān</i>	12,158
601	Sui	<i>Qiè yù</i>	16,917
1011	Northern Song	<i>Guǎng yù</i>	26,194
1039	Northern Song	<i>Jì yù</i>	53,525
1615	Ming	<i>Zì huì</i>	33,179
1716	Qing	<i>Kāngxī zì diǎn</i>	47,035
1916	Minguo	<i>Zhōnghuá dà zì diǎn</i>	48,000

multiplication in the number of graphs was the cumulative nature of the Chinese literary tradition: graphs used to write ancient texts were always preserved and included in dictionaries even when the words they represented had long since passed out of real usage. Thus, as the corpus of Chinese literature increased over time, the number of characters naturally also rose. As the quantity of literature increased, new words continued to enter the language; some of these words came from the vernacular language; in other cases dialectal and even foreign words were incorporated in the language. New proper names, both of places and people, also progressively enriched the total graphic inventory. Another very important factor in the proliferation of characters was the coining of variant ways to write the same word; these variants of a single word (sometimes referred to as allo-graphs) often coexist, and were used over long periods of time because of the lack of any strict policy of standardization. An idea of the number of Chinese characters found in representative dictionaries at different periods can be seen from Table 3.5.<sup>15</sup>

Up until the present time the dictionary with the largest number of characters is the *Jì yù* compiled by Dīng Dù (AD 990–1053) and a group of assisting scholars in the Song dynasty. It is very clear in the case of this dictionary that the reason for this extraordinarily large number of characters is the inclusion of large numbers of variant ways of writing one and the same word. But even when allowance is made for this, it is undeniable that the total number of Chinese characters in existence is staggering.

In face of these large figures for the overall number of characters, it is natural to ask how many characters are in ordinary use. Surely no-one could remember tens of thousands of different graphs, nor would one need such a large number for recording almost any conceivable stage of the language. As pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, a Chinese character generally represents a single mor-

pheme; although the number of words in a language with a well-developed literature may be quite large, numbering in some cases hundreds of thousands, the number of morphemes (especially native, non-borrowed morphemes) is much smaller, numbering generally in the thousands. This would suggest that the number of characters needed to write any one synchronic stage of Chinese should number thousands rather than tens of thousands, and this would in fact appear to be the case. A number of statistical studies all bear this out. The Thirteen Confucian Classics (*Shīsān jīng*), which cover a period of almost a millennium from the Zhou dynasty down to early Han, contain a total of 6,544 different characters (Qián 1980); this number is actually on the high side, since the period during which the Thirteen Classics were written is very long, and moreover one of the works contained in the collection is the *Ēryǎ*, a dictionary which contains large numbers of strange and little used characters. The *Shuōwén jiězì*, as indicated earlier, contains almost 10,000 characters, but it is doubtful that all the words it contains were still in common use at the time of its compilation. Modern studies bring us closer to the actual number of characters needed by an ordinary literate person. In a study done by the Institute of Psychology of the Academy of Sciences in the 1960s, it was determined that the average college-educated Chinese person who is not an expert in the fields of Chinese literature or Chinese history knew between 3,500 and 4,000 characters. A frequency study of the four-volume edition of Chairman Máo Zédōng's *Collected Works* discovered a total of only 2,981 different characters (Zhāng 1980, 196). It is estimated that the average printing shop stocks about 6,000 different characters (Guān and Tián 1981).

Another way to approach this problem would be to examine how many characters occur in some specific number of compounds. Guān and Tián, in a preliminary survey of this kind found that in the *Xiàndài hànyǔ cídiǎn* (see section 7.9), 1,972 characters occur in five or more combinations, and that 1,094 occur in two to four combinations for a total of 3,066. This comes close to representing the number of characters an average reader would have to know to read most modern prose. A few characters for grammatical morphemes, personal and place names, and colloquial words which are of a high frequency but which do not themselves enter into lexical combinations should probably be added to this number to arrive at a more realistic figure. All these statistics suggest that an ordinary literate Chinese person knows and uses somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 Chinese characters. Specialists in classical literature or history would naturally know more, since they regularly deal with ancient texts containing numerous characters no longer used in modern Chinese; but even in the case of such people as these, it is doubtful if their active character vocabulary would exceed 5,000 or 6,000.

### 3.7 The adaptability of the Chinese script

Alphabetic writing can easily be adapted to various different languages; the Latin alphabet has been used to write hundreds of different languages; the Cyrillic and Arabic scripts have likewise been adapted to use for scores of languages. A logographic script, on the other hand, would seem to be much more closely wedded to the language for which it was initially invented. This is especially clear in the case of the large category of *xíngshēng* characters in which one of the elements represents the sound of the word being written. When one applies a character of this category to an unrelated word in another language, the relationship between graph and word becomes purely arbitrary. Not only is this the case when Chinese characters are used to write unrelated languages, it is to some extent also the case when characters developed to write the Chinese of the second millennium BC are employed to write later stages of the same language. Phonological changes in the language have made the phonological principle underlying many *xíngshēng* characters appear quite arbitrary to speakers of later forms of the language.

Nowadays essentially the same characters are used to write the classical language and the modern standard language based on the contemporary Peking dialect; yet these two languages are drastically different in almost every respect. The question arises then as to how the same script has been adapted to write quite different languages.

There is one respect in which the relationship between graph and word has not changed throughout the history of written Chinese: every graph continues to correspond to a single syllable. The morphemes of the modern language, however, cannot all be matched in a one-to-one fashion with those of the classical language. This raises the problem of how to write words in the modern language which have no known or obvious correspondences in the earlier classical language. It should be remembered that adapting the traditional script to the writing of Modern Chinese has for the most part not been a conscious, well-planned process. It has been rather the work of innumerable anonymous writers over many centuries; it has also been something like a trial-and-error process, in that certain words have been written a number of different ways before a single accepted manner of writing has been settled on.

In this process of graphic adaptation, a number of principles can be observed. Whenever possible, the same etymon is written with the same character; the modern word *shuǐ* 'water' is etymologically the same as the Old Chinese word for 'water' (*\*hrjədx* in F. K. Li's reconstruction) and so a single graph can be used for both the modern and the ancient forms. In actuality, the great majority of words in modern Chinese can be written in this way, but there are a significant number, many of them very high-frequency words, which cannot. Where there is

no traditional character available, two devices have been used for representing modern words: frequently new characters have been created, generally on the basis of the *xíngshēng* and *huìyì* principles; in some other cases an unrelated traditional character has been used, confusing in the process the etymological roots of the word thus written. In a number of other cases, new graphs have been devised for words for which there is an ancient etymon; the adoption of a simpler graph has usually been the reason for such substitutions.

Table 3.6 contains a list of graphs which illustrate some of the processes that have been employed in adapting the traditional script to writing the modern language. Explanations are given in the notes to the table. All these examples demonstrate that the Chinese writing system, far from being a static, fossilized form of writing, can be readily adapted to write various forms of Chinese, and in fact has been undergoing a constant process of adaptation throughout its history. This versatility is probably one reason for its tenacity which seems surprising to most non-Chinese in view of the writing system's incredible complexity.

In addition to the standard stock of Chinese characters used to write the classical and modern standard languages, there are also a considerable number of dialectal characters. Such characters have been coined to write words peculiar to various dialects and are used to record folk verse, dramatic texts, dialogue in local stories and other types of local literature. As in the examples from Table 3.6, most of these characters are based on the *xíngshēng* and *huìyì* principles. A few examples of dialectal characters are shown in Table 3.7. The first Sūzhōu character represents a fusion of two morphemes, *fəp<sup>7</sup>* 'not' and *zən<sup>2</sup>* 'once, at some point in the past'. The graph is composed of the character conventionally used for *fəp<sup>7</sup>* on the left and *zən<sup>2</sup>* on the right. The second Sūzhōu character is used to write the word *li<sup>1</sup>* 'he, she'. Although such a character exists in the early lexical sources, it is not attested with this meaning; it consists of the 'man' radical on the left and a phonetic element (pronounced *li<sup>3</sup>* in Sūzhōu) at the right.

The Fúzhōu negative *ŋ<sup>6</sup>* is written with the 'man' radical on the left and the common negative *bù* on the right. In Fúzhōu the 'man' radical is frequently used to make new characters for dialect words; this particular character would not seem to be either a *xíngshēng* or *huìyì* character, since it contains no phonetic element and its meaning cannot be considered as derived in any sense from 'man' and 'not'; nor indeed does it seem to belong to any of the other six traditional graphic categories. The second Fúzhōu character, on the other hand, is a typical *xíngshēng* form: the left-hand component is pronounced *tai<sup>2</sup>* and the right-hand component is the 'knife' radical.

In Guǎngzhōu the 'mouth' radical is frequently employed for writing colloquial dialect characters; this is the case with the first of the Guǎngzhōu characters shown in Table 3.7; the right-hand component in the character is phonetic,

Table 3.6. Adaptation of characters in writing the modern language

Modern character	Modern pronunciation	Meaning	Guǎngyùn reading
1. 筷	kuài	'chopstick'	—
2. 趕	gǎn	'overtake'	—
3. 找	zhǎo	'search for'	—
4. 另	lìng	'another'	—
别	bié	'another'	pjät
5. 不	bù	'not'	pjəu
6. 吃(喫)	chī	'eat'	kjət (khiək)
7. 喝(飲)	hē	'drink'	xât (xâp)
8. 歪(癩)	wāi	'askew'	— (xwai)
9. 余(鑿)	cuān	'parboil'	— (tshuān)
10. 饺(角)	jiǎo	'dumpling'	— (kák)

1. The old word for 'chopstick' is *zhù* (MC *djwo-*), still used in some conservative southern dialects. According to a Ming dynasty work by Lù Róng, the word *zhù* was tabooed on boats because it was homophonous with another word pronounced *zhù* meaning 'stop'; it was replaced by a word of opposite meaning *kuài* '(go) fast'. From here, this taboo replacement has spread to most modern Chinese dialects. For the new meaning of 'chopsticks', a bamboo radical was added to the top of the traditional character meaning 'fast'.<sup>16</sup>

2. The word *gǎn* 'pursue, overtake' is not found in early dictionaries such as the *Guǎngyùn* and *Jiyùn*. It consists of a radical *zǒu* 'to run' and a phonetic pronounced *hàn*.

3. This character apparently first occurs in the Ming dynasty in the sense given here. It consists of two elements, the hand radical on the left and a second component *gē* 'dagger-ax' on the right. It can be explained neither as a *xingshēng* nor as a *huìyì* character; its apparently purely arbitrary nature is a puzzle.

4. The character *lìng* 'another' would appear to be an abbreviation of another word, *bié*, which is very close in meaning.

5. *Bù* is the common negative used before verbs and adjectives. The pronunciation *bù*, however, does not correspond to the Middle Chinese readings found in the *Guǎngyùn*. The reading given in Table 3.6 would regularly yield *\*fōu* or *\*fū* rather than *bù*; but since the character given is the most common negative in classical texts, it has been borrowed to write the corresponding common negative in the modern language. Modern *bù* should go back to a Middle Chinese *\*puət*, which is not attested in the early lexical sources.

6. The very common verb *chī* is written with the character given here, to which it corresponds neither phonologically nor semantically. A Middle Chinese *kjət* would give a modern pronunciation *ji*; in the *Guǎngyùn* this character is glossed as 'to stutter'. In fact the etymology of the modern word *chī* 'to eat' is quite puzzling; it has regular correspondences in a great many dialects (including non-Mandarin dialects), but so far no-one has been able to connect it convincingly to any character in the early dictionaries. The character given in parentheses was formerly used to write the same word, but,

Table 3.7. Dialectal characters

Dialect	Character	Pronunciation	Meaning
1. Sūzhōu	匆	fən <sup>1</sup>	'not yet'
2.	俚	li <sup>1</sup>	'he, she'
3. Fúzhōu	怀	ŋ <sup>6</sup>	'not'
4.	劊	thai <sup>2</sup>	'kill'
5. Guǎngzhōu	唔	m <sup>2</sup>	'not'
6.	劊	thəŋ <sup>1</sup>	'slaughter'

pronounced *ŋ*<sup>2</sup>. (The apparent discrepancy in sound can be explained by two factors: *m*<sup>2</sup> 'not' is the only etymological syllabic *m* in the language; moreover, there has been a tendency in recent times for a number of words pronounced as syllabic *ŋ* to shift to syllabic *m* – the word for 'five', which is pronounced both as *ŋ*<sup>4</sup> and *m*<sup>4</sup>, is an example of this.) The second character for *thəŋ*<sup>1</sup> is, like its Fúzhōu counterpart, a *xingshēng* graph; the left-hand component is pronounced *təŋ*<sup>1</sup>, and the right-hand component is the 'knife' radical.

## Notes to Table 3.6. (cont.)

although it is glossed by the *Guǎngyùn* as meaning 'to eat', it cannot be reconciled phonologically with the modern word *chī*.

7. The character now used to write *hē* 'to drink' is etymologically incorrect; in the *Guǎngyùn* it is defined only as 'to scold, to reprove'. The etymologically correct character is the one in parentheses, defined in the *Guǎngyùn* as 'to drink in large quantity'. It is quite possible that the use of the first character is influenced by *kě* 'thirsty', which contains the same phonetic component.

8. The original character for *wāi* 'askew' (shown in parentheses) is of the *xingshēng* type; it has now been replaced by a later graph consisting of the negative *bù* on top of *zhèng* 'upright'. The phonetic portion of the original character is rather rare and probably unknown to most people; the structure of the later *huìyì* form is immediately clear to anyone even with an elementary knowledge of Chinese characters, and this no doubt accounts for its prevailing over its rival.

9. The verb *cuān*, which means to plunge something into boiling water for a short time to cook it lightly, is now written with this *huìyì* character, which consists of the graph for 'to enter' above the graph for 'water'. It replaces the extraordinarily complex, but etymologically more correct, thirty-two-stroke character shown in parentheses.

10. The character used to write *jiǎozi* 'a sort of boiled, meat-filled dumpling' is written with this *xingshēng* character, which consists of the food radical on the left with a phonetic element *jiāo* on the right. In origin the word *jiǎozi* is nothing more than the word *jiǎo* 'horn' shown in parentheses; *jiǎozi* were originally named for their horn-like shape, but the etymological sense was lost at some point and the need for a new character specifically for this word was felt.

More important than the use of Chinese graphs for writing dialectal words in China is the large-scale adoption of the Chinese writing system in Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Since medieval times, Chinese characters have been the basis of the writing systems in these countries. In all three countries classical Chinese became the official written language, much as Latin was in pre-modern Europe. As long as these foreign peoples used the Chinese script to write literary Chinese no problem arose, but once the idea of writing was introduced, it was only natural for them to want to devise ways of writing their own native languages. There are really only three ways a morphemic script like the Chinese script can be adapted to writing an unrelated language. The graphs can be borrowed to write their semantic analogues; for example, the Chinese graph for *shuǐ* 'water' could be borrowed to write Korean *mül* 'water'. Another way is to use the characters for their sound values alone; in this way the graphs cease being morphemic and become syllabograms. A Chinese character pronounced *ko*, for example, could be employed to write the syllable *ko* in Japanese irrespective of its meaning. A third way would be to fashion new characters using the *xíngshēng* or *huìyì* principles. In actuality all these processes have been employed at one time or another in the three countries where Chinese characters were adopted.

The first two methods were widely used in early Korea and Japan. In Japan the phonetic use of characters to represent syllables eventually resulted in the development of two syllabaries (called *kana* in Japanese) based on simplified forms of Chinese characters. Modern Japanese orthography is a mixed script, employing syllabic writing for grammatical particles and suffixes, and Chinese characters for most nouns and verbs. As a general rule Chinese loanwords (of which there are many thousands) are written with Chinese characters. After the Second World War, the number of Chinese characters to be used was limited by law to a list of 1,850. Words that had formerly been written with characters which were not on this list had to be written in the *kana* syllabaries. In addition to this limitation on the total number of Chinese characters, a number of difficult graphs were simplified in form and put into use. This script reform undoubtedly gave an impetus to the script reforms that were inaugurated in China in the following decade.

Although there would not be any particular difficulty in writing Japanese in an alphabetic system (or even in one of the native syllabaries), and the advantages gained in convenience and speed, especially in this increasingly mechanized and computerized age, would be many, Chinese characters are viewed by a majority of the Japanese as such an integral part of the native culture that there seems to be little likelihood that characters will be abandoned, at least in the foreseeable future (Miller 1967, 134).

The use of Chinese characters has had a rather different fate in the two other countries where they enjoyed official status for many centuries. The native Korean alphabet *hangül*, invented in the fifteenth century, has increasingly come to replace Chinese characters since the Second World War. Before this time, Korean was generally written in a mixed orthography, native Korean words being written in *hangül* and Chinese loanwords in Chinese characters. This mixed style still survives in South Korea. In North Korea, on the other hand, characters have been abandoned altogether and only the Korean alphabet is used; even in South Korea, there appears to be a tendency toward greater use of the native alphabet at the expense of Chinese characters, so at present the prospects for the long-term survival of Chinese characters in Korea are rather doubtful.

In Vietnam, as in Korea and Japan, classical Chinese was the official language of the court and administration up until the present century. Alongside this official scholarly language there developed a sort of popular Vietnamese writing system known as *chữ nôm* which, like the Chinese script, was morphemic, representing each individual morpheme with a separate graph. In some cases Chinese characters were used unchanged either for meaning or for sound; but the majority of graphs in the *chữ nôm* script were newly created characters mostly of the *xíngshēng* type. This adaptation of Chinese writing to the unrelated Vietnamese language never seems to have played an important role in Vietnam. It was an alphabetic system, based on the Latin alphabet, invented by Roman Catholic missionaries in the seventeenth century that was eventually to win out over both character systems; as a result, today almost no-one in Vietnam is able to read *chữ nôm* and very few people (except for some ethnic Chinese) are able to read traditional Chinese characters. The latinized writing system (called *quốc ngữ*) has for all intents and purposes become the only writing system employed to write Vietnamese (Thompson 1965).

Perhaps in the long run Chinese characters will survive only in China itself and in Japan; at least at present in these two countries, there are few signs of any impending reform that would do away with Chinese characters altogether.

### 3.8 Recent developments in the Chinese writing system<sup>17</sup>

The Chinese script has been changing throughout its history; in certain periods like the Qin and Han dynasties it underwent large-scale revision, which gave it a wholly new aspect. From the Tang dynasty down to the beginning of the twentieth century, on the other hand, the official script changed very little. In the Ming and Qing dynasties there developed a very strong conservative attitude toward the writing system which was opposed to virtually any innovation, especially to acceptance of simplified or so-called popular (*súfǎ*) graphic forms. Despite

this generally conservative and non-innovative orientation toward the script from the Tang dynasty on, a large number of popular simplified characters were created and used widely among the common people for writing such things as account books, pawn tickets, medicinal prescriptions, operatic scripts and certain forms of vernacular literature. Even members of the literati employed these non-official but convenient forms in personal correspondence and for copying materials for private use; such characters were strictly banned, however, for any public or official use. As part of the general reform movement of the early twentieth century, the reform and simplification of the traditional script occupied an important place. There was a widespread desire on the part of concerned individuals that the Chinese script should be simplified, and it was felt that one of the most practical ways to effect this was to accept the many simplified characters already current as official forms suitable for use in printing. In 1935 the Nationalist government actually promulgated a list of 324 simplified characters for official use but, due to conservative opposition, support for the reform was withdrawn in the following year. After 1949, the government of the People's Republic of China took a strong stand in favor of script reform; this culminated in the issuance of a list of 515 simplified characters in 1956 (Chén 1956). This list contained many simplified forms which had been in unofficial use for many centuries, and at the same time a number of newly created abbreviated forms were introduced. In the previous year, the government had decreed that henceforth Chinese should be written horizontally from left to right on the model of European languages, thus bringing to an end the old pattern of vertical writing starting on the right-hand side of the page. (In practice, classical literature, history and some modern works on historical and archeological topics are still printed in the old way.)

In 1964 a further list of more than 2,000 simplified characters, many of them resulting from the simplification of common radicals and phonetic components, was put into effect. While this process of script reform was probably not as drastic as the switch from seal script to the clerical script in the Han dynasty, it does represent a thoroughgoing reformation of the way in which Chinese is written.

Ten simplified characters currently in official use, along with their former non-simplified forms, are given in Table 3.8. In the notes to the table, the various principles employed in their formation are explained.<sup>18</sup>

At the present time in China one can observe a large number of simplified characters in widespread use which have still not received official approval. They are widely used in personal correspondence; they may also be observed on street signs, wall slogans, and in various kinds of handwritten materials. A few of these unofficial but commonly used characters are shown in Table 3.9. Full forms of characters are shown in parentheses after the simplified forms.

Table 3.8. Structure of simplified characters

1. 云(雲)	yún 'cloud'	6. 洁(潔)	jié 'clean'
2. 礼(禮)	lǐ 'ritual'	7. 里(裏)	lǐ 'inside'
3. 后(後)	hòu 'behind'	8. 扑(撲)	pū 'pounce'
4. 医(醫)	yī 'doctor'	9. 历(歷)	lì 'undergo'
5. 门(門)	mén 'door'	10. 让(讓)	ràng 'allow'

1. The simplified character is actually the original character for 'cloud'. Very early it was borrowed to write a homophonous word *yún* 'to say'; to keep the two graphs distinct, a 'rain' radical was added to the top of the original graph to form a new unambiguous graph for 'cloud'. In Modern Chinese the old word for 'to say' is obsolete, so the graph can be restored to its original use.

2. Both characters, the simplified and complex forms, have existed from ancient times; both forms are given, for example, in the *Shuōwén jiězì* where the simpler form is already identified as the "ancient (*gǔwén*) form"! The more complex form has been eliminated in favor of the simpler one.

3. The simplified character usually has the meaning of 'empress'; it has been homophonous with the word for 'behind' as far back as we know; moreover, there are already examples of the simpler form being used in the *Liji* (*The Book of Rites*) which is a Han dynasty compilation. The use of the simplified character is based on this and other ancient precedents.

4. The simpler form makes official a character already well established in popular usage. The simplified graph occurs in the *Suōwén jiězì* in the meaning of 'quiver'. Some scholars have suggested that it may also have been used for the pouch in which doctors carried acupuncture materials, but there is no real evidence for such a view.

5. The simplified form of *mén* 'door' is based on its cursive form. A fairly large number of modern simplified graphs have been created by regularizing cursive forms for use in printing.

6. This is a newly created *xingshēng* character; it consists of the 'water' radical on the left and a phonetic element on the right. The right-hand element, when pronounced alone, is *ji*, but is pronounced *jié* when it occurs in the common word *jié* 'to connect'; the latter character differs from *jié* 'clean' only in having the 'silk' radical on the left.

7. The less complex form originally means 'a Chinese mile' (about one third of an English mile); it is homophonous with the word for 'inside'. The substitution of *lì* 'mile' for *lǐ* 'inside' can already be found in many pre-modern novels. This is a case of a simplified character being identical with an already existing character still in common use; the difference in meaning and the different contexts in which the two words are likely to occur will normally ensure that no confusion will result.

8. These two characters were originally homophonous; the first means 'to pounce on, to attack' whereas the second one is glossed as 'to hit lightly'. It seems likely that the two characters were originally a single morpheme, so the simpler graph has been retained for both meanings.

9. The new form for *lì* 'undergo' represents the official adoption of a popular graph already well established in usage. The simplified form is a *xingshēng* character with the graph *lì* 'strength' (written inside the 'cliff' radical) as its phonetic.

Table 3.9. Unofficial simplified characters

1. 爿 (餐)	cān 'meal'	6. 初 (稻)	dào 'rice plant'
2. 尸 (展)	zhǎn 'unfold'	7. 袪 (褲)	kù 'trousers'
3. 攵 (信)	xìn 'letter'	8. 洵 (酒)	jiǔ 'wine'
4. 鞋 (鞋)	xié 'shoe'	9. 付 (副)	fù 'deputy'
5. 宀 (家)	jiā 'home'	10. 廼 (建)	jiàn 'construct'

There have been several movements in China in the twentieth century which have advocated the out-and-out abolition of the traditional script and its replacement with some sort of alphabetic writing (see section 10.4). Although some minor steps have been taken in this direction, the position of Chinese characters in Chinese society seems scarcely to have been shaken. Perhaps they play such an important role in Chinese cultural identity that it would take an almost super-human effort to dislodge them after almost 4,000 years of hegemony.

#### Further reading

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- Lǐ Xiàodíng 1977. *Hànzì shǔhuà*. Taipei: Liánjīng Chūbǎn Shìyè Gōngsī. [A general introduction to the origin and development of the Chinese script.]
- Lǐ Xuéqín 1985. *Gǔ wénzì xué chūjǐè*. Peking: Zhōnghuá Shūjú. [An excellent guide to recent developments in Chinese epigraphy.]
- Liáng Dōnghàn 1959. *Hànzì de jiégòu jí qí liúbiàn*. Shanghai: Jiàoyù Chūbǎnshè. [A useful general discussion of all aspects of the Chinese writing system.]

#### Notes to Table 3.8. (cont.)

10. The simplified form of *ràng* 'to allow' illustrates several interesting points. First of all, it is a newly created *xíngshēng* character consisting of the 'speech' radical on the left and a phonetic element on the right. The radical itself is a simplified component based on its cursive form, and is used in its simplified form whenever it occurs as the left-hand component in a character. The phonetic, pronounced *shàng*, is at first sight rather puzzling, since the alternation of words beginning with *sh* and *r* in a single phonetic series is unusual. The explanation for this rather odd usage probably lies in the character's dialectal origin; in certain Wú dialects the literary readings of *ràng* and *shàng* are the same. (In the Sūzhoū dialect, for example, both are pronounced *zay*<sup>6</sup>.) Although this particular simplified character is probably of regional origin, its extreme simplicity no doubt led to its being adopted in other regions of China, and finally to its acceptance as an officially sanctioned simplified character.