

The Story of Chinese Characters

One of the things that connects Chinese people together is their ancient writing system. Chinese characters are not pictures, but they usually contain several different elements that work together to tell a story, giving the characters their meaning. Learn how this writing system developed, and the history of Chinese writing from the past to the present.

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STANFORD HOUSE

史丹福書屋

Room: 611-612, 6/F, Citimark, Shatin, H.K.
Tel: +852 2330 2533 Fax: +852 2330 3598
Email: info@stanfordhouse.com.hk
Website: www.stanfordhouse.com.hk



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Before You Read

This story is about the country of China, its writing system, *hanzi* (sinographs), and the effect *hanzi* has had on Chinese civilization.



A. Evolution of Chinese Characters. This table shows how Chinese characters have evolved over the centuries. Look at the table and the photos in this reader. Then answer the questions below.

Style	Meaning				
	mountain	water	horse	tortoise ¹	dragon
Oracle ² bone script	𠩺	𠩺	𠩺	𠩺	𠩺
Seal script	𠩺	𠩺	𠩺	𠩺	𠩺
Clerical ³ script	山	水	馬	龜	龍
Cursive script	𠩺	𠩺	𠩺	𠩺	𠩺
Semi- cursive ⁴ script	山	水	馬	龜	龍
Regular script	山	水	馬	龜	龍

1. What are some differences between how the characters were written long ago and how they are written today?
2. Why might the characters have changed over the centuries?
3. What do you think are some of the difficulties with learning Chinese characters?

¹tortoise: a reptile with a hard round shell
²oracle: information or advice about the future
³clerical: connected with office work
⁴cursive: writing with the strokes joined together

B. An Introduction to Chinese Calligraphy. Read the paragraphs. Then complete each definition with the correct word.

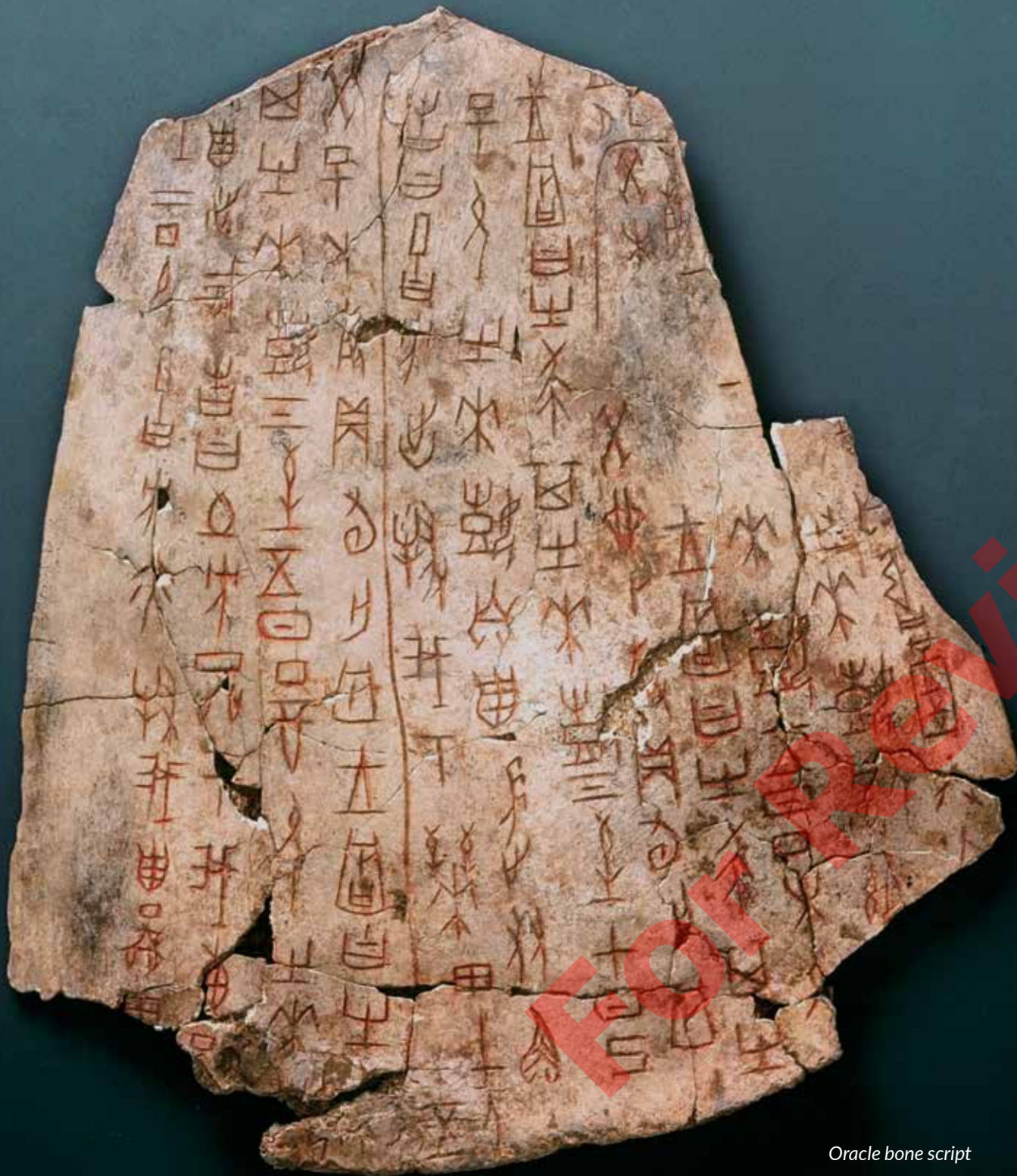


Calligraphy⁵ has always had an important place in Chinese society because traditionally it has been considered as one tool for cultivating the mind. Before trying out Chinese calligraphy, you should gather the proper materials. For a beginner, all you really need is a calligraphy brush, calligraphy paper, an inkstick, and an ink stone. If you are new to Chinese characters, then you should find a good model of a character to reproduce. In China, the character 永 [yǒng], which means “forever,” is often used to teach children the basics of good writing. This is because it has all the common strokes that are used when writing Chinese characters.

With writing the character 永, you begin with the top dot stroke. Dipping your brush in ink, make a short graceful stroke at the top of the paper. Now you want to write the longest stroke, applying appropriate pressure throughout the stroke. You begin with a short horizontal stroke, and just below the dot make a long stroke right down the center of the paper. Finish this with a “hook” stroke that begins from the end of the vertical stroke, and quickly flicks up towards the left, removing the pressure from the brush rather quickly as you go along. Then, beginning from the left side write a raised stroke that starts from the left and goes upwards to the right, then finish with a “throw away” stroke that goes sharply out to the left again in a downward motion, with the pressure easing on your brush as you go out. Then on the right-side, write a short “throw away” stroke that starts on the right and goes downwards sharply toward the vertical stroke you wrote earlier. Finally, write the “pressing forcefully” stroke that starts at the left-hand tip of the downward stroke you wrote earlier, and comes sharply down, with more pressure added along the way, ending thickly. In order to make sure that the strokes have the proper lengths and the character has the correct balance, when practicing many students write the *hanzi* on a cross **grid**.⁶

1. A person who has a “c_____” mind is someone who has a high level of education and shows good manners.
2. When you r_____ something, you copy it.
3. Something or someone who is g_____ has beauty in motion and style.

⁵calligraphy: the art of producing beautiful handwriting
⁶grid: a pattern of straight lines that cross each other and form squares



Oracle bone script

One of the earliest forms of writing which is still being used today is Chinese characters, or *hanzi* (“Han characters”). According to legend, *hanzi* were invented under order from the Yellow Emperor by Cangjie, a man with four eyes who could see everything in the universe. Like many great creative people, Cangjie faced a mental block when he first set out to create this new system of writing. However, as he was thinking about the problem, he saw a few lines impressed on the ground—animal tracks. He asked a hunter about the tracks, and the hunter replied that by identifying the tracks one could identify the animal. This led to Cangjie’s idea of basing the writing system on using a few lines to identify each thing, just as an animal can be identified by the few lines of its tracks.



Within no time at all, he had compiled a list of characters. The Yellow Emperor was so impressed with the system that he ordered all his deputies to learn it. Meanwhile, as the story goes, the evil spirits cried at night, because they knew then that with the development of writing they could no longer trick humans, and humans now had the keys to knowledge and growth. The gods, however, celebrated the achievement by raining grain from the skies. Like the Yellow Emperor, Cangjie was probably a mythical person, though there may indeed be a historical figure hiding behind him in the shadows. And just as Cangjie could be a myth, this story of how the *hanzi* were created is also a myth, though there may be a grain of truth to it, in that the *hanzi* were created by people observing the world around them and drawing what they saw.

There are two separate periods in the evolution of Chinese characters. The first was the ancient period, when *hanzi* began to be used for oracle bone inscriptions⁷ during the Shang Dynasty⁸ (1600–1046 BCE). Oracle bones were used to record historical events and as a form of fortune telling. For this latter usage, a fortune teller would drill⁹ some small pits on a tortoise shell or animal bone, and then heat it, until it cracked. The fortune teller would study the cracks and make predictions. This prediction, along with the issue and the result, in many cases would be cut into, or sometimes written on the shell or bone. However, while the purpose of these oracle bones is often given as “fortune telling,” these inscriptions were not always fortunes as we think of them, but seem to have served some sort of ritual¹⁰ purpose for the state. The oracle bone characters are the oldest *hanzi* known so far, though this already quite sophisticated writing system indicates an earlier development period. Cut into a bone or shell, they tended to be rather rough and simple pictograms¹¹ without many rounded corners. For example, the symbol

for “eye” was 目 and the symbol for “child” was 子.

⁷inscription: words cut in stone or metal

⁸dynasty: a period of time when members of the same family rule a country

⁹drill: to make a hole in some material

¹⁰ritual: of actions regularly performed as part of a ceremony

¹¹pictogram: a picture representing a word or phrase (also known as pictograph)

The next stage in the development of the *hanzi* was its use on bronze ware from the 11th to the 3rd centuries BCE. Bronze objects of that time were created by making a model of the object they wished to make. Clay was packed around this model, and the model and the **mold**¹² were then cut apart and separated, allowing for the mold to be easily put back together to cast the bronze. Given the way the mold was made, it was comparatively easy to recreate beautiful and complex *hanzi* in bronze—if the artists wanted to, they could just take a stick and write the pictograms into the soft clay.

Tens of thousands of bronze pieces have survived from ancient China, and over 4,000 of them have some writing on their surface, giving us a fairly clear picture of the development of writing in China after the oracle bone stage. What this picture shows is that there was not one Chinese script, but there were several regional varieties. There was so much variation to Chinese characters that it would have been difficult for someone from one region to read another region's script. In the early bronze script stage, many of the characters looked like oracle bone characters, but with thicker and more rounded lines. However, over time the characters were gradually made more uniform and simplified, using thinner strokes. For example, in early bronze script, “elephant” is 象, while in later bronze script it is 𠩺.

The final stage of the development of *hanzi* during the ancient period was the seal script, which were simplified versions of the characters used in bronze script. The term “seal script” refers to its frequent use on seals and in official documents, though it was not always used as such. In many cases of seal script, parts of the earlier characters were simply omitted. For example, the word for “carriage” was transformed from 𨋖 to 車. In other cases, some of the **radicals**¹³ used in the *hanzi* were combined. As with the bronze script, every state had its own variation of characters which often could not be read by outsiders.

¹²**mold**: a hollow form into which materials are put to shape objects

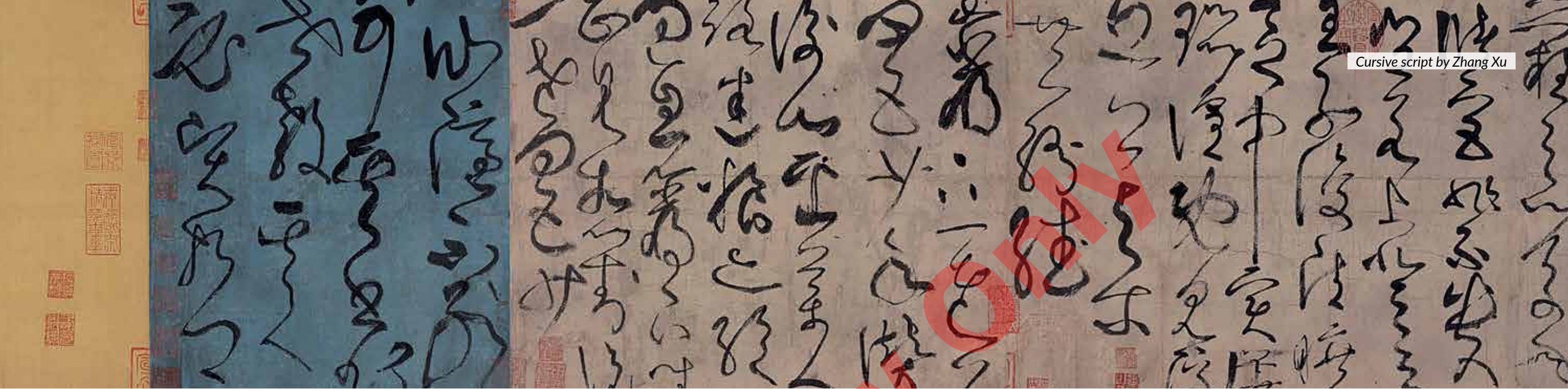
¹³**radical**: an element of a word

Bronze script



Fact Check

1. When did *hanzi* probably first start to appear?
2. How can oracle bone inscriptions be described?
3. How many bronze pieces from ancient China have been found with *hanzi* written on them?



Cursive script by Zhang Xu



Small seal script by Li Si



Clerical script of the Han Dynasty



Regular script by Ouyang Xun



Semi-cursive script by Su Shi

In 221 BCE, Emperor Qin Shihuang (259–210 BCE) brought China together as a unified country. A standard character set was put forward nationwide, i.e. the small seal script. His prime minister Li Si created the *Cangjiejian* with the help of Zhao Gao and Huwu Jing. It gave a list of the approved Chinese characters and provided a model for how small seal script should be written. With updates and expansions, the *Cangjiejian* became the standard reference work for small seal script for hundreds of years. Even though the Qin Dynasty only lasted until 206 BCE, this one change probably did more to bring China together than anything else Qin Shihuang may have accomplished. The Chinese people still have many different **dialects**¹⁴ of the Chinese language, but now they were able to at least read and understand the same written texts. This is still true today, as there are many dialects of Chinese spoken in the country that all use the same Chinese characters. *Hanzi* is thus one of the things that helps unite the Chinese people.

Using small seal script as a model, government clerks in the Qin Dynasty developed the clerical script, which marked the beginning of the modern period of *hanzi*. This differs from the small seal script in that it is even more simplified, sometimes by combining or changing a radical, so the characters could fit into

a square. For example, the character for “want” was changed from 𠂔 to 要. With this change, the characters finally began to look like their modern forms.

In the years that followed, two more styles of script were developed which are both commonly used in calligraphy today. The first is cursive script, in which the calligrapher may write several strokes of a character or even several characters in a row without lifting the brush from the paper. Even with a familiarity of *hanzi*, such calligraphy may be difficult or even impossible to read unless one is taught how. The second is semi-cursive script. Here, the writing is fluid and quick, but the individual strokes are often recognizable if you are familiar with clerical script.

While many of the characters in the clerical and semi-cursive scripts look a lot like the modern *hanzi* most people use today, they are not quite the same. The *hanzi* did not begin to reach their final form until the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220), when the regular script came into being. Some say it was developed from clerical and semi-cursive scripts, while others hold that they influenced each other during their development. Whatever the case, it took some time before the regular script was universally used and accepted throughout China, and it has also seen continued development in the centuries since then. To date, regular script is the traditional style of *hanzi* widely used in modern life.

¹⁴ **dialect:** a regional variety of a language differing from other varieties in pronunciation, grammar, or word usage

A. Multiple Choice. Answer the questions below by choosing **A**, **B**, **C**, or **D**.

1. What does the passage probably mean when it says that “there may indeed be a historical figure hiding behind [Cangjie] in the shadows”?
A. There may have been another historical person who came before Cangjie.
B. Cangjie may be based on a historical person we know little about.
C. The Yellow Emperor may have been hiding behind Cangjie.
D. Cangjie was a real figure from history who did exactly what was in the story.
2. What was Li Si’s contribution to the development of *hanzi*?
A. He made sure that everyone was using the small seal script for calligraphy.
B. He created the first Chinese dictionary.
C. People copied his calligraphic style.
D. He helped create a standard character set for China.
3. Why are pictograms sometimes not practical for use in a writing system?
A. They cannot convey abstract ideas very well.
B. They are quite complicated and difficult to write.
C. They should be cut into tortoise shells or animal bones.
D. Most people no longer remember their meanings.
4. How can we find examples of Wang Xizhi’s calligraphy today?
A. We can see it on old monuments and coins.
B. It was reproduced by other calligraphers.
C. Examples of it can be found on old paintings.
D. We can go to museums and see what he actually wrote with his own hand.
5. How did Ouyang Xun historically have a strong impact on calligraphy in Asia?
A. His calligraphy was used on monuments that everyone could see.
B. He helped make regular script the standard script.
C. His work survived while the work of many others did not.
D. His calligraphy was used on the coins.

B. Guess the Meaning. Try to guess the meaning of each character based upon its elements. Choose the words from the box to fill in the blanks.

grasshopper to rush in ripple to stop bad to run after

1. 亻 “person” + 亭 “pavilion” = 停 “_____”
2. 氵 (水) “water” + 美 “beautiful” = 漾 “_____”
3. 门 “door” + 马 “horse” = 闯 “_____”
4. 虫 “insect” + 乍 “suddenly” = 蚱 “_____”
5. 辶 (走) “go” + 豕 “pig” = 逐 “_____”
6. 少 “lack” + 力 “strength” = 劣 “_____”

C. Answer the Questions. Use information from the passage to answer the questions below.

1. Many students make up stories like this to help remember the *hanzi*. For example, they might say that when you combine the “sun” (日) and “moon” (月) together, they become extra “bright” (明). Make up some stories about the *hanzi* in activity B, and see if it helps you remember them.
2. Give an example of how another country changed *hanzi* to better fit their own language. Why do you think this was necessary to do?
3. For what reason are calligraphy and paintings normally paired together? Why do you think they help to form a “complete” work of art?

The Four Treasures of the Study

Track 2

In ancient China, a study necessarily meant reading and writing *hanzi*, whether it was to take notes, produce essays, create a painting, or to practice calligraphy. In this regard, there were four necessary tools which no student could ever afford to be without, which were called the Four Treasures of the Study.

The first is the inkstick, which is made by mixing soot or charcoal with some sort of paste. Sometimes incense or spices are added as a preservative and to make the inkstick smell nice. This mixture is then pressed into a mold and allowed to dry and become hard. Traditional inksticks are always black.

The inkstick is useless without the second tool, the inkstone. An inkstone can be made of just about any kind of material, including metal, although actual stone is the most popular. The stone should be somewhat flat and small enough to fit comfortably on a desk. Cut into the top of the stone is a smooth, flat inkwell. To use an inkstone, an inkstick is ground

into the inkwell with water to produce a liquid. The amount of water and ink can be adjusted to produce different shades of gray for ink-wash paintings. Many of these inkstones are highly decorated and considered works of art.

A good brush is the next tool. These often have handles of wood, and nearly always use real animal hair for the brush itself. For calligraphy, the tip of the brush is often cone shaped. This allows the brush to be used both to draw very fine, delicate details, and wide, bold lines, depending upon how much pressure is applied.

The final treasure is paper. The most famous paper used for writing *hanzi* is Xuan paper, which is produced in Anhui Province, China, and which has a reputation for being able to last 1,000 years. This paper is loved because it is strong and smooth, and easily holds the ink. While it is not necessary to use Xuan paper for writing *hanzi*, whatever paper is used should be able to absorb the ink without blurring the words, while allowing the calligrapher to write quickly and fluidly.

While these Four Treasures of the Study have been replaced by more modern tools for today's students, they are still integral for anyone who seriously wants to practice calligraphy.



Word Count: 388
Time: _____