

# Exploring the Characteristics of Chinese Ancient Inscriptions: A Chen's Theory Perspective

Wang Sai, Elis Mokhtar, Norakmal binti Abdullah, Tang Tsiao Yin

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i2/21532>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i2/21532

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**Published Online:** 17 May 2024

## Abstract

The exploration of Chinese ancient inscriptions is crucial for understanding the historical, cultural, and artistic legacy of China. This research delves into the characteristics of these inscriptions through the lens of Chen's Theory of Chinese Calligraphy, which emphasizes five key aspects: handwriting information, verve information, strength information, implication information, and information regarding admiration for ancient times. Utilizing a combination of literature review and visual analysis, the study meticulously examines selected inscriptions to uncover their unique attributes. The methodology involves a systematic review of existing literature on Chinese calligraphy, complemented by a visual analysis of selected ancient inscriptions. This dual approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the inscriptions' artistic and cultural significance. The major findings highlight the intricate craftsmanship, expressive power, and cultural depth embedded in Chinese calligraphy, as well as the influence of historical admiration on the development of calligraphic styles. The study's results not only enrich our appreciation for Chinese calligraphic tradition but also provide a foundation for future research. Potential areas for further investigation include exploring the intersections between calligraphy and other traditional Chinese arts such as painting and seal carving, as well as the application of modern technologies like digital tools and virtual reality for analyzing and preserving ancient inscriptions. Additionally, comparative studies between Chinese calligraphy and other global calligraphic traditions could promote cross-cultural exchange and deeper appreciation. Understanding these characteristics is vital for scholars and enthusiasts alike, as it deepens their connection to the artistry and cultural richness of Chinese calligraphy, thereby enhancing their overall comprehension of Chinese culture and history.

**Keywords:** Chinese Ancient Inscriptions, Chinese Calligraphy, Cultural Heritage, Chen's Theory, Traditional Chinese Arts

## Introduction

The ancient inscriptions style holds a revered place in the annals of Chinese calligraphy, representing one of its earliest forms and a vital component of China's cultural heritage (Wei & Long, 2021). Despite being less prevalent in contemporary practice compared to other calligraphic styles, ancient inscriptions are revered for their historical significance and aesthetic allure (Matsumoto & Okada, 2021). Originating over four millennia ago, the earliest

Chinese writings were etched onto oracle bones during the Shang Dynasty for divination purposes (Liu et al., 2021). Over time, calligraphy evolved into various styles, including seal script, clerical script, regular script, running script, and cursive script, each characterized by distinct features and purposes (Huang et al., 2023). Renowned calligraphers like Wang Xizhi during the Eastern Jin Dynasty elevated calligraphy to an art form, with his regular script serving as a pinnacle of Chinese calligraphic achievement (Halperin, 2020).

In this study, the researcher explores the characteristics of Chinese ancient inscriptions through the perspective of (Chen's Theory of Chinese Calligraphy, 2022). Chen's theoretical framework, deeply rooted in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics, emphasizes the concept of 'Qi' as the essence of calligraphic expression (Chen, 2022). 'Qi' embodies the vitality and spirit infused within calligraphic lines, influencing the overall quality and artistic merit of the works. Handwriting information, verve information, strength information, implication information, and information regarding admiration for ancient times are among the important information encapsulated within 'Qi,' shaping the distinct character of calligraphers and their creations (Chen, 2022). Through a meticulous analysis guided by Chen's theory, the researcher aims to uncover the intrinsic characteristics that define Chinese ancient inscriptions and elucidate their enduring significance in contemporary calligraphic practice.

Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of Chinese calligraphy is essential to unravelling the characteristics of ancient inscriptions and their application in contemporary contexts. Chen's Theory provides a comprehensive framework for discerning the characteristics of calligraphic lines and the philosophical principles that underpin their creation. By applying this theoretical lens, the researcher seeks to identify and elucidate the characteristic embedded within Chinese ancient inscriptions and explore how these characteristics manifest in contemporary calligraphy. Through this study, the researcher aims to shed light on the enduring legacy of Chinese calligraphic tradition and its continued relevance in shaping artistic expression in the present day.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this article draws upon Chen's Theory of Chinese Calligraphy (2022), which provides a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics and aesthetic principles underlying Chinese calligraphic expression. According to Chen (2022), several types of information (as shown in Figure 1) contribute to the quality and aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy, each playing a distinct role in shaping the visual impact and artistic merit of the works.

First, handwriting information pertains to the visual vigour and energy conveyed through brushstrokes, encompassing elements such as transition forms, shading, and pressure. Kang Youwei emphasized the significance of handwriting power, highlighting its role in measuring skill and mastery in calligraphy (Shi, 2023). Verve information emphasizes the mood and sentiments evoked by the characters, transcending mere form to imbue calligraphy with emotional depth and individual expression. Calligraphers like Li Zhiyi underscored the importance of infusing works with spirits and emotions, enhancing resonance with the viewer (Li, 2023). Strength information focuses on the balance and contrast between strong and weak brushstrokes, conveying energy, dynamism, and visual impact (Clarke, 2019). Different styles of calligraphy are defined by the interplay of bold and delicate strokes, contributing to

the overall aesthetic appeal of the work. Implication information delves into the underlying meanings and ideas conveyed by the calligrapher, going beyond surface appearances to explore deeper layers of textual content (Chen, 2022). This aspect enables viewers to connect with the intellectual and philosophical dimensions of the work. Information regarding admiration for ancient times reflects the calligrapher's reverence for tradition and artistic heritage. By studying and emulating the styles of the past, calligraphers maintain a connection with the rich legacy of Chinese calligraphy, enhancing the authenticity and depth of their creations.

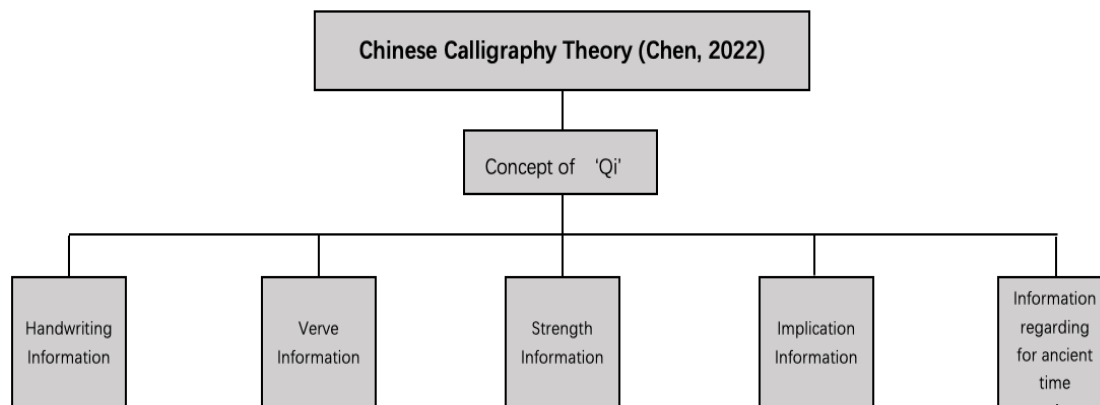


Figure 1. Chinese Calligraphy Theory by Chen (2020)

### Methodology

The methodology for this article employs a multi-faceted approach to explore the characteristics of Chinese ancient inscriptions based on Chen's theory of Chinese calligraphy. Firstly, selection criteria for ancient inscriptions are established to ensure the inclusion of diverse and representative samples. Ancient inscriptions are chosen based on their historical significance, artistic merit, and relevance to the study's objectives. This process involves meticulous examination and evaluation of existing literature and archival materials to identify suitable candidates for visual analysis.

Secondly, an analytical approach grounded in Chen's Theory is adopted to dissect and interpret the selected ancient inscriptions. Chen's theoretical framework provides a structured lens through which the characteristics of Chinese calligraphy can be systematically analysed. Drawing upon concepts such as handwriting information, verve information, strength information, implication information, and information regarding admiration for ancient times, the visual analysis delves into the characteristics of brushwork, composition, and aesthetic expression embodied in the inscriptions.

Results from the literature review and visual analysis serve as the foundation for uncovering the characteristics of Chinese ancient inscriptions. Through a synthesis of scholarly discourse and hands-on examination, the study clarifies the distinctive characteristics and cultural significance embedded in these historical artifacts. By juxtaposing theoretical insights with empirical observations, the research endeavours to provide a comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic principles and artistic conventions that underpin Chinese calligraphic tradition.

Furthermore, the findings derived from this methodology contribute to the broader discourse on Chinese calligraphy and its evolution over time. By illuminating the enduring legacy of ancient inscriptions and their continued influence on contemporary calligraphic practice, the study sheds light on the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in Chinese cultural heritage.

## Findings and Discussions

### *Characteristics of Chinese Ancient Inscriptions*

#### Handwriting Information

The first characteristic of Chinese ancient inscriptions by Chen is handwriting information, which delves into the intricate interplay between angular and circular brushwork, revealing a rich tapestry of artistic expression and cultural significance (Huang et al., 2019). Angular strokes (as shown in Figure 2) impart distinct characteristics to the script, emphasizing precision, regularity, and orderliness. These strokes contribute to a disciplined aesthetic, ensuring consistency and accuracy in character forms (Huang et al., 2023). Through meticulous planning and execution, writers achieve a neat and balanced appearance, enhancing the visual appeal of the script. Huang et al (2023) suggested that angular brushwork is commonly linked to traditional calligraphy styles such as regular script and running script. They proposed that this style represents a significant element of cultural heritage, conveying both cultural value and historical significance.

On the other hand, circular strokes (as shown in Figure 3) in calligraphy offers a contrasting aesthetic, characterized by smooth and continuous lines that evoke softness, elegance, and harmony (Peng, 2020). The gentle curves and arches produced by circular brushwork enhance the beauty of character forms, mimicking natural elements like landscapes and flowers. Circular brushwork is often used in cursive styles and semi-cursive scripts, emphasizing fluidity and emotional expression. By adjusting the brush pressure, calligraphers can introduce variations in line thickness, creating visual contrasts and dynamism within the artwork (Tsuda et al., 2017). Circular brushwork conveys emotions of tranquillity, warmth, and emotional richness, making it suitable for poetic or lyrical calligraphy works. Overall, angular and circular brushwork serve distinct purposes in calligraphy, providing diverse possibilities for artistic expression and emotional communication.

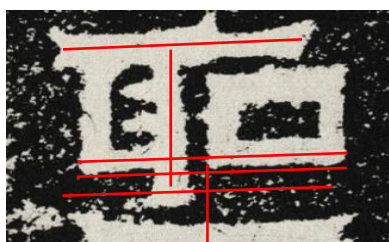


Figure 2 (part)

The example of angular brushwork

“Cuan Bao Zi” (part)



Figure 3 (part)

The example of circular brushwork

“Running Script Seven-Character Poem Scroll”(part)

#### Information

The second characteristic of Chinese ancient inscriptions by Chen is verve information. It explores the dynamic energy and expressive flair embedded within the strokes of calligraphic artistry, unveiling a captivating narrative of cultural identity and aesthetic mastery (Shi, 2017).

Hanchen (2021) asserted that in Chinese calligraphy, the spirits and feelings of words resonate deeply, infusing each stroke with a profound emotional essence that transcends mere visual representation. This verve, or vitality, imbues the artwork with a dynamic energy that amplifies the emotional impact of the characters. From expressions of sadness and grief to moments of joy and elation, and even manifestations of anger and indignation, calligraphers adeptly convey a spectrum of emotions through their brushwork. Figures such as the "Commemorate Nephew Script" by Yan Zhenqing (as shown in Figure 4) encapsulate the depths of sorrow and loss, where each stroke mirrors the calligrapher's emotional turmoil, from hesitant beginnings to unrestrained outpourings of grief. Conversely, works like Wang Xizhi's "Lanting Xu" (as shown in Figure 5) radiate with the infectious joy of camaraderie and celebration, with brushstrokes flowing harmoniously like the laughter of friends. Meanwhile, pieces like Huang Tingjian's "Fan Pang Zhuan" (as shown in Figure 6) capture the fiery intensity of anger and defiance, where each character brims with indignation and resolve. Through their mastery of calligraphy and the infusion of verve, artists breathe life into words, allowing viewers to not only read but also feel the emotions coursing through the ink-stained pages, creating a timeless connection between the creator, the artwork, and the observer.



Figure 4

The example of sadness of Spirits and Feeling of the Words characteristic

“Commemorate Nephew Script” (part)

Yan Zhenqing

Tang Dynasty

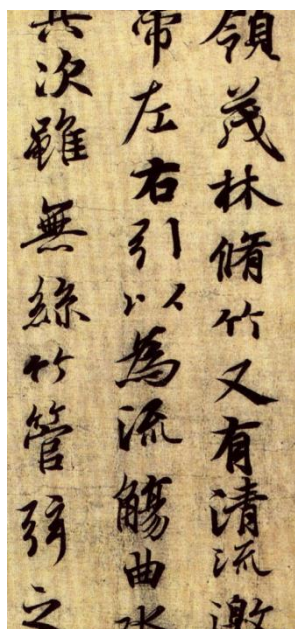


Figure 5

The example of joy of Spirits and feeling of the Words characteristic

“Lanting Xu” (part)

Wang Xizhi (303-361 AD)

The Eastern Jin Dynasty

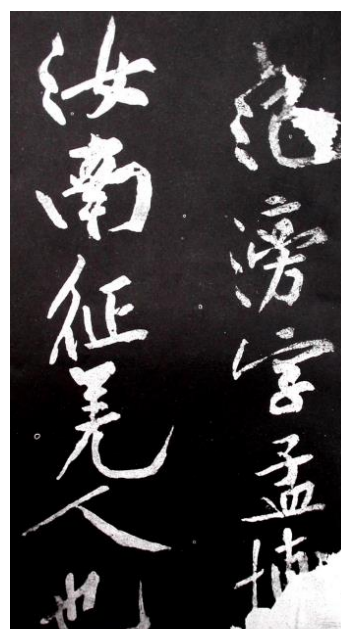


Figure 6

The example of anger of spirits and feeling of the Words characteristic

“Fan Pang Zhuan” (part)

Huang Tingjian (1045-1105)

Northern Song Dynasty

### Strength Information

Next, the third characteristic of Chinese ancient inscriptions is strength information, which examines the boldness and power conveyed through the strokes of calligraphic expression. Strength in Chinese calligraphy manifests through an interplay between strong and weak

brushstrokes, each contributing to the overall dynamism and expressiveness of the artwork (Escande, 2021; Pang, 2023). Strong brushstrokes (as shown in Figure 7) convey vigor and intensity, imbuing specific characters with vitality and commanding attention. These bold strokes add a sense of power and presence to the composition, enhancing its visual impact. Conversely, weak brushstrokes (as shown in Figure 8) contribute subtlety and grace, weaving delicate nuances into the calligraphy and enriching its texture. This contrast between strong and weak elements creates a harmonious balance, enriching the visual experience and showcasing the versatility of the calligrapher's skill. Similarly, the pace of writing, whether slow or urgent, influences the emotional resonance of the artwork. Slow writing (as shown in Figure 9) imparts a tranquil aesthetic beauty, characterized by smooth, steady, and profound strokes that invite contemplation and reflection. In contrast, urgent writing (as shown in Figure 10) emphasizes strong, dynamic strokes and a sense of urgency, reflecting the author's inner passion and impulsiveness. This dichotomy between slow and urgent writing styles adds depth and dimension to Chinese calligraphy, allowing for a rich exploration of emotion and expression (Höllmann, 2017).



Figure 7

The example of strong brushstrokes of strength information characteristic

“Confer office upon oneself Script” (part)



Figure 8

The example of praises of weak of strength information characteristic

“Yin Fu scriptures” (part)

Chu Suiliang (531-582)

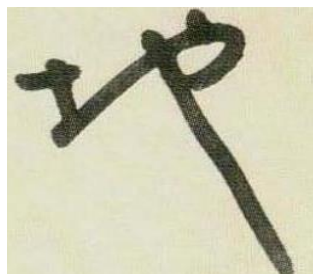


Figure 9

The example of slow of strength information characteristic

“Cursive Script - Tang Gengwei's Inscription on Wang Wei's Former Residence at Qingyuan Temple” (part)

Zhu Da (Approximately 1626-Approximately 1705)

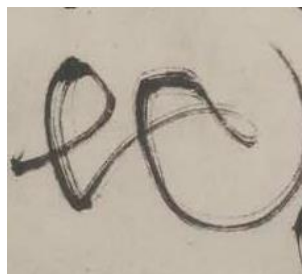


Figure 10

The example of urgent of strength information characteristic

“Du Fu's Eight Poems on Autumnal Sentiments, Scroll” (part)

Meanwhile, in implication information, autobiographical calligraphy pieces (as shown in Figure 11 and Figure 12) delve deep into the personal experiences and emotions of the calligrapher, offering a profound insight into their inner world (Pan et al., 2020). Typically written from a first-person perspective, these works are rich in emotions and individuality, reflecting the calligrapher's unique journey of life. Through brushwork, stroke techniques, and ink shades, calligraphers convey a myriad of feelings, from joyous triumphs to poignant

sorrows (Yifan, 2023). Each stroke carries the weight of memories and significant life events, creating a narrative that unfolds gracefully across the page. Autobiographical calligraphy pieces often incorporate illustrations or decorative elements that complement the storytelling, enhancing both the visual appeal and emotional resonance of the work (Ringel, 2021). Through these masterfully crafted pieces, viewers are invited to embark on a journey through the calligrapher's past, experiencing their joys, struggles, and moments of introspection with each stroke of the brush.

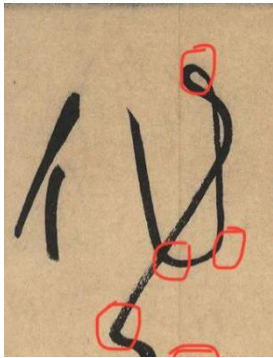


Figure 11

The example of circular movements of autobiography characteristic

“Zi Xu Tie” (part)

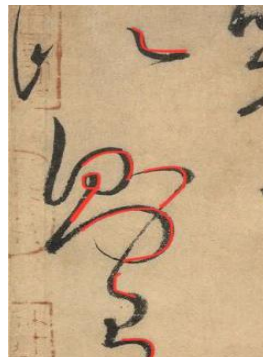


Figure 11 (part)

The example of circular movements of autobiography characteristic

“Zi Xu Tie” (part)

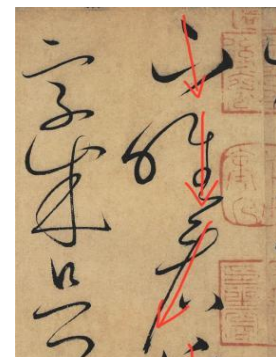
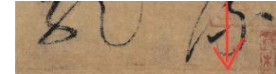


Figure 12

The example of balanced and upright of autobiography characteristic

“Zi Xu Tie” (part)



### Information Regarding Admiration for Ancient Times

The admiration for ancient times, as highlighted by Chen, is deeply embedded in the characteristics of various Chinese ancient inscriptions. This reverence is particularly evident in the Han Dynasty Seal Script (as shown in Figure 13), characterized by gradually transitional lines and thickness variations, which create a sense of historical continuity and artistic refinement (Jin, 2022). The fusion of "bone" and "flesh" in the lines, along with the even spacing between characters and the rounded curves, not only reflect admiration for the past but also convey a sense of grace and elegance associated with ancient aesthetics. Similarly, the Bronze Inscriptions (as shown in Figure 14) display a profound respect for history, culture, and religious practices through their artistic expression, precise fonts, and structured layouts, emphasizing symmetry and balance to evoke a harmonious visual effect that resonates with the ideals of ancient civilizations (Khan & Vaidya, 2019).

Moreover, this admiration for ancient times is also reflected in the use of Han Dynasty Clerical Script, which demonstrates a reverence for tradition through its diverse brushwork and unique techniques (Wang et al., 2023). The "Cicada head and swallowtail" technique (as shown in Figure 15), along with the "Tidun" technique for varying brushstroke thickness, showcases an innovative approach that respects and builds upon ancient forms of expression. Additionally, the transformation of character composition in this script highlights a creative adaptation of historical styles, further illustrating the admiration and respect for the cultural heritage of ancient times. Overall, the characteristics of these ancient inscriptions underscore

a deep-seated admiration for the past, not only as a source of inspiration but also as a way to preserve and promote cross-cultural exchange and cultural identity.

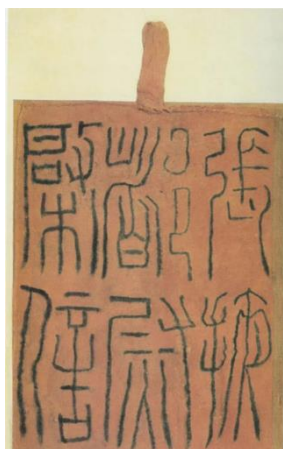


Figure 13

Han Dynasty Seal Script  
 “Commandant of Zhangye”  
 Late Western Han Period



Figure 14

“Bronze Inscriptions on  
 Weight” (part)



Figure 15

Han Dynasty Clerical Script  
 “The Cao Quan Stele in Heyang County”  
 (part)

Overall, these findings and discussions underscore the depth and complexity of the Chinese calligraphic tradition, highlighting its role not just as a form of writing but as a profound art form that reflects cultural values, emotional expression, and historical significance. By understanding these characteristics, scholars and enthusiasts can gain a deeper appreciation for the artistry and cultural richness of Chinese calligraphy, enriching their understanding of Chinese culture and history.

### Conclusion

In summary, the study of Chinese ancient inscriptions, as examined through the perspective of handwriting information, verve information, strength information, implication information, and information regarding admiration for ancient times, provides valuable insights into the artistry, cultural significance, and emotional depth of Chinese calligraphy. These findings deepen our understanding of the Chinese calligraphic tradition, demonstrating its role as a profound form of art that reflects cultural identity, historical continuity, and emotional expression.

Future research in this area could explore how calligraphy intersects with other traditional Chinese arts, like painting and seal carving. Studies could also look into using modern technology, such as digital tools and virtual reality, to analyze and preserve ancient inscriptions. This would help ensure that these inscriptions remain accessible and well-preserved for future generations. Additionally, comparative studies between Chinese calligraphy and other calligraphic traditions worldwide could provide insights into the universal themes and cultural specificities of calligraphic art. Such studies could promote cross-cultural exchange and a deeper appreciation for calligraphy as an art form.



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