

# Understanding Chinese Wisdom through Characters



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Art Author: Zikai Ma

Authors: Weiqing Zhang, Tao Guan,  
Ou Tang and Yuanqing Ma

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Scholars  
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# FOREWORD

Dekuan Huang<sup>1</sup>

Among many languages in the world, Chinese is the only one that originated from the far ancient character system. Modern archaeology has proved that, as early as the Shang dynasty (fourteenth to eleventh century BC), Oracle Bone Script was the mature character system in use. During the etymological evolutions from Oracle Bone Script to the contemporary scripts, the principal character system has remained the same without revolutionary changes. Chinese characters are the representations of Chinese history and civilization, and at the same time they carry the rich cultural and philosophical connotations as the typical symbols of Chinese culture.

The early Chinese characters depicted images from nature, following their natural shapes and changes. These structures were various and vivid in depiction, marking the symmetrical balance that conforms to the aesthetic principles. It can be safely said that every ancient character was the result of the ancient people's wisdom. The beauty of the shapes lies in their structures and their wise design, from which the aesthetic pursuits of the ancient Chinese could be seen.

Ancient Chinese characters kept in classics were either written with brushes, or engraved on oracle bones with knives, or molded on bronze utensils. The strength of the brushes and knives, the strokes from the beginning to the end, and the fast or slow writing speed of the turns all indicated the rhythms of character writing. When they evolved into the modern Chinese characters (Clerical and Regular Script), the self-awakening aesthetic consciousness in writing further promoted the beauty of Chinese characters, which constituted the art of Chinese calligraphy with its special features. Compared to other languages in the world, Chinese characters are not only

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<sup>1</sup> Dekuan Huang is Professor of Chinese Etymology at Qing Hua University, director of the Unearthed Literature and Preservation Center, president of the Chinese Etymology Association, and director of the Chinese Character Museum.

practical tools to record and communicate, but also bear the functions of art creation and aesthetic education.

In *Understanding Chinese Wisdom through Chinese Characters*, the authors selected eighty-five Chinese characters and went through a thorough study of their structural evolutions and cultural connotations. The analysis of the evolution of Chinese cultures reveals the authors' interpretation of the cultural features of these characters. There are various interpretations of the Chinese characters depending on individuals' understanding throughout the long passage of evolution. Among the many interpretations, there has not been an "accurate" one, which is the long-existing and frequently asked question in explaining the evolutions of Chinese characters and their relations with Chinese cultures. The authors of this book lifted themselves from the bondages of the complexity in character evolution and multiple interpretations. They presented to readers the evolutionary and cultural stories to explain these thousand-year-old characters, bringing a new life to these ancient characters. It is an effort worth applause and appreciation.

The uniqueness of this book is the combination of calligraphy and the cultural connotation of characters, creatively highlighting the Chinese character system and the core values of Chinese culture. Centering around each character, there is a story of evolution, along with an artwork from the well-known contemporary calligrapher Zikai Ma. His calligraphy works and seals precisely demonstrate the shape and structure of these ancient characters, which are of high artistic value.

During communications between the Eastern and Western civilizations, the spread and acceptance of ancient characters and Chinese culture are research fields worth further exploration. The authors made significantly meaningful efforts from their passion toward Chinese cultures and characters in this book. I sincerely hope their contributions are rewarded with wide recognition and appreciation by Chinese lovers and readers across borders.

October 4, 2022  
At Qing Hua University, Beijing, China



# INTRODUCTION

## An Overview of Chinese Language

Chinese is one of the oldest languages in continuous use for over four thousand years. It has the features of uniqueness and liveliness in that it keeps evolving, growing, and enriching itself over the passage of time, and through communication with other world languages. Evolved from pictograms, Chinese language has its own phonetic system, different from the phonemic languages whose pronunciations can be directed by their alphabets. Chinese language is a living fossil that brings diversity to the world languages and world civilizations. Today, Chinese is spoken by one fifth of the world population and is still attracting more people with its amazement and cultural charisma.

As an indigenous language, Chinese is deeply rooted in China and represents Chinese culture well. The earliest record of Chinese written language was in *The Book of Changes* (易经 yì jīng, first appeared in the Western Zhou dynasty, 1046–771 BC), which said,

上古结绳而治，后世圣人易之以书契，百官以治，万民以察，盖取诸夬。<sup>1</sup>

In far ancient times, people used rope knots to record events and administer the country. Later a saint switched rope knots to engraved writings. Hundreds of officials used this writing to administer, and tens of thousands of people were informed of state affairs through this writing. This was the idea from Hexagram (夬卦 from *The Book of Changes*).

Even though the book did not mention who the saint was, it was assumed that he was Fu Xi Shi (伏羲氏), one of the far ancient emperors in Chinese history. According to Kong Anguo (孔安国, 156–74 BC),

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous. *The Book of Changes* (Western Zhou Dynasty). Xi Ci Xia: 1. <https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/xi-ci-xia/zhs>.

古者伏牺氏之王天下也，始画八卦，造书契，以代结绳之政，由是文籍生焉。<sup>2</sup>

The ancient emperor Fu Xi Shi ruled over the world (China). He initially started with Bagua pattern and administered by creating engraved writings to replace rope knots. In this way, the written language was created.

A more commonly accepted version about the creator of Chinese language is the tale about Cang Jie (仓颉, ?–4596 BC). He was said to have invented the writing system during the reign of Emperor Huang Di (黄帝, reign dates 2697–2597 BC or 2698–2598 BC). Emperor Huang Di gave an order to Cang Jie, an officer in charge of history recording, asking him to create a writing system to record historical events.

黄帝史官仓颉，见鸟兽蹄迹之迹，知分理之可相别异也，初造书契。<sup>3</sup>

Cang Jie, the historian official during Emperor Huang Di's reign, observed the footprints of birds and beasts, distinguished, and categorized them. He then created engraved writings accordingly.

Cang Jie understood the difficulty of using rope knots to record historical events because they became hard to read over the passage of time. He observed the universe, mountains and rivers, paws of animals, feet of birds, and palm prints. He was inspired by the images in nature and created symbols following these images for specific meanings. Thus, he started the Chinese writing system. Some of the symbols from nature are 日 “the sun,” 月 “the moon,” 水 “water,” 山 “mountain,” etc.

Early philosophers such as Xun Zi (荀况, 316–235 BC), Han Fei Zi (韩非子, 280–233 BC) and many others confirmed that Cang Jie created the writing system of Chinese language. They complimented Cang Jie for his

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<sup>2</sup> Anguo Kong. *Shang Shu Xu* (Han Dynasty).

<https://zh.m.wikisource.org/zh/%E5%B0%9A%E6%9B%B8%E5%BA%8F>.

<sup>3</sup> Shen Xu. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Han Dynasty), Volume 1 Preface: 2.

<https://ctext.org/shuo-wen-jie-zi/xu/zhs>.

great contributions to Chinese language and civilization from different perspectives.

奚仲作车，苍颉作书，后稷作稼，皋陶作刑，昆吾作陶，夏鲧作城，此六人者所作当矣。<sup>4</sup>

Xi Zhong built carriages; Cang Jie created the writing system; Hou Ji invented farming tools; Gao Tao started criminal laws; Kun Wu made pottery; Xia Gun constructed cities. All these six people did the right things.

故好书者众矣，而仓颉独传者，壹也。<sup>5</sup>

It was said many people created the writing system, but among them Cang Jie was the only one who marked his name in history. The reason is that he was the most devoted person.

古者苍颉之作书也，自环者谓之私，背私谓之公，公私之相背也，乃苍颉固以知之矣。<sup>6</sup>

In ancient times, Cang Jie created the writing system. He called those circling around themselves selfish. The opposite of selfishness was public. The difference of the two concepts was known by Cang Jie.

In fact, Cang Jie could not have created the entire system of Chinese written language single-handedly, but he was the great compiler, organizing what his ancestors and associates collected from different areas of the country. The written language was adopted during Emperor Huang Di's reign (2717–2599 BC) and remained through the following Xia (2070–2600 BC), Shang (1600–1046 BC) and Zhou (1046–256 BC) dynasties.

The story of Cang Jie as the creator of written Chinese characters was widely accepted during the Warring States period (475–221 BC). He was regarded as the God of Language and received worship from people to

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<sup>4</sup> Buwei Lv. *Lv Shi Chun Qiu* (Warring States Period). Shen Fen Lan· Jun Shou: 3. <https://ctext.org/lv-shi-chun-qiu/shen-shi/zhs>.

<sup>5</sup> Kuang Xun. *Xun Zi* (Warring States Period). Jie Bi: 10. <https://ctext.org/xunzi/jie-bi/zhs>.

<sup>6</sup> Fei Han. *Han Fei Zi* (Warring States Period). Wu Du: 8. <https://ctext.org/hanfeizi/wu-du/zhs>.

commemorate his contribution to Chinese civilization in many temples. Cang Jie was one of the representatives to bring Chinese civilization to a higher level that could be handed down to generations for many thousand years.

## Six Writings—the Keys to Chinese Characters

Logographic symbols are the most distinctive feature of written Chinese as a language, but the key to understanding the formation of characters is Six Writings. Six Writings were created by Cang Jie as the six categories of character creation, and were elaborated by Xu Shen, the author of *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* during the Han dynasty. The study of characters has been an independent discipline known as 训诂学 *xùn gǔ xué* “etymology” to researchers. The Han dynasty (202 BC–AD 220) marked the most prominent achievements in the study of ancient characters. The first character dictionary, *Er Ya*, was published during the Qin and Western Han dynasties (221 BC–AD 9). *Guang Ya* was an encyclopedia-style dictionary following the *Er Ya* pattern but with a wider selection of characters. It was published in the later period of the Han dynasty. Some other dictionaries were published during the Han dynasty such as *Shi Ming* and *Fang Yan*. *Tang Yun* was published during the Tang dynasty, *Ji Yun* in the Song dynasty and *Kang Xi Dictionary* in the Qing dynasty.

*Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (说文解字, AD 100–121) was published during the Eastern Han dynasty. This dictionary has been regarded as the most authoritative dictionary in China and the world for two main reasons. First, the author Xu Shen (许慎, AD 58–147 or AD 30–121) collected over 13,000 characters, explained, compared, and rectified them. The other significance is that the author was the first person to organize the characters according to radicals and components of characters. His categorization of the dictionary was based on Six Writings, which are pictograms (象形), simple ideograms (指事), compound ideograms (会意), picto-phonetic compounds (形声), phonetic loans/rebus characters (假借) and derivative cognates/explanative characters (转注).

There were hundreds of books focusing on the study of *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* in the two thousand years that followed. One of the most quoted research results was *Notes on Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (说文解字注) by Duan Yucai (段玉裁, 1735–1815) in the Qing dynasty. Another was a recent study, *Modern Notes on Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (说文解字约注) by Shunhui Zhang (1911–1992). Many of the explanations in this book are from the above three sources.






Xu Shen gave clear definitions of Six Writings with examples in his dictionary *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*. He summarized the six identifiable writings of characters in their formations, meanings, and pronunciations.



先以六书，一曰指事。指事者，视而可识，察而见意，“上、下”是也。二曰象形。象形者，画成其物，随体诂诂，“日、月”是也。三曰形声。形声者，以事为名，取譬相成，“江、河”是也。四曰会意。会意者，比类合谊，以见指撝，“武、信”是也。五曰转注。转注者，建类一首，同意相受，“考、老”是也。六曰假借。假借者，本无其事，依声托事，“令、长”是也。<sup>7</sup>

Teach first with Six Writings. The first is simple ideograms. Simple ideograms are recognized and understood by their shapes. 上 “above” and 下 “below” are such examples. The second is pictograms. Pictograms depict objects following their shapes. 日 “The sun” and 月 “the moon” are such examples. The third is picto-phonetic compounds. Name things according to their types and pick similar pronunciations to form new characters. 江 “River” and 河 “stream” are such examples. The fourth is compound ideograms. Two or more shapes and meanings are put together to form new characters. 武 “Weapon” and 信 “faith” are such examples. The fifth is derivative cognates. Characters with the same radicals carry the same meanings and they explain each other. 考 “Old” and 老 “old” are such examples. The sixth is loans. When there are no such characters, borrow from other characters with the same or similar pronunciation. 令 “order” and 长 “long” are such examples.


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<sup>7</sup> Shen Xu. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*. (Han Dynasty). Volume 1, Preface: 3.  
<https://ctext.org/shuo-wen-jie-zi/xu/zhs>.

According to the frequency of usage in Six Writings, pictograms, compound ideograms and picto-phonetic compounds cover the majority of Chinese characters. Pictograms, also known as pictographs (象形), are the beginning symbols of the character writing system. They depict images from nature, which reflect the cognition of the ancient residents. These pictograms cover the primary proportion of single structures in the character writing system. Examples are  山 shān “mountain,”  水 shuǐ “water,”  日 rì “the sun,”  月 yuè “the moon,” and  木 mù “wood.” These pictograms form independent characters themselves, and at the same time, they can be used as components, working with other pictograms to form characters to show more complicated meanings. These single-structure characters also change their forms slightly to become radicals in combination with other characters to build even more characters.

Ideograms, also known as simple ideographs or indicative characters (指事), are the early form of characters for abstract and iconic illustrations. The meaning of ideograms is easily seen. Examples are 上 shàng “above,” with a short line above a longer line , and 下 xià “below,” with a short line underneath a longer one . Similar characters are 凹 āo “a dent” and 凸 tū “an intruding part” on the flat surface of an object. Ideograms cover a smaller proportion of the writing system.

Compound ideograms, or associative compounds (会意), are the combinations of two or more pictograms, building the extensive meanings related to the original pictographic components. An example is 林 lín with two 木 mù “wood” pictograms staying together meaning many trees as “woods.” Another example is 明 míng, which is composed of 日 rì “the sun” and 月 yuè “the moon,” meaning the bright light from both the sun and moon.

Picto-phonetic compounds, also known as picto-semantic compounds, or phono-semantic compounds (形声), are the combination of pictograms for meanings and phonetic components for pronunciations. Examples are 江 jiāng “river” and 河 hé “stream,” both with  as water radicals, while 工

and 可 mark their pronunciations.<sup>8</sup> Picto-semantic characters are a miracle in the creation of Chinese language. They not only retain the ideographic features of pictograms and systematic categorization of characters, but also mark the pronunciation to distinguish them from similar characters. Picto-phonetic characters cover 82 % of the Chinese vocabulary according to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, offering an easy access to a big vocabulary size, and laying a good foundation for the development of Chinese characters in the long run. The formation of picto-phonetic characters in another perspective proves that Chinese is adaptable in meeting fast-growing needs as a living language.

Phonetic loans, or borrowings (假借, 通假), refer to characters that were originally created for certain concepts but were borrowed to represent other concepts with the same pronunciation. This phonographic usage is a way to make one character for multiple usages. An example is 北 běi. It was first created as “back,” and was borrowed to mean the direction “north.” In order to eliminate the confusions of the homophone, another character was created by adding 月 yuè “flesh” under the original 北. This created a new character 背 for “back.” While 北 was kept for its borrowed meaning as “north.” The borrowing of homophonous characters gives characters multiple uses in different contexts, which was a strategy in coping with complicated usages with a limited number of characters.

Explanative characters, or the derivative cognates (转注) are the last category discussed. According to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, Xu Shen mentioned two characters, saying they were interchangeable, and they both meant the same. Even when they look different, they could be used in the same places and mean the same. An example given was 考 kǎo and 老 lǎo. Xu Shen explained, 考 was the same as 老. There were three conditions for the characters to be interchangeable. First, they shared the same radical, such as 耂; second, they both sounded similar, such as lǎo and kǎo; third, they served complimentary meanings. Even though this category is not a way to build more characters, it reflects the situations when characters adjust

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<sup>8</sup> Shen Xu. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*. (Han Dynasty). Volume 1, Preface: 3.  
<https://ctext.org/shuo-wen-jie-zi/xu/zhs>.

themselves to adapt to the changing forms and phonemes in different regions.

Six Writings are keys to the mystery of Chinese characters. These six character-building patterns lead to the understanding of new characters in three aspects of vocabulary: pronunciation, meaning, and ways of writing. Today, for language learners, Six Writings are the most efficient way to learn individual characters and words composed of characters. Once learners grasp a basic size of vocabulary, they can easily deduce the meanings and pronunciations of new words so that they can keep reading without being distracted.

Chinese philosophy and wisdom are seen in the shape of characters. The building of characters indicates how ancient Chinese people understood themselves and nature. One example is the character of human beings as 人 rén “human,” which indicates the shape of a person worshipping or working. This shape has been kept over the years, bearing the philosophy of humbleness, which is highly encouraged and appreciated in Chinese culture. Another example is the character of 家 jiā “home” with the structure 宀 mián “a shelter or a house” on the top, and 豕 shǐ “pig” at the bottom. When they are put together, it is a pig kept in a house, meaning home is where food is guaranteed for a family. Food was important to a family, especially when animal husbandry was in the early stages and food supply was not stable. Home is an abstract concept, but ancient Chinese built the association of a shelter and livestock together making home a place where families could be safe from the weather as well as with a steady food supply. From the character structures, one can easily see the philosophy behind characters and the wisdom reflected in Chinese language.

## Evolution of Chinese Characters

Archaeologists have unearthed evidence of the early Chinese language: the scripts on oracle bones. Carved on turtle shells or animal bones, the inscriptions were well preserved over time. Today, they are called Oracle Bone Script. Scientists have proved the scripts on oracle bones could date back to the Xia and Shang dynasties. Oracle Bone Script was used to record sacrifice procedures, history, and royal family anecdotes. There were about



100,000 pieces of oracle bones unearthed but only a small fraction of the characters has been decoded. Fragments of these historical records prove that Chinese has been mature as a language since the late Shang dynasty. It is hard to tell how many years were needed to develop a written language from scratch to the level of recording events and the level of being understood. Therefore, the very beginning of Chinese language could date back further to the Xia dynasty or even earlier.

When explaining the evolution of a certain character, we have chosen the scripts that best represent each milestone in its development over thousands of years. The six scripts in explaining characters are Oracle Bone Script, Bronze Inscription, Small Seal Script, Clerical Script, Regular Script, and Simplified Script.

Oracle Bone Script—Most of the early scripts on oracle bones, ox bones, or tortoise shells were engravings unearthed in the late Qing dynasty. Most of those inscriptions are still under research and more time is needed to investigate them. Some research results can be found in *The Oracle Bone Script Dictionary*, which includes many decoded inscriptions. Even though there has been some disconnection between Oracle Bone Script and the modern characters, the study of Oracle Bone Script leads to more understanding of the wisdom of the language creation, because Oracle Bone Script revealed the early cognition of the universe and the ancient Chinese people themselves.

Bronze Inscription—Toward the end of the Xia and Shang dynasties, emperors and lords tended to cast rectangular or round-shaped bronze containers called 鼎 Dǐng. The sizes and delicacy of Dings were determined by the level of the national ceremonies and events they commemorated. Some of the Dings weighed over 1,000 kg. Due to the advanced cast technology, records of events were engraved on the bronze containers, which made it possible to have the inscriptions kept in good condition. The Zhou dynasty was the main period when Dings were made in big numbers, so inscriptions collected from these Dings are called Bronze Inscription and they are a good source to study the ancient Chinese characters. Many of the unearthed Dings are in exhibition in museums today, so visitors can see characters kept in this way.


Small Seal Script—Toward the Zhou dynasty, characters were generally written in Big Seal Script, including Stone Drum Inscriptions and 籀文 zhòu wén “ancient forms.” When the Zhou royal authorities became weak, they lost absolute control over the territory lords. The Eastern Zhou dynasty even broke into the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period. As the territory lords became stronger, they adopted their ways of writing, measurements, and widths of roads and carriages, which made interstate trade and communication difficult missions. Toward the end of the Warring States period, the state of Qin spent many generations developing its economy and building its army. Soon, Qin became the strongest and conquered the other states, unifying the country for the first time. The Qin Empire was built. Emperor Shi Huang Di saw big barriers in the accessibility of administrative orders to each part of the country. He gave orders to standardize the writing system. Scholars under the leadership of Prime Minister Li Si (李斯, 284–208 BC) created a new writing style called Small Seal Script, based on the traditional Qin writing and features of Big Seal Script. Small Seal Script was also called Qin Seal Script. This was the first standardized written Chinese in history, which effectively promoted the centralization of governance. The unified language replaced the different writing systems across the country. For example, there were about one hundred and fifty varieties of the writing of 車 chē “vehicles” in different places at different times, but after the unification of the writing system, there was only one accepted form. The beauty of Small Seal Script, in thin lines and symmetrical structure, soon made it accepted throughout the country.

Character writing went through another big change during the Han dynasty—Clerical Script. It started from the Qin dynasty and was generally used among government workers because Small Seal Script was time-consuming and difficult to write. Clerical Script came to its peak time during the Eastern Han dynasty because it became the standard government document writing format. Small Seal Script was a reformation of the ancient scripts, and Clerical Script was a revolution that started the modernity of the Chinese writing system. Small Seal Script still followed Six Writings as guidelines, but Clerical Script went free from the restrictions of Six Writings, bringing the Chinese character writing system into the modern era. Clerical

Script marked the beginning of modern Chinese writing that has influence until today.

Chinese written language has gone through several simplifications throughout history. The first was Small Seal Script during the late Warring States period and the Qin dynasty, which replaced the complicated writings of the ancient forms with clearer and simpler scripts. The second was Clerical Script during the Han dynasty, which regulated strokes and simplified structures, making written Chinese with less logographic and more symbolic features. The third was during the mid-twentieth century, which made changes based on cursive scripts during the Jin (266–420 AD) and Tang (618–907 AD) dynasties and based on the popular writings among civilians. Characters before the third simplification are called traditional Chinese, used mainly in Taiwan, and those after the third simplification are called simplified Chinese, used in mainland China and Southeast Asian countries.

## Modernity of Chinese Language

The Chinese writing system is different from that of the alphabetical languages because of its uniqueness in character structure, vocabulary building, and syntax. Each initial Chinese character represents a certain meaning. When collocated with other characters, they produce different characters and different words. To some extent, these initial characters are like roots in English vocabulary. Such initial characters are pictograms and later evolved to be both single-structure characters and radicals to form other characters. For example, the initial form of water was . It evolved to be a single-structure character 水 shuǐ “water” and a radical 氵 shuǐ “water”. When collocating with other characters, 氵 forms characters such as 河 hé “rivers,” 洋 yáng “oceans,” 湖 hú “lakes,” and many more. The characters formed with the same radical have similar meanings as well. So, the evolution of radicals gives opportunities for Chinese language to increase its vocabulary in an easy way.

The number of characters collected in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* is over 130,000 in total. Imagine that a book was scheduled for printing in ancient China. It

could be either handwritten or have every page engraved. If each page had 400 characters, there would be 250 carved pages for a 100,000-character book. And, after this book was printed, all the 250 wood engraved pages would be of no use. That was what happened before the engraved blocks were introduced. During the Song dynasty, there was an innovation in printing technology, which was to engrave each character individually on a piece of wood, clay, stone, or metal block, and to arrange the movable blocks into each page grid for printing. This technology solved the issues of wasting the page engravings and made printing more efficient. In addition, the engraved blocks could be used multiple times.

The biggest revolution in spreading thoughts and ideas in Chinese language took place in the twentieth century. During the computer era in the 1980s, Chinese language had a breakthrough in digitization. With the fast development of computer technology, it would be outdated if a language were not able to be read and written on computers. With the widespread use of computers, it became crucial to find a proper way to key in Chinese characters. At the beginning, people found it impossible to create a keyboard with 10,000 buttons for every character. Scientists worked out different ways to move characters onto computers. They tried to deconstruct the characters into several parts and mark each part with a number. For one character one might need to hit several keys. Within twenty years, there were thousands of coding systems for Chinese characters. Among the various systems, one coding system has stood out, which is the Pinyin system. Anyone who can speak Chinese can type in pinyin and the corresponding characters are reflected on the screen. Easy accessibility from the different input systems makes Chinese language alive on computers. These were the first steps of Chinese digitization. The wide use of the internet further pushed Chinese language to the more accessible information highway. Literary works are moved onto computers and cloud drives to allow more people to read, edit, review, and communicate. People use applications to type in characters to communicate with others in the world. Technologies make it possible for this old language to rediscover its youth and enthusiasm, and to fit into the new modern age.

## Words about This Book

The most quoted reference in this book is *the Chinese Text Project*, an online digital library open to readers and researchers all over the world. This project includes pre-modern texts from the Zhou dynasty to the Qing dynasty and the Republican Era, providing over thirty thousand titles and five billion characters. Unfortunately, most of the texts did not come with English translations, except for some translated texts of the Pre-Qin period and the Han dynasty, which means the database is still growing as long as the copyrights allow.

The translation in this book, unless identified, is done by the authors themselves, with reference to different translators' work. The hardest part is that some of the ancient quotations have different interpretations, even among modern scholars. The best way to solve this issue is to go through large amounts of reading and sorting before finding a more reasonable interpretation. The reason we did not simply quote from some of the translators' works is that their interpretations might not fit into modern language usage as some of the translations were done two hundred years ago. Some of the translations are confusing in word choices. For example, 君子 was once translated as "the sons of a king," which, in most classics, refers to those ethical people with virtues and qualities. So, in this book, 君子 is translated as a gentleman, which fits the English definition of being a "chivalrous, courteous or honorable man."<sup>9</sup> The only difference between Chinese 君子 and English gentleman is that Chinese 君子 refers to scholars with the pursuit of moral cultivation and self-improvement as their lifetime goals. For words with no equivalence, we find the closest in meanings to interpret them.

In this book, we categorized the characters according to the sections of nature, human beings, moral cultivation, Confucianism, the grand way of Dao, and arts. Most early characters were images of nature and human beings, followed by things close to ancient people's lives. Then, people started to care about morality building, following rites and orders as a result

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<sup>9</sup> Definition of "gentleman," Oxford Languages, accessed August 10, 2022.  
<https://www.google.com/search?q=gentleman>.

of observing the universe. This is the cognitive order of the world and human beings themselves. Through the study of character creation and evolution, the ancient people's wisdom is seen in keeping surviving skills and keeping a harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

When combing the evolution of each character, we adopted the mainstream threads instead of getting side-tracked by variants at different periods of time because some characters had hundreds of variants that had little connection with today's characters and stopped being used thousands of years ago.

Confucianism and Daoism are the two main philosophies indigenous to China that have had great influence on the shaping of Chinese personality and the political landscape. This is living wisdom that we can draw from the formation and usage of characters in the ancient classics to face the modern challenges.

This book serves as a brick for gems in the exploration of the origin and development of Chinese characters. It also serves as a bridge connecting antiquity with modernity. A special feature of this book is the addition of artwork from Master Ma Zikai, a well-established Chinese seal artist, calligrapher, and Chinese landscape painter. His calligraphy and seal art in this collection illustrate artistically the wisdom and creativity of the ancient Chinese characters.



# SECTION

# 1







Characters  
On  
*NATURE*





## 天 Heaven—Humans Propose, Heaven Disposes

Table 1 The Evolution of Characters

					
甲骨文 Oracle Bone Script	金文 Bronze Inscription	小篆 Small Seal Script	隶书 Clerical Script	楷书 Regular Script	简体中文 Simplified Chinese

天<sup>1</sup> tiān is one of the earliest ideograms in Chinese, which first appeared in Oracle Bone Script during the Shang dynasty. It was like a person with a box on his head, emphasizing the existence above his head. In Bronze Inscription, 天 remained the human shape with more emphasis on the head. After Bronze Inscription, a line replaced the box on the head and this shape was stabilized. 天 is one of the fundamental characters in Chinese. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* explained the meaning of 天 as,

颠也。至高无上，从一大。他前切。<sup>2</sup>

Head, referring to the ultimate existence, following the 一 and 大 sections.

Modern scholar Wang Guowei explained the shape of 天 as,

天本谓人颠顶，故像人形。<sup>3</sup>

The ancient 天 referred to the existence above human heads, thus it follows the human shape.

<sup>1</sup> The serial number is 0078 under level one frequency in usage in the “Table of Standard Chinese Characters.” State Department of PRC. Accessed June 4, 2021. [http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2013-08/19/content\\_2469793.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2013-08/19/content_2469793.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Shen Xu. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*. (Han Dynasty), Volume 2, 一 Section: 3. <https://ctext.org/shuo-wen-jie-zi/yi-bu/zhs>.

<sup>3</sup> Guowei Wang (Qing Dynasty). *Guan Tang Ji Lin* (Shi Jia Zhuang: Hebei Education Press, 2001), 139.

Ancient Chinese people described “heaven” as a mysterious existence above their heads. *The Book of Changes* explained what 天 “heaven” was:

天秉阳，垂日星。<sup>4</sup>

Heaven holds the Yang energy, where the sun and stars are hanging.

The feature of heaven was believed to be Yang, with the sun, moon, and stars hanging above, which was the ancient people’s cognition of the universe through observation. But the book pointed out the property of heaven as:

乾，天也，故称乎父。坤，地也，故称乎母。<sup>5</sup>

Qian is heaven. It is so called father. Kun is earth. It is so called mother.

According to the Qian Kun theory, the universe was the place where everything lived in between heaven and earth. Heaven was regarded as father and earth as mother to all creatures because together they bred all creatures, which was why they were long-lasting, according to *The Book of Rites*.

天长地久。天地之所以能长且久者，以其不自生，故能长生。<sup>6</sup>

Heaven and earth are long-lasting. The reason is that their operation and existence are not for themselves. Thus, they last eternally.

The early Chinese residents had three levels of understanding 天 “heaven.” The first level was the natural existence of 天 “heaven.” There was a dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Zigong concerning 天.

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<sup>4</sup> Sheng Dai. *The Book of Rites* (Warring States Period). Li Yun: 20.  
<https://ctext.org/liji/li-yun/zhs>.

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous. *The Book of Changes* (Western Zhou Dynasty). Shuo Gua: 10.  
<https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/shuo-gua/zhs>.

<sup>6</sup> Er Li. *Dao De Jing*. (Spring and Autumn Period), 7.  
<https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing/zhs>.