

The History and Origin of Chinese Characters (I)

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The present article is the introductory section from a larger study entitled *The History and Culture of Chinese Characters*. The aim of this paper is not only to offer a better understanding of what is believed to be the origin of Chinese characters, but to further arouse the interest into this subject. I will first offer a short historical view of the Chinese characters by means of synthesizing the most relevant bibliographical sources in this respect. Furthermore, I will briefly describe three of the most important stories related to the origin of the Chinese characters.

Keywords: Chinese characters, history, origin, script, Fu Xi, Cang Jie



What is the difference between Chinese language and its written characters? Human race makes use of language in order to communicate. Through language we can accumulate knowledge, moreover the culture of a country is also build, but the advantage of having characters is that one can record the language, as well as exchange information. The use of language is what draws the distinction between man and animal, yet characters differentiate between the human society and the civilization.

The source of China's history is distant and the flow is long; it acts as a mark of written language. Chinese characters are sustained by a 5000 years old Chinese civilization. The history of the development of Chinese characters is influenced by the development of the Chinese people. One can for sure admit that the Chinese characters are both unique and beautiful, therefore they are not only a symbol for the Chinese civilization, but also Chinese people regard it as their national

treasure. Chinese characters have been under constant development. It is not a surprise that, Chinese characters are already used by a great number of people from all over the world, not to mention that they are the only characters that had been used for such a long period of time.

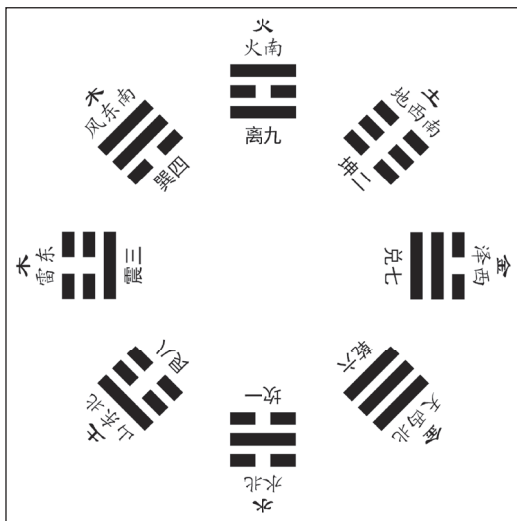
Chinese characters emerged from pictographic characters. What is a pictographic character? This type of characters have developed from the drawings and are classified as ideographic characters. The earliest pictographic characters have appeared in four great countries with and ancient civilization - known in Chinese as 四大文明古国- , Ancient Egypt (古埃及), Ancient Babylon (古巴比伦), Ancient India (古印度) and China (中国). The Chinese scholars Shi Ding Guo and Luo Wei Dong have presented thus in *The Wisdom of Chinese Characters* (2013) the creation of the pictographic characters: "Ancient Egypt had a sacred style of calligraphy, people from Ancient Babylon

used cuneiform script, Ancient India invented Brahmī, Ancient China used the Chinese characters.” I will also provide the original quote of the scholars: “古埃及有圣书字，古巴比伦人使用楔形文字，古印度产生了婆罗米文，古代中国的文字是汉字。”（右定果，罗卫东（2013）《汉字的智慧：英文版》，北京：北京语言大学出版社）

Approximately 5000 to 3000 years before, Chinese characters began to appear on pottery and tortoise shell, as well as on ancient bronze artifacts. The characters from this period were part of the pictographic characters. The Chinese characters started with Oracle Script 甲骨文, the earliest form of Chinese character, and developed until today to the Simplified characters. There is a clear distinction in the form of the characters from one script to the other. The 8 scripts that lead in succession to the characters people use today are the following: Oracle Script 甲骨文, Inscription in Bronze 金文, The Small Script 小篆, The Clerical or The Official Script 隶书, The Regular Script 楷书, The Cursive Script 草书, The Semi-Cursive Script 行书 and The Simplified Characters 简体字.

Han Jian Tang, in his book entitled *The Chinese Characters* (2014), explained: “Chinese Characters come from drawings. Before inventing the characters, the ancestors of Chinese people have chosen the form of a drawing to express the meaning as a method, the creation of the Chinese characters precisely evolved from drawings.”（韩鉴堂（2014）《汉字》，北京：五洲传播出版社）. To speak the truth, Chinese characters have a lot of beautiful stories about the origin and the evolution of the characters, such as “Fu Xi and the invention of the Eight Trigrams” – known in Chinese as伏羲画八卦-, “Keep record by tying knots” – translated in Chinese as结绳记事- and “Cang Jie invents characters” –with the original title of仓颉造字.

1. Fu Xi and the invention of the Eight Trigrams 伏羲画八卦



The creation of the Chinese characters has a transition period and it can be related to the invention of the Eight Trigrams by Fu Xi. Fu Xi is a legendary Chinese emperor, considered one of the most knowledgeable persons of all times in China. He used mathematical symbols to describe everything he observed and therefore he created the Eight Trigrams.

At the beginning of the society, people started to use rope for hunting. Everything that could be seized was to be found either in the sky, which comprised the flying birds, or in the water, which had fish. Most of the captured birds were caught alive and if one could not finish to eat, they would raise the birds and eat them the next day. In that way, people learned how to raise animals. The abilities to use rope to hunt and to raise livestock also brought people knowledge and experience; it is considered that a mystical person named Fu Xi invented fishing and hunting with the rope. After Fu Xi and Nu Wa -creator of humans in Chinese mythology- married, they raised children and Fu Xi, based on the changing shapes of all living things from heaven and earth, invented the Eight Trigrams, invented the characters and ended the history of “Keep record by tying knots”



Fu Xi

In ancient times, people were completely ignorant of nature. With the change of temperature, people would get sick and die. Every person who ran into a problem which he or she was unable to solve would ask Fu Xi for help. The legend says that Fu Xi was fishing in a river when he once captured a white turtle, then he immediately began to dig a pond and raise the turtle.

However, one day, people ran to Fu Xi's house and told him that there was a strange animal at the river. Fu Xi went to the river and could not distinguish if the animal was a dragon or a horse. Fu Xi approached the animal, analyzed it carefully and discovered that the back of the animal had some decorative designs: 一六居下, 二七居上, 三八居左, 四九居右, 五十居中. Fu Xi took a tree leaf and noted all the designs that were on the back of the animal. People were staring at the animal and asked the wise Fu Xi what kind of animal could that be, but because he himself did not know, he chose the name 龙马, Dragon-Horse.

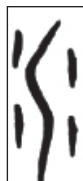
Fu Xi was thinking over and over again what the meaning of the decorative designs could have been, but he still could not discover the secret behind those designs. That day he was standing by the white turtle and reflected on the problem that was constantly in his mind: What was the meaning of the designs? Suddenly, the white turtle came in front of Fu Xi, looked at him and nodded three times. The white turtle observed him in a very attentive way. Gradually, he discovered that the shell of the white turtle also had some decorative designs. It is said that this designs led him to create the Eight Trigrams.

Some specialists think that the Eight Trigrams are China's most ancient characters, while other people think that it is the embryonic form of the characters; actually, the Eight Trigrams are used to divine the eight groups of pictures. There are eight combinations of three lines, all solid, all broken, or a combination of solid and broken lines that are joined in pairs of 64 hexagrams, formerly used in divination. “—” represents Yang, “- -” represents Ying, Ying Yang match together. Each combination represents an element, for instance Heaven, male and northwest represents Day 乾为天; Earth, female and southwest represents Land 坤为地; Thunder represents thunder 震为雷; Wind, southwest is represented by wind 巽为风; Water represents water 坎为水; Fire represents fire 离为火; Mountain, northwest represents mountain 艮为山 and the last one; Marsh represents marsh 兑为泽.

If we observe them carefully we will find out that the Eight Trigrams line combination is not very far from the form of the Chinese characters used today. There are some modern characters that have a connection with the combination of lines from the Eight Trigrams, for example the modern character of “water” looks very much alike the character from the Eight Trigrams.

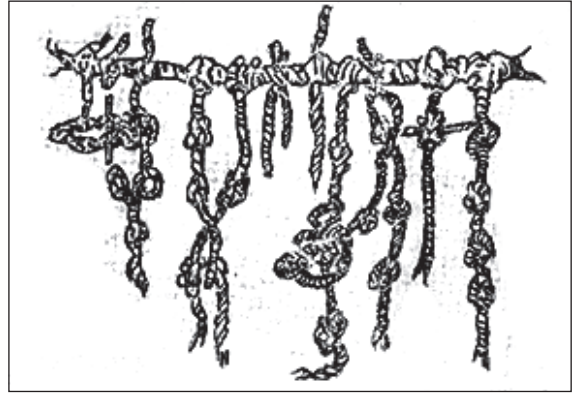


Modern character



Ancient character

2. “Keep record by tying knots” 结绳记事



Speaking of Chinese characters, another story about the origins of characters that is unforgettable to the Chinese society is named “Keep record by tying knots”. Tying knots in order to keep record of a matter was an ordinary method of remembering before the appearance of the Chinese characters. Han Jian Tang in *The Chinese Characters* (2014) offers to the readers the clearest explanation: “Keep record of a matter can be done by using rope to make knots, if one wants to remember a big event from one's life, one will have to ty a big knot; if one wants to remember smaller things than one will have to ty smaller knots, for many things one will have to ty many knots, for few things few knots. However this kind of notation is only for the people who have tied the knots that will understand, so this method only helps to remember, but not to record or spread the language.” (韩鉴堂 (2014) 《汉字》, 北京: 五洲传播出版社).

In the ancient Chinese legends, people are described as devouring raw meat and fowl, using no characters to record daily matters, as a consequence things were easily forgotten. The problem occurred most of the times when raising domestic animals. Each time the animals were let free during the day, one would not know exactly the number of animals that came back. If animals were lost, this would represent a big loss for a farmer.

In my understanding, this anecdote simply denotes some specific traits of ingenuity. Fu Xi, for instance, had a big contribution to finding a method to record matters. It passed a lot of time until Fu Xi finally had come up with an idea. At the door of the livestock fence he placed stones, each of them representing the number of animals. When animals got in, Fu Xi simply added a stone; in this way, farmers would know the exact number of animals that have returned. If one animal missed, one will know the number of the lost animals. This method spread quickly and was widely used on such a scale that the number of missing animals was reduced significantly.



But this method was at some point replaced with another one - and, instead of stone, people started using rope. For any event or problem, people would tie a knot; when a solution would be found to their matter, they untied it. The disadvantage of this method was that if, one forgot what the matter was when the knot was tied, then the knot would never be untied.

The process of this method is a complex one, but the capability to record information was a low one, moreover the range of use was very small. For instance, if people wanted to remember 10 things, then they would tie only one knot to the rope - as I have drawn 十 -, with the hope that once they see the knot they will remember the matters. If one wanted to bear in his mind 20 or even 30 things, of course one would tie 2 卩 or 3 卩 knots. With the increase in the number of knots on the rope, there is a chance one would not remember what they had been tied for, eventually leading people to think that even if the method Fu Xi thought about was relatively simple to use, it was not reliable.

Nowadays, this method is not used anymore. In fact, the method of tying knots to a rope did not satisfy the rapid development of the society and therefore a new method was invented and the Chinese characters finally began to take shape.

3. “Cang Jie invents characters” 仓颉造字



Cang Jie

The story of Cang Jie inventing the characters takes place during the reign of Emperor Huang, more than 5000 years ago. Emperor Huang once sent Cang Jie to manage the livestock and the food supplies number, but the number kept increasing and it became hard to remember. One day it began to snow and Cang Jie climbed the mountain to go hunting. Suddenly, two pheasants looking for food jumped out from the

woods. As the pheasants passed, they left some claw prints in the snow. Not long afterwards, two fawns came around close to the hunter, but they eventually got scared and ran away leaving behind them another set of claw prints.

Cang Jie compared the claw prints of the pheasants and the fawns and realized that they were not identical. As a result, he named the claw prints after the animal species - namely 鸡 and 鹿. From that day on, Cang Jie drew various symbols based on whatever animals or phenomena he saw and established a meaning to each symbol; instead of naming them simply symbols, he chose a pleasant name, that is “Character” - in Chinese being called 字.

All the above mentioned stories about the origin of the Chinese characters are actually no more than just legends - pleasurable and meaningful, but nevertheless no more than pious fictions. As a matter of fact, we now know objectively that characters were not invented by a single man, whether Fu Xi nor Cang Jie, but by the cultural development of the society.



Bibliography:

1. Han Jian Tang, *The Chinese Characters* (2014)
2. Shi Ding Guo and Luo Wei Dong, *The Wisdom of Chinese Characters* (2013)