The Structure of the Chinese Characters (III)

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The present article is a section from a larger study entitled The History and Culture of the Chinese Characters and serves as a continuation to my second article named The Evolution of Chinese Characters (II). The article aims to provide the reader with a short background on the methods used in order to create the Chinese Characters. I will mainly refer to the Ancient Characters, thus leaving the Current Characters for another detailed explanation. The foundation of the article lays on the contribution of Xu Shen brought to the development of the characters.

Keywords: Ancient Characters, Xu Shen, "The Six Methods", Single-Component Characters, Composed Characters

Even though the Chinese characters are under constant development, they still follow a regular pattern, subsequently thinking that Chinese characters do not have rules is absolutely wrong. As long as one grasps the pattern of the Chinese characters, one will considerably effortless learn as well as remember the characters.

Conducting a research into the structure of the Chinese characters, one will have to study the method of creating the Chinese characters. As for the structure of the Current Characters现行汉字, the necessity of explaining the structure of the Ancient Characters古文字 comes at first.
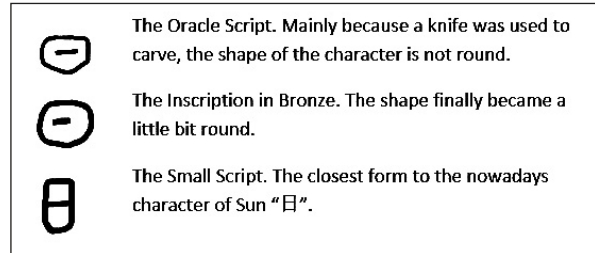
The structure of the Ancient characters are strongly related to the method of creation known by almost every Chinese learner as"六书"- known in English as "The Six Methods". By the beginning of the Han Dynasty, people started to develop an interest in analyzing the structure of the Chinese characters. Xu Shen许慎 had an active role in explaining the structure of the Chinese characters by publishing the first Chinese characters dictionary entitled《说文解字》.

In order to master the whole system of the Chinese characters, it is enough to understand the methods of creation. Having a closer look to the 《说文解字》dictionary, one will notice that Xu Shen used "The Six Methods" to analyze and summarize the form, the sound and the meaning of the Ancient characters, by thus making important contribution to a better understanding of the Chinese characters. The dictionary has a total of 15 volumes, including 9353 Chinese characters and 540 analyzed radicals. The uniform and rounded Small Script was used as a style of writing the dictionary, consequently one will encounter difficulties in assimilating information without a thorough understanding and extensive knowledge of the Chinese characters.

Generally, there are just 4 methods of creating the Chinese characters, these are the Pictogram象形 -derived from a picture-; the Ideogram指事- characters indicating an idea-; the Combined Ideogram 会意- Chinese character that combines the meaning of existing elements, also known as joint ideogram or associative compounds-; and the Phonogram 形声– Chinese character that combines the sound and the meaning. However the dictionary of Xu Shen is mentioning 6 methods, adding the Synonymous Characters转注 – characters with meanings influenced by other words-; and the Loan Characters假借- characters acquiring meanings by phonetic association- .

The very first Chinese characters developed from a picture, for instance the following characters：People"人"，Water"水"，Sun"日". According to Xu Shen in 《说文解字》："象形者，画成其物，随体诘诎". He meant, that the so-called "Pictogram象形" is a creation method of drawing the shape of an object. This method was used to create the well-known pictographic characters. Let us take as an example the Chinese character for Sun"日".

The Oracle Script. Mainly because a knife was used to carve, the shape of the character is not round.

The Inscription in Bronze. The shape finally became a little bit round.

The Small Script. The closest form to the nowadays character of Sun "日".

Following next to the Pictographic characters is the Ideogram指事. Xu Shen defined the present method as "指事者，视而可识，察而见意，上下是也". As stated in the dictionary 《说文解字》, one can easily guess the meaning of the Chinese character just by having a closer look at the character. This method can only represent simple abstract concepts, therefore this type of characters in Chinese language are rare. By far the most obvious examples of Chinese characters are "上"and "下"having the easy recognizable meaning of "up" and "down".
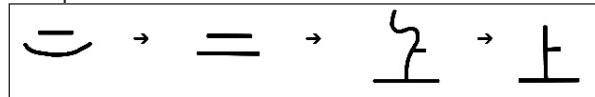

The writing method of the character "上"is awfully easy. In order to represent the meaning of "up" the character needs a small line drawn on the upper line of the character, just as seen in the image, in contrast to the character "下"where the small line is drawn at the lower line.
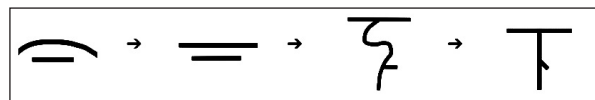
The Pictogram and the Ideogram are Single-Component Characters. More specifically, as the English translation of the term 独体字 points out, both of the already mentioned creation methods are used for the Chinese characters of only one component. The following Chinese characters"女", "子", "本"serve as a sample for the previously mentioned category of characters. On the other hand, Composed Characters, are the group were two or more components form a character. In this case, "众"is considered to be a "合体字"; albeit at a first glance it may look particularly sophisticated, the character "众" is practically built from 3 Single-Component Characters: "人". Even though the Pictogram and the Ideogram characters

are particularly rare methods used in the process of creation, their existence in the Chinese language are a matter of great importance. Single-Component Characters establish the foundation of the Composed Characters, where two and even more独体字 take the form of a合体字. It is generally known, that the number of 合体字in the Chinese language exceeds the number of the 独体字.

The third and surprisingly uncomplicated method of creation Chinese characters is generally recognized in English as Associative Compound Characters and in Chinese as 会意字. In conformity with Xu Shen, the definition of Associative Compound Characters is 《说文解字》："会意者，比类合谊，以见指伪，武信是也". Two or more Single-Component Characters are used to form a new character thus creating a new meaning. Truly, the most magnificent and significant会意字in the Chinese language is 爨（cuàn）.The structure of the character itself is remarkably detailed and embodies a profound meaning.

Ancient form and Current form
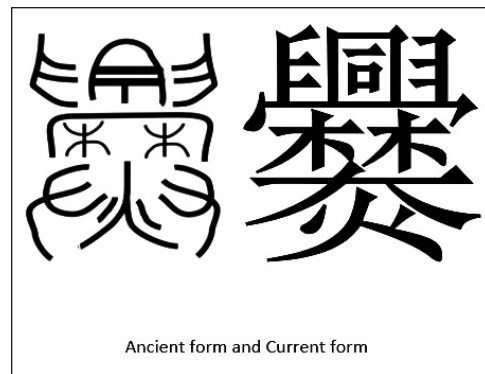
In order to comprehend the creation of the Chinese character "爨", one will need to take into account its ancient form. Not surprising, this character assembles multiple 独体字. Literally, the middle part of the character is an oven with "木" or more specifically wooden bricks in it, whereas the upper part represents a pair of hands "手" holding a pot "锅" and in the lower part there is another pair of hands that lights a fire "火". Eventually, the character's ultimate meaning is light fire for preparing a meal.

"爨"is visibly hard to write, luckily not all Chinese characters are that complex. Let us take as an example the character "人" meaning "people". The former character used two times will automatically form "从" and of course, making use of the character "人" three times a new and significant character will come up: "众". In China, number 3 implies the state of being numerous, so obviously the character "众" has the meaning of a lot of people. After years of learning the Chinese language and expressing interest in the study on the history of the evolution of the Chinese characters, I am a strong believer that Chinese characters are not hard at all to learn. As a further example, I will take

the character "歪". This particular character is formed exactly out of two 独体字, in which the upper part is a "不" – represents the negative way of expressing "no"- and the lower part is a "正"-meaning "straight"-. After assembling the two characters into one new character, the meaning of it will be "askew".

If the preceding creation methods were all representing the meaning of a character, thereby the following methods concentrate substantially on the sound. Xu Shen's perception on the Phonogram is as follows 《说文解字》："形声者，以事为名，取譬 相成，江河是也". This type of Composed Character is made up of two components, one portrays the meaning and the other the sound. The Chinese character of "mother" is by far the most adequate example. In the character "妈", the left part "女" defines the meaning of woman, while the right part "马" provides the sound. A considerably amount of Chinese characters use this method of creation, not surprising approximatively 80% of the characters are Phonograms.

In Phonograms, the part defining the meaning of the character is known as "形旁"and the part providing the sound is known as "声旁". Astonishingly convenience has been brought into Chinese learners lives once with the apparition of this particular creation method, mostly because one can also guess the meaning of the character. Obviously guessing the meaning may lead to a wrong acknowledgement as Chinese characters are under constant change and some of the characters lost its original meaning, so one always has to check a dictionary.

The Synonymous Characters or the 转注 is a using method of the characters pointed out by Xu Shen in 《说文解字》"转注者，建类一首 ，同一相受，考老是也"and through his theory he used "考"and"老"as examples. The meaning of both the characters is identical, the sound is very close to one another, therefore they can mutually explain it selves "考" 就是"老"，"老"就是"考". To be vitally taken into consideration is the fact that this is a using method but not a creation method. Gao Geng Sheng高更生in his book entitled 《现行汉字规范问题》introduces his personal opinion on the Synonymous Characters, by mentioning that nowadays in researching the evolution of Chinese Characters one does not need to reflect on "转注这个术语", because one can completely understand the Chinese characters even without it.

Similar to the preceding using method, the sixth and the last one is the Loan Characters, in Chinese being known as 假借. Apparently, this method implies "a false borrow" of a character and incorporate a new meaning based on the similar sound. Han Jian Tang韩鉴堂in his book entitled《汉字》provides a very accurate example. The Associative Compound Characters "北" (read as "běi") original meaning was "相背，背离", however after a while, to the same

character the meaning of "north" was added.

While Professor Hu, who I met in Xu Shen's native town Luo He, He Nan Province; cited Confucius at the beginning of his speech on the development on the Chinese Characters, I will do it at the end of my article. "子曰：学而时习之，不亦说乎？". The significance hidden between these strokes illustrates the importance and joy in repeating the information after it is learnt. So, the key for one to learn and master the Chinese Characters successfully is perseverance and to constantly repeat them.

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