

CHINESE
CULTURE

CHARACTERS

HAN JIANTANG

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Preface

The aim of this book is to provide an accessible introduction to the fascinating culture of Han characters. I sincerely hope that it will help all readers to become interested in the “Kingdom of Han Characters”, allow them to recognize Han characters, and so encourage Sino-foreign cultural exchange.

Han characters have an ancient history and are regarded as one of the wonders of human civilization. The development of Han characters evolved from pictures through the following key stages: Jiaguwen (inscriptions on animal bones or tortoise shells), Jinwen (inscriptions on ancient bronze ware), Xiaozhuan (the lesser seal style Chinese characters of the Qin Dynasty (221BC-206 BC)), Lishu (the official script in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), and Kaishu (regular script). Over this time, drawings evolved into strokes, pictographic characters became symbols, and complex characters changed into simple ones. Simplification has always been at the heart of the development of Han characters. This development is brought to life in this book in both words and pictures.

As a kind of graphic written language, ancient Han characters have unique intrinsic graphic and pictographic elements, which are highlighted throughout this book. As you will see, modern Han characters are no longer pictographic characters, however they do still have graphic elements, and retain, to varying degrees, the forms of the ancient pictographic characters from which they originated. This book explores how dominant or recessive the pictographic element in modern Han characters are – which is of great value in the recognition and use of Han characters.

Han characters can be thought of as “living fossils”. They have a square structure that contains a wealth of information that distills certain elements of Chinese history, civilization, culture and art. The book also introduces and celebrates these elements and highlights the value of Han characters as art.

Han characters are an ancient form of communication that is still used by a large number of people; they are still in a process of development and renewal and are a key part of China's past, present and future.

In brief:

Han characters are the written symbols of the Chinese language.

They originate from drawings and have unique graphic elements.

They are noteworthy and beautiful and carry a profound history with them.

Like a long-running river, they have developed over time.

They continue to evolve as a living and continually improving part of China's modern culture.



The Dawn of Civilization

Characters are the written symbols of language and, as such, are the most important sign of human civilization.

The first few characters appeared in what we call the River Civilization of some ancient Oriental societies. Dating back around 5,000 years, these symbols show that our distant ancestors had a desire to communicate and record their thoughts.

The Graphic Characters of the River Civilization

Human beings experienced a great leap in their evolutionary history when they developed language. They subsequently experienced another important leap forward when they started to use written characters.

On the Way to Civilization

Written characters can be broadly categorized into two kinds: graphic characters and alphabetic writing. The oldest characters, which were created in the ancient nations of the Orient, evolved from drawings and therefore fall into the first category. For example, about 5,500 years ago, the Sumerians, who lived in the areas drained by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, invented cuneiform characters which they inscribed on clay tablets. Some 5,000 years ago, the Egyptians, who lived in the Nile River Valley, wrote pictographic characters on papyrus. Some 500 years later, the ancient Indians, who lived in the Indus River Valley, invented seal characters of their own. Between 3,000 and 5,000 years ago, the Chinese people, who lived in the Yellow and Yangtze River Valleys, wrote pictographic characters on pottery, tortoise shells and bones and bronze utensils. These ancient characters demonstrated the exceptional intelligence of the River Civilizations.



These cuneiform characters on clay tablets are early pictographic symbols.

Ancient Sumerian Cuneiform Characters

Cuneiform characters are generally accepted as being the earliest of their kind in the world. They were created by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia some 5,500 years ago. They were symbols that were impressed into clay tablets using pens made of reeds. The strokes of these characters are thick at one end and thin at the other, which give them the look of a wedge or a nail. People of later generations called them “cuneiform characters on clay tablets” or T-shaped characters. The cuneiform characters on clay tablets evolved from drawings and therefore belong to the pictographic category mentioned above. The use of this type of characters was very popular during the Babylonian period. After some 3,000 years, they gradually died out. Today, some 2,000 years later, approximately 750,000 clay tablets that carry cuneiform characters have been found. In addition, many cuneiform characters have been found inscribed on mountainsides, as well as on stone tablets and pillars. The cuneiform characters representing the Code of Hammurabi and the Behistun Inscriptions are the most spectacular of all the cuneiform inscriptions yet discovered.

Deciphering the meaning of cuneiform characters baffled European scholars for centuries. However, a key breakthrough occurred



The Stele of the Code of Hammurabi. The stele is 2.25m high. The engraving on the upper part indicates that the Sun God is delivering a royal sceptre to the King Hammurabi. The lower part is the Law, which is inscribed with 8,000 cuneiform characters.



H.C. Rawlinson, a British scholar, made rubbings of the cuneiform characters on the side of this steep cliff. Rawlinson subsequently took at least a dozen years to successfully decipher the meaning of this rock engraving. He is known as “The Father of Cuneiform Characters on Clay Tablets”.