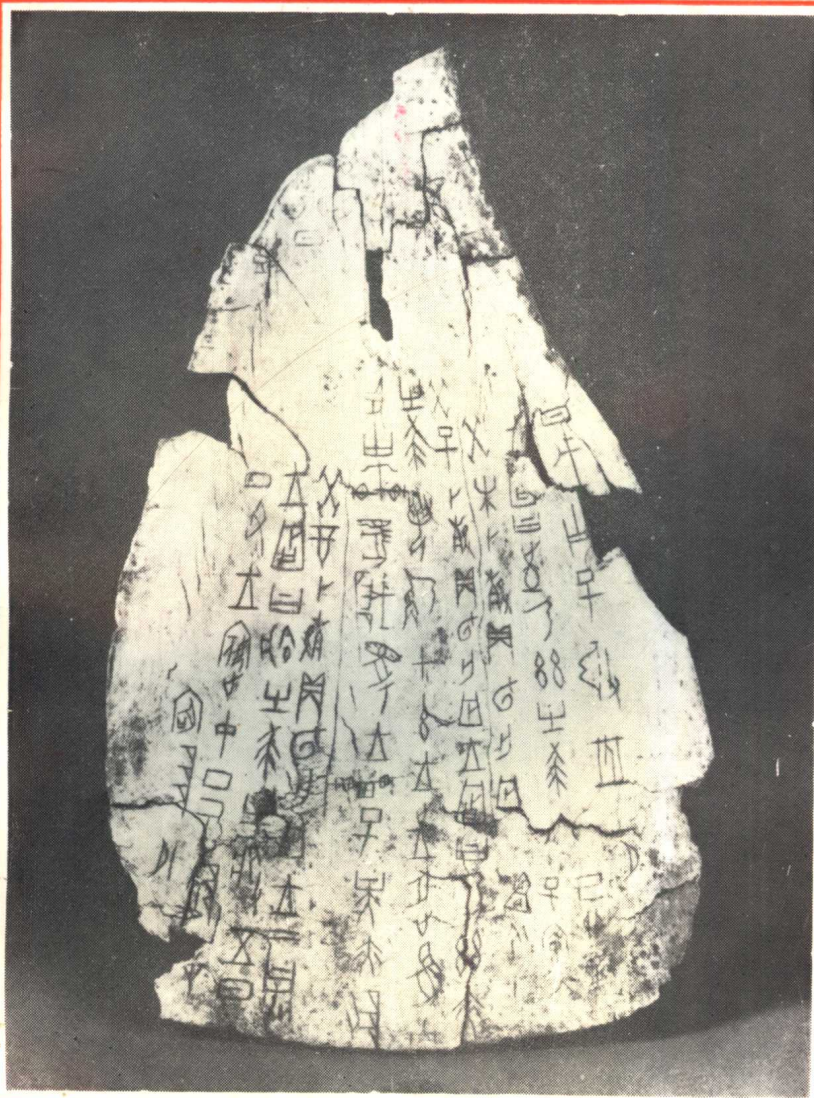


漢字字源入門

王宏源 著



THE ORIGINS OF
CHINESE CHARACTERS

责任编辑 周奎杰
封面设计 张大羽

汉字字源入门

王宏源 著

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华语教学出版社出版

(中国北京百万庄路 24 号)

邮政编码 100037

北京外文印刷厂印刷

中国国际图书贸易总公司发行

(中国北京车公庄西路 35 号)

北京邮政信箱第 399 号 邮政编码 100044

1993 年(16 开)第一版

1997 年第三次印刷

(汉英)

ISBN 7-80052-243-1/H · 240 (外)

04000

9-CE-2775P

INTRODUCTION

This book is intended as a guide to the origins and histories of Chinese characters. Although it could be used as a Chinese etymological dictionary, the book is an attempt to find a new way to teach the practical ideography of Chinese to those whose native scripts are alphabet-based.

Writing is a system of conveying ideas by means of conventional symbols that form visible marks. These symbols are traced, incised, drawn, or written on the surface of materials such as tortoise shells, bones, stone, metal, bamboo, papyrus, parchment, or paper. Writing gives permanence to human knowledge and enables communication over great distances.

Writing grows out of pictures. This is as it should be, since the most natural way of communicating visually is through pictures. At some remote time in the Upper Paleolithic period, perhaps about 20000 BC, early man in southern France and northeastern Spain drew sketches of his prey—horse, buffalo, deer and other animals—on the wall of his cave and colored them with earth and vegetable dyes. Several factors may have led to the creation of a primitive drawing, some aesthetic, some spiritual or magical. This may have been the beginning of art, but it was hardly the beginning of writing. Such pictures do not represent writing because they do not belong to a system of conventional signs and their significance can be understood only by the man who drew them or by his family and close friends who had heard of the event. However, genuine writing, whether it retains a pictorial form or not, serves purely to communicate.

In the process of using pictures to identify and recall objects or beings, a complete correspondence is established and gradually conventionalized between certain written signs and certain objects and beings. These simple pictures contain only those elements that are important for the communication of meaning and lack the embellishments that are included in an artistic representation. Since these objects and beings have names in spoken language, a correspondence is also established between the written signs and their spoken counterparts. When individual signs are used to express individual words and syllables, a consequence might be the development of a complete system of word signs; that is, word writing or so-called logography. In logography, one sign or a combination of signs expresses one word or a combination of words. However, pure logography is not found in any known system of writing. It exists normally only in conjunction with syllabography, as best represented in logo-syllabic writing.

INTRODUCTION

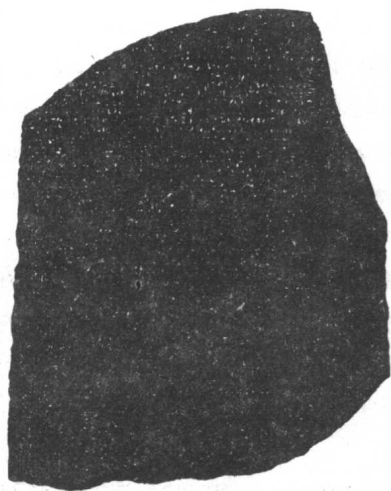
Logosyllabic writing—that is, writing in which signs express words and syllables—is found in the Orient, the vast belt of Asia extending from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea to the Western shores of the Pacific Ocean. Egypt and the area of the Aegean Sea, at least in the pre-Hellenic period, are included within the orbit of Oriental civilizations.

In this large area are found seven original and fully developed logosyllabic systems of writing: Sumerian in Mesopotamia, 3100 BC to AD 75; Proto-Elamite in Elam, 3000 to 2200 BC; Proto-Indic in the Indus Valley, around 2200 BC; Egyptian in Egypt, 3000 BC to AD 400; Cretan in Crete and Greece, 2000 to 1200 BC; Hittite in Anatolia and Syria, 1500 to 700 BC; and Chinese in China, 1300 BC to the present. Other logosyllabic system may at some time come to light, but at the present there are no likely candidates to be added to the above list of seven. The Proto-Armenian inscriptions discovered within the last few decades are too short and too little known to allow any safe conclusions. The mysterious Easter Island inscriptions are not writing even in the broadest sense of the word, as they are probably nothing but pictorial concoction for magical purposes. Finally, the systems of the Mayas and the Aztecs do not represent a full logosyllabic writing; even in their most advanced stages they never attained the level of phonographic development of the earliest stages of the Oriental systems.

The Rosetta Stone 罗塞塔石碑

(section of Egyptian hieroglyphics)

Stone found in 1799 that is celebrated for having furnished the first clue to the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics since it bears an inscription in hieroglyphics, demotic characters, and Greek.

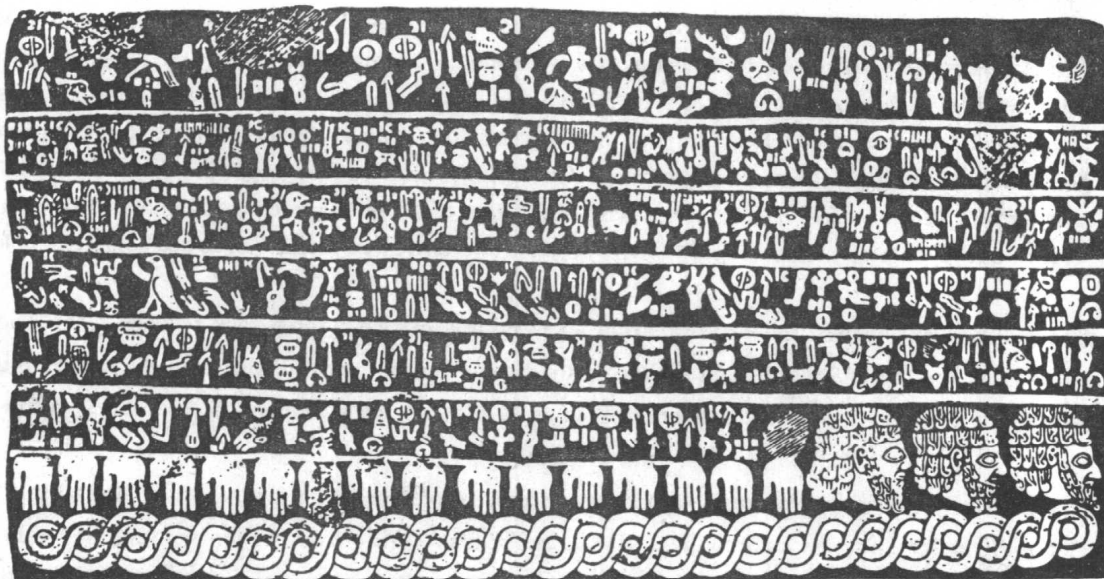


Of the seven systems, three—namely, Proto-Elamite, Proto-Indic and Cretan—are as yet undeciphered. Consequently, modern understanding of the logosyllabic systems is limited to the remaining four systems: Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite and Chinese. Chinese writing is the only logosyllabic writing system used today and it has developed a formidable degree of sophistication.

History does not throw much light on the beginning of Chinese writing. Chinese mythology attributes the invention of writing to Ts'ang Chieh (仓颉 cāngjié). It is said that he got his ideas from observing animals' footprints and birds' claw marks on the sand as well as other natural phenomena. When we try to fix in detail the developmental stages of the Chinese writing, there is a simple method to divide all Chinese characters into three stages, often overlapping chronologically: ideography, phonetic borrowing, and pictophonetic writing.

Ideography is the basic stage, the forerunner of writing. It consists of a drawing or a combination of drawings to represent the thing or action shown. The drawings are simplified and give a clear impression as a memory-aid device. Samples of these devices can be found all over the globe. The following Chinese ideographic characters are good examples: 木 *mù* stands for a tree; 鱼 *yú* for a fish, 虫 *chóng* for a snake, and 射 *shè*, literally "shoot", is the combination of a hand and the bow and arrow. The number of ideographic characters in Chinese writing system is limited. However, the surviving ideographs have static and definite meanings with simple but distinctive strokes. They are basic and easy to understand and many of them, especially the pictographs of single objects, are used as "radicals" in the Chinese writing.

Ideography is a natural method. But a complete system of ideographs have probably never existed either in antiquity or in modern times. To create and memorize thousands of signs for newly acquired words

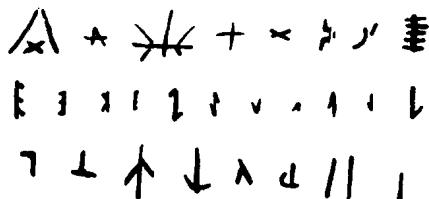


Copy of a hieroglyphic Hittite inscription from the site of Carchemish (after Renfrew, p. 48).

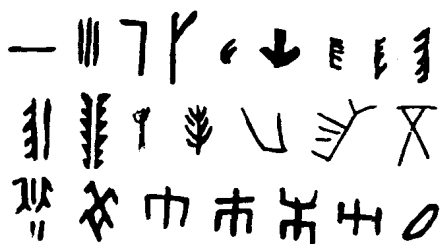
赫梯语象形文字(卡尔凯美什遗址)。

Word-Signs On Potsherds

陶器上的刻划符号



上：西安半坡 下：临潼姜寨



仰韶文化 (5000—3000 BC)



马家窑文化 (3300—2500 BC)

and names is so impracticable that ideographic writing either can be used only as a very limited system, or it must be adapted in some new way in order to develop into a useful system.

Phonetic borrowing is the second stage. The number of function words and abstract nouns is very limited, but they are used frequently and difficult to draw or show. Therefore, signs for function words and abstract nouns were borrowed from ideographs with similar pronunciation. Such signs should also be simple and distinct. A borrowed character should have few strokes, and if the borrowed ideograph was not obsolete, it should be "returned" to its original meaning by adding an auxiliary element to distinguish the new character from its original borrowed pictorial form. These borrowed ideographs are called **phonetic loan characters (PLC)** in this book. The phonetic loan characters could be regarded as symbols. However, in many cases there is a tie of meaning between the original and borrowed forms. Let's see some examples;

北 *běi*, literally "north", is borrowed from an ideograph of two figures back to back. The "north" may derive from the fact that early man sat facing the sun to the south with his back to the north, thus 北 *běi* is a PLC. The word for "back" itself is returned as 背 *bèi*, adding a "human body" radical below.

自 *zì*, literally "self" and "from", is borrowed from the pictograph of a nose. Both "self" and "from" are difficult to express as drawings. Here, "self" may derive from a man pointing at his nose to express "himself", and the character was also adopted to indicate the abstract concept "from". 自 *zì* thus is a PLC. The word 鼻 *bí*, nose, is returned, includes the pictorial element 自 *zì* and a phonetic element 畀 *bì* below.

Finally, 葉 *dié*, meaning thin, derives from a pictograph of a tree with leaves, while 葉 = 叶 *yè*, meaning leaf, has a plant-radical above. Note that since antiquity many of the pronunciations have changed, so that the original borrowed and returned forms no longer sound alike sometimes.

The adoption of the borrowing method in the Chinese writing system was a watershed between memory-aid picture writing and practical logo-syllabic writing. As the development of the society and the deepening of practice and realization, more and more objects and beings should be named precisely. Therefore, pictophonetic characters or pictophones emerged.

A pictophone consists of at least two parts: one part refers to the meaning of the character, and is usually called the "radical"; the other, the phonetic element, gives its sound. In most cases, the phonetic element also has meaning value as a "pictophonetic" element. The following examples are similar to rebus writing: 蝶 *dié* and 鰈 *dié*, literally butterfly and flounder, with the "worm" and "fish" radicals respectively, and the pictophonetic element 葉 *dié*: thin. This stage is the last stage of development. Pictophonetic characters comprise about 90% of all Chinese characters. Today, the number of characters is fixed. When the Chinese need to introduce a word from the West, they use a new combination of characters to form a Chinese word such as 吉普 *jípǔ* for jeep, 浪漫 *làngmǎn* for romance, 歇斯底里 *xiēsīdǐlǐ* for hysteria, 激光 *jīguāng*, or 鐳射 *léishè* (in Taiwan) for laser.

Whether borrowed or created, a character generally begins its life in Chinese with one meaning and its ancient pronunciation. Yet no living language is static, and in time words develop a new pronunciations or meanings and lose old ones. However, the forms of the ideographic characters are somewhat static, especially the pictographs which derive the "letters" of Chinese from common objects or beings. This book will show you a panorama of these fascinating characters.

A look at the origins of the characters that make up the Chinese writing system involves also a look at the origins of the Chinese civilization. The early history of both China and the Chinese dates from the Neolithic period (about 5000 BC) to the Han Dynasty (206 BC to AD 220), including the Shang Dynasty (1523 to 1028 BC) and the Zhou Dynasty (1027 to 221 BC). By the Han Dynasty, the number and forms of common characters were fixed. Some illuminations and brief summaries of the ancient Chinese culture will help understand the ancient but practical ideographs as well as the remote civilization.

Etymology is not an exact science. Many times we are unable to discover the origin of a character, but more often there are ten origin stories for one character. Unproved but often ingenious etymological theories are put forward frequently, some plausible and attractive, some wildly improbable. I will choose the most likely explanations in this book, because the purpose of the book is not to introduce scholarly debates but to serve as a new way to learn Chinese characters.

A picture is worth one thousand words. The origins and histories of Chinese characters should be not a blind spot in the Chinese puzzle, but a key to resolving the puzzle.

INTRODUCTION

Some Chinese characters have been simplified as *jianhuazi* (简化字), and these simplified forms are used on mainland China. But, the ancient form of Chinese characters must be referred to in such a book as this. And although the explanations for each entry are bilingual, they are not equivalent, the Chinese part being simpler with easy characters.

For transcription, the Chinese phonetic alphabet, or *pinyin* (拼音) as it is known, has been used with "four tones" (四声) in this book.

At the end of each article in this book, there are certain bracketed etymological and cross-referenced characters which are marked with *pinyin* and sometimes have a compact statement of the history of the given character.

Inscriptions

甲 "Shell and bone character" Inscriptions were carved on oracle bones with practical and angular strokes, Shang Dynasty.

金 "Bronze character" Inscriptions are found on bronze vessels of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties. Bronze characters derive from prehistoric picture writing, and their lines are smooth yet forceful.

古 "Ancient character" Inscriptions, which appear on the surface of bamboo, stone, pottery or ancient seals, were used mainly during the Warring States Period (475—221 BC).

篆 "Seal character" A kind of standard or decorative character which appeared in the Qin Dynasty (221—207 BC).

参 "For reference"

H. Y. WANG

Dec. 1991

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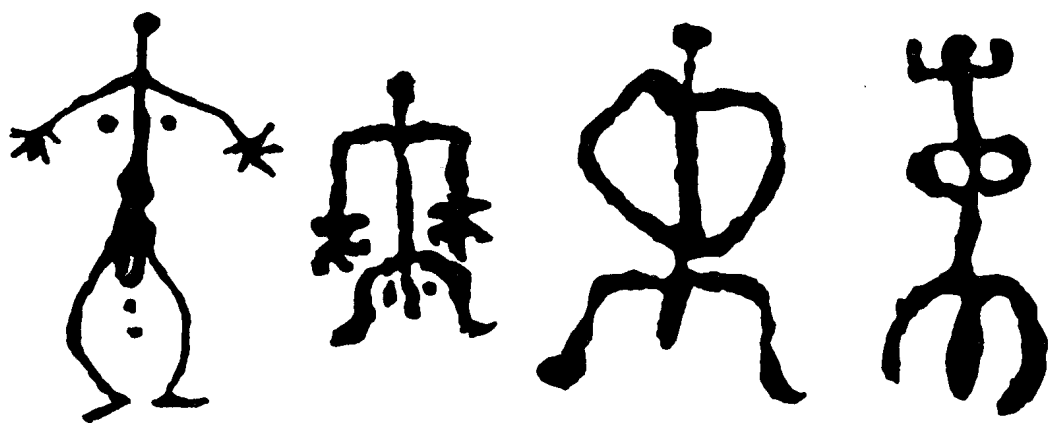
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Chapter 1

MAN 人类

The first inhabitants on Chinese soil whose remains are known to us were the race to which Yuanmou Man belonged 1,700,000 years ago. However, Peking Man is more famous, and it was the focus of worldwide attention in 1927. Peking Man was later and more “human” than Java Man. Peking Man’s bones were firstly discovered by Professor Pei Wenzhong at Zhoukoudian near Beijing. Unfortunately, all the Zhoukoudian hominid remains disappeared when being transferred from Peking to an American ship during the Japanese invasion of China prior to the Second World War. In Chinese characters, the form of a standing man means “great”, perhaps because standing was a great feat in man’s evolution.

中国大地上埋藏有十分丰富的古人类化石和旧石器时代遗物,至今已发现的早、中、晚各个时期的地点共 200 多处,包括直立人、早期智人、晚期智人各个阶段的人类化石。这当中据认为最早的为距今 180 万年的西侯度文化(山西省)和距今 170 万年的元谋人*(云南省)。1927 年裴文中教授在北京周口店发现的北京人则是最早发现,最具有影响的中国直立人。不幸的是,大量极其珍贵的北京人遗物,包括五个头盖骨和其它骨和牙齿标本在太平洋战争爆发前,全部在几个美国人手里弄得下落不明。



Figures in rock art (after Gai, S. L. 盖山林 (2) fig. 195; 765; 902; 908).

岩画中所见人形。

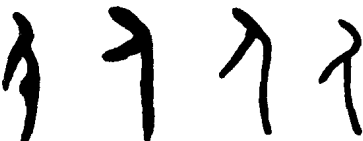
* 系根据古地磁学测定的数值。1983 年有人对此提出不同见解,认为元谋人化石年代不超过 73 万年,可能距今 50 至 60 万年。北京人距今 70 至 20 万年。

1.1 Man's Body 身体

rén 人 

—man, person

從 = 从, 苾, 枞, cōng; 從 = 从, (丛 = 叢) cóng; (众 = 衆) zhòng; 認 = 认 rèn).

 金文 古文 篆文

* Drawing of a man, a figure in profile. The original form of 人 rén may reveal evolution from anthropoid apes to man. [亻 as radical]

人的侧视形。

tǐng 王 

—good; erect (archaic)

廷, 庭, 廷, 蜓, 霆 tǐng; 挺, 艇, 铤, 挺 tǐng.

 篆文 参考

廷

* Drawing of a man standing on land. 挺 tǐng: to erect; with a hand-radical which indicates a verb. [壬 rén, 人 rén, 土 tǔ; land]

人挺立于土上。

wù 兀 

—proud; upright; bald

兀 wù; 尧 = 尧 yáo; 浇 jiāo; 饶 jiǎo; 挠, 蛲, 饶 náo; 跷, 跷 qiāo; 翘 qiáo, qiào; 烧, 桡, 尧, 饶 ráo; 绕 rǎo, rào; 烧 shāo; 晓 xiāo; 晓 xiǎo.

 金文 古文 篆文

* A derivative of 人 rén by adding a stroke on the man's head. [人 rén; man]

人上一横。

yuán 元 

—basic, first, primary

阮 ruǎn; 玩, 顽, 完, 烩 wán; 莞, 皖, 腕 wǎn; 沅, 鼋, (園 = 园) yuán; (远 = 遠) yuǎn; 垸, 院 yuàn.

 金文 篆文

* Two strokes drawn on a man's head; a composite of the characters for "man" and "above". [上 shàng, 人 rén]

元字上从人头形, 所以元即首(头)。元首二字重文迭义。

dà 大 甲 骨 人 人 人 人 人

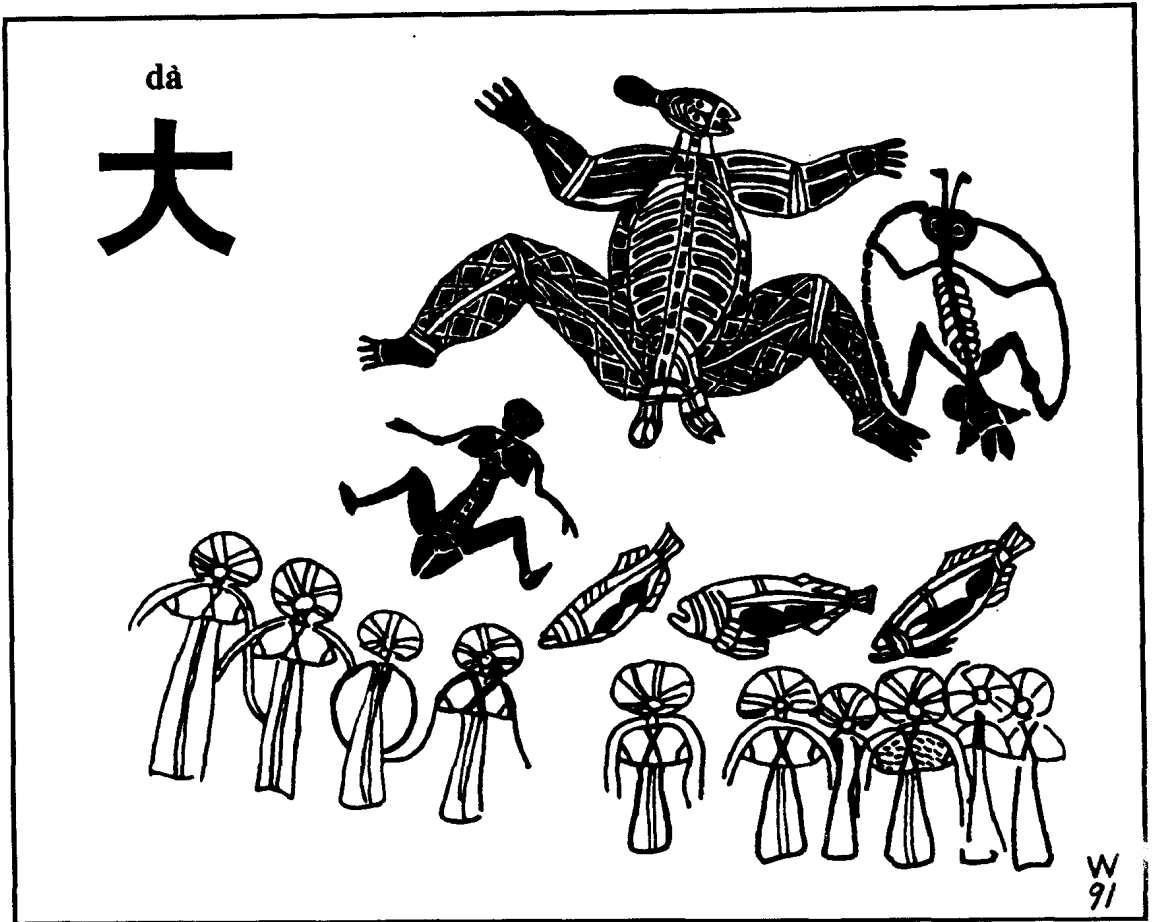
—big, great

驮 tuó; (達 = 达, 鞑 dá).

金 文 人 人 古 文 人 人 篆 文 大

* A standing man with his legs apart and his arms held out. See below.

人的正面形。“大”的字形中可引申出一种胯下形,表示控制、掌握等意,参见家、衣等字。



Nourlange rock painting, Northern Territory, Australia. 澳大利亚土著岩画。

tài 太 甲 骨 人 人 金 文 大

—greatest; too, over

汰, 酖, 钛, 肽, (态 = 態) tài.

古 文 大 篆 文 大

* Shows one man placed over on another man. Later, the lower man was simplified as a dot. [大 dà]

人胯下一点。古文字大太一字。

kàng 亢       亢

— high, haughty; excessive, extreme

亢, 抗, 炕 kàng; 杭, 吭, 航 háng; 沆 hàng.

* Derives from 大 dà; a standing man by adding a stroke between the person's legs. [大 dà]

亢为大的加划衍生字。





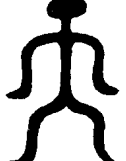







lì 立             立

— stand; set up; exist; at once

粒, 笠 lì; 拉, 垃 lā; 啦 la; 泣 qì; 位 wèi; 翌, 翊 yì.

* Drawing of a man standing on land. [大 dà]

象人立于大地之上。















tiān 天             天

— overhead; sky; heaven, god; day, weather

添 tiān; 忝, 舔 tiǎn; 吞 tūn.

* A standing man drawn to emphasize the head. [大 dà]

天即颠(头顶), 强调“大(人)”的头部。















shēn 身               身

— body, life; personally

* A side view of a man's body depicting the arm, prominent belly with navel and phallus. 身 shēn is a radical that indicates the body or an action of the body.

[殷 yīn]

象鼓腹的侧视人形。参考中所画为印第安人图形文字, 意为“男人”。

nǚ 女               女

woman

钁 nǚ; 汝 rǔ; 妆 zhuāng; 好 hǎo.

* A modest woman squatting down with hands crossed in front of her body.

交手屈膝的女子形。

jǐ 脊 篆文 脊

—spine, backbone; ridge

脊, 嵴, 瘠 jí.

* Drawing of a man's backbone and ribs. The lower part is a radical indicating a person's body. [肉 ròu]

脊字上部象人脊椎骨和肋骨形。

► The "X-ray" figure on a painted pottery plate, Banpo, the Neolithic.

半坡彩陶上的X光式人像。(采自《中国新石器时代陶器装饰艺术》, 23页, 文物出版社, 1982年。)



wèi 胃 金文 胃

—stomach

渭, 猬, 谓 wèi; 膚 = 肤 fū; 喟 kuì.

篆文 胃

* The upper part is said to be derived from a drawing of a stomach. The lower is a radical indicating a man's body. [田 tián, 肉 ròu]

胃字上面的“田”源于胃的象形。

xīn 心 甲骨文 心

—heart; feeling; center, core

芯 xīn, xìn; 沁 qìn; 愛 = 爱, 噉, 媛, 媛, 媛 ài; 蕊 ruǐ; 憂 = 忧, 優 = 优 yōu.

金文 心

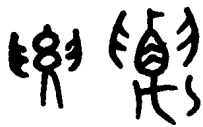
古文 心 篆文 心

* A primitive anatomical representation of a heart. There are two radicals derived from this pictograph—a vertical one on the left side of a character; and a flat one written on the bottom of a character such as 恋 liàn and 慕 mù. Both of them are used in characters referring to emotions. [忄, 灬 as radicals]

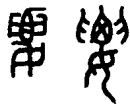
象心形。心的部首有二种形式。在繁体字愛和憂中都用了心。

yào
要

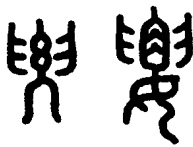
金文



—important; want to; must
#要: to ask, coerce, 腰 yāo.



篆文



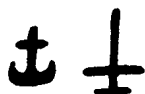
* Ancient pictographs of 要 yào showed two hands placed to indicate the midsection of the body. PLC, 腰 yāo: waist, kidney; with the human body radical. According to Chinese tradition, the kidneys are the body's most important organs.

The second pictograph of 要 yāo portrays a woman being grasped by two hands, hence, the meaning "coerce". The upper middle part was an ancient phonetic element. Later, both the phonetic element and the hands merged in the character 西 xī. [女 nǚ]

要是腰的初文,象人双手叉腰以指示腰部,“腰乃一身之要”。

shì
士

金文



古文



篆文



参考



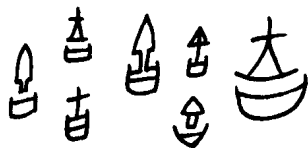
牡

—scholar-official; scholar, gentry; soldier; person
#仕 shì: to be an official.

* Drawing of a phallus. Or it derives from a drawing of an ancient weapon. PLC. [牡 mǔ; male (animal)]
象牡器之形。一说象古代兵器之形。

jí
吉

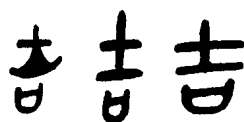
甲骨文



—favorable omen, good luck; propitious, auspicious; good; a surname.

#佶, 诘 jí; 髻 jì; 洁, 结, 诘, 桔 jié; 桔 jú; 黠 xiá; 颞, 颞 xié.

金文



古文



篆文



* A combination of 士 shì and a square. [士 shì]
吉字从士从口。

bǐ 比 甲 骨

𠂔 𠂔 𠂔

金 文

𠂔

𠂔 𠂔

古 文

𠂔 𠂔

篆 文

𠂔

— to compare; liken to; ratio; next to

𠂔 妣, 毗, 枇 = 秕 bǐ; 𠂔, 狴, 陛, 庇, 笄, (毕 = 畢, 毙 = 斃) bì; 批, 砒, 纸 pǐ; 琵琶, 枇, 毗, 蚘 pǐ; 仳 pǐ; 屁 pì.

* Shows two persons racing. [匕 bǐ]

比象二人比赛竞走赛跑形。

bǐ 匕 甲 骨

𠂔 𠂔 𠂔 𠂔

金 文

𠂔 𠂔 𠂔

篆 文

𠂔

参 考

𠂔 妣

— an ancient type of spoon

𠂔 叱 chī; 牝 pìn; female (animal).

* Derived and simplified from 比 bǐ. It is also a symbol for female, see below. PLC. [妣 bǐ; deceased mother, 牡 mǔ; male (animal)]

匕是比字之省。

cǐ 此 甲 骨

𠂔 𠂔 𠂔 𠂔

金 文

𠂔

𠂔 𠂔 𠂔

古 文

𠂔 𠂔

篆 文

𠂔

— this

𠂔 雌 cí; 疵 cǐ; 柴 chái; 砦 zhài; 贲, 舘, 舘, 髭, 齧 zī; 紫, 舘 zǐ; 毗 zì; 嘴 zuǐ.

* A combination of the symbol for female 匕 bǐ and a phonetic element 止 zhǐ. PLC, 雌 cí; female (animal), with the element of bird, 隹 zhuī. [雄 xióng; male, 匕 bǐ, 止 zhǐ]

此从匕止声。

yì 亦 甲 骨

𠂔 𠂔 𠂔

金 文

𠂔

𠂔

古 文

𠂔

篆 文

𠂔

— also (literary form)

𠂔 奕, 弈 yì; 迹 jì.

* Drawing of a man with two dots indicating the armpits. PLC. See below.

亦是腋字初文, 用两点指示人的两腋, 参见夜。