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Within A Picture

An Illustrated Guide to the Origins of Chinese Characters

By Shi Zhengyu

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NEW WORLD PRESS

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to the Origins of Chinese Characters

Written by Shi Zhengyu

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PREFACE

It is a pleasure for me to write, as requested, a preface to the English edition of *Picture Within A Picture: An Illustrated Guide to the Origins of Chinese Characters*, written by Shi Zhengyu. I do wish to avail myself on this occasion to write a few words on this interesting book full of historical background events and knowledge, along with ancient forms of Chinese characters and picture illustrations. This work reveals her arduous pursuit and naive curiosity to trace the origins and evolution of Chinese characters. Having read through the book, I believe that other readers of the book will find the characters lovely and interesting. I am grateful to her for her kind request. The book is characterized by the interesting and delightful as well as the scientific manner in which it is written. I will focus my comments on the latter.

Ancient Chinese characters are a large accumulation of pictographic characters. In other words, they express their meanings by resemblance to other objects. The characters, either single or ones in combination, have been readjusted and standardized since the Qin Dynasty, and have evolved into today's characters. These characters have been the carriers of the Chinese language during its long historical development and inherited the meanings and pronunciations from their ancient counterparts. Now, the character “日(sun)” no longer looks like the sun; “眼(eye)” does not look like the eye; “水(water)” does not show ripples; “要(want)” does not resemble a man with hands on the waist; ...However, they not only can record the basic elements of the Chinese language, but also structure the sound theory of other words with their own pronunciation and meanings. Pictographic characters unify form and meaning. The unity, representing a historical concept, has been accepted universally in the long historical development. The marriage of form and meaning is an inevitable outcome of history, not depending on anyone's will. For this reason, form and meaning cannot be interpreted freely; or in other words, interpretation must be well-grounded and in conformity with form and theory. Conformity with form means conformity with the form undergoing historical evolution; conformity

with theory means conformity with the theory agreed upon during historical development. Modern Chinese characters may sometimes seem to contradict each other. After tracing back their historical evolution, conformity with form and theory appears more clearly and is understandable.

In addition to the opinions referred to above, free interpretation is not admissible because all characters are systematized. Not one of them stands alone by itself. They became interconnected with historical evolution. One character being wrongly interpreted, will cause troubles to the interpretation of interrelated characters. An example can be cited pertaining to the interpretation of the character “弛 (limp)”. According to an interpretation, as the component “弓 (bow)” resembles a snake, and so the character means “松弛 (limp)”. Such an interpretation does not take into consideration the fact that characters, incorporating the component “弓”, as in “张” and “引” carry the opposite meaning of “松弛”, while characters as “弹”, “弥” have nothing to do with the meaning of “松弛”. Consequently, how can other characters be construed if “弛” is interpreted in such a sense?

Good interpretation requires first of all the understanding of the rules for structuring characters, and secondly, the mastering of an overall system of characters, and thirdly, the knowledge of the historical evolution of structuring characters. It may be said that it is too troublesome. It is true that it is not an easy job to improve cultural quality, however, it is not advisable to, for the sake of simplicity, neglect scientific rules. In the end, it will cause much more troubles. Following the rules and using a correct approach, work can be accomplished naturally with much convenience.

The objective of the book designed by the author is to discover a scientific rule for teaching Chinese characters. For this end, she began with ancient characters, leading people to an understanding of history of the evolution of Chinese characters. She has selected single characters as fundamental units. Each by itself acts as an independent character. They are then supplemented with some ancient ones containing more than one unit. By using these fundamental units capable of forming other characters, she masters the key links for a systematized structure of Chinese characters and this is the starting point for learning Chinese characters. Ancient forms of these single characters happen to be pictographic characters, which gives birth to the idea that picture illustrations provide resemblance of the charac-

ters to the objects and can be conducive to the understanding of the initial theory on structuring characters. This is of great help to beginners, both children and foreigners. What is more important is that by applying the accomplishments of research in ancient characters, she endeavors to interpret the forms and meanings of characters in conformity to historical events and the overall structuring system, avoiding arbitrary interpretations. Despite what remains open to discussion or that interpretation of some characters can be improved, I submit that she is particular about the choices among many opinions pertaining to the interpretation as to what should be used or rejected and no free guesses have been made as others have done. She speaks of the original meaning, the extended meaning or the meaning used today; she has paid due attention to linking traditional characters with simplified ones. She has not neglected the pronunciation attached to silent characters. It is obvious that she tries to popularize ancient characters through the study of modern Chinese. I believe that her objective represents serious pursuance and implied wisdom which will bring nothing but success.

In the absence of reference books for teachers teaching Chinese characters in elementary and secondary schools and for foreigners learning them, *Picture Within A Picture: An Illustrated Guide to the Origins of Chinese Characters*, is a good book for reference and for this reason, serious study and improvements need to be made in respect of the questions pertaining to the selection and interpretation of the characters as well as the picture illustrations and editing. Popularization of science is under way now and for popularization, scientific attitude is absolutely needed. Otherwise, people will be affected adversely. A good book with good objectives needs to be revised and perfected again and again and I believe that with the continued efforts of the author and her cooperators, *Picture Within A Picture: An Illustrated Guide to the Origins of Chinese Characters* will become a master work and be greeted with the appreciation of more and more readers.

Wang Ning
Beijing Normal University
February 28, 1996

About the Author

Ms. Shi Zhengyu, whose ancestral home is in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, was born in Beijing in 1964. From 1983 to 1988, she studied in the Chinese Department at Beijing Normal University where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree. From 1988 to 1991, she continued to pursue her study there while majoring in modern Chinese and graduated with a Master's degree.

In recent years, Ms. Shi has written a number of academic theses and published works, including *The Structure and Features of Separable Verbs in Modern Chinese*, *The Analysis of Pictographs' Ideographic Function of Pictophonetic Characters* and *The Analysis of Meanings Showed by Character Components of Pictophonetic Characters*, etc. She also wrote *An Illustrated Guide to the Origins of Chinese Characters* (Chinese Edition), which was published in 1994 and won the Second Golden Key Award in the Eighth National Books Contest ("Picture Within A Picture etc." is based on that book).

Ms. Shi presently serves as a lecturer in the Chinese Center at Beijing University. She is also a member of the Chinese Characters Association.

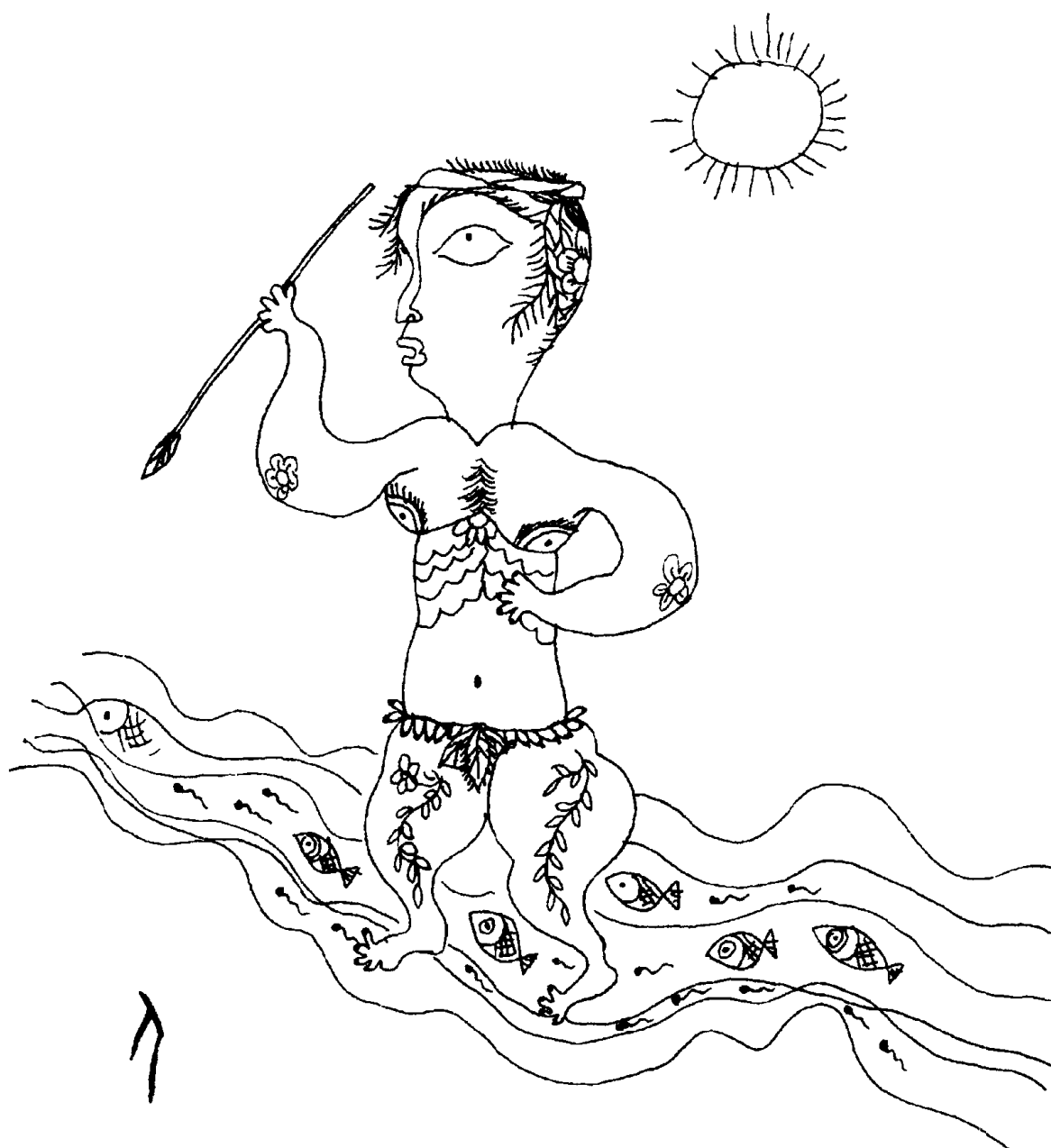
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SECTION ONE

HUMAN BEINGS



rén Ancient Chinese formed the character “人” from the sideview of a standing person. When used as a component of another character, it appears written as “亻”, indicating an object or action relating to people.

It was said in *The Narration and Explanation of Characters*, the first dictionary compiled by Xu Shen to interpret the meaning of Chinese characters in a comprehensive and systematic manner, that people were “the most precious thing in the world”, or the most respected in the world. This shows the naive humanism of ancient China.



cóng The shape of this character shows two people walking together, indicating one person following another. Therefore, one who follows another is also called “随从 (suícóng: entourage, attendant)”. Because this character shows two people, it has also come to mean to gather or assemble. The traditional character “叢” refers to a gathering or body of plants, such as small trees or bushes. Thus, it has been simplified as “丛”. Comprising this character is a “一” which, as a self-explanatory character, here has no significance. “从” indicates the pronunciation, as well as expresses the meaning. For example, plants and trees growing together are referred to as “树丛 (shùcóng)” or “草丛 (cǎocóng)”, etc.

In the period of the Three Kingdoms, Cao Cao used the following lines of poetry to express the vitality of the natural landscape: “Gathering together trees are growing, flourishing various plants are seeming.”



bǐ In ancient Chinese, this character is a sideview of two people
比 standing. The difference between “比” and “从(cóng)” is that the
 figures are facing opposite directions: in “从”, they face to the
 left, in “比”, to the right.

“比” shows two people close to each other, indicating intimacy. Lines of classic Chinese poetry say that “海内存知己，天涯若比邻 (Intimate friends are found elsewhere in the country, remote areas appear to be next-door neighbors)” and “在天愿作比翼鸟，在地愿为连理枝 (In the sky, we’d be two love-birds to fly wing to wing, on the earth, two trees with branches twined from spring to spring)”. “比” in the quoted lines means “close to”.

On the ocean bottom lives the flounder, or flatfish, whose eyes move closer together as the fish grows, eventually migrating entirely to one side of the head. We call this fish “比目鱼(bǐmùyú)”.



běi Two people sitting back to back forms “北”. Later, “北” came to indicate a direction, north. Its original meaning is expressed by adding a “月(肉)(indicating flesh)” underneath, thus becoming “背”, meaning “back”. The pronunciation changes as well (from the third to the fourth tone as “bèi”).

In a battle, when the losing side turns and retreats, it is called “败北(bàiběi)” (the pronunciation remains in the third tone).



lì The ancient Chinese character shows two people walking
 丽 next to each other, meaning to form a couple or a pair. Later, a
 “亻” was added to make “伉”, found in “伉俪(kànglì)”, mean-
 ing a husband and a wife, which was the original meaning of “丽”.

Later, “丽” plus “鹿(lù:deer)” made “麗”, signifying a deer with
 a magnificent coat, and meaning “美丽(měilì: beautiful)”, or “华丽
 (huálì: magnificent, resplendent)”. It has been simplified back to
 “丽”, but no longer carries the original meaning of two persons walking
 side by side.