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CULTURE

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HAN JIANTANG



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China Intercontinental Press

图书在版编目 (C I P) 数据

汉字: 英文 / 韩鉴堂著; 王国振, 周玲译. -- 北京: 五洲传播出版社, 2014.12 (中国文化系列 / 王岳川主编)

ISBN 978-7-5085-2714-7

I . ①汉… II . ①韩… ②王… ③周… III . ①汉字—文化—中国—英文 IV . ① H12

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2013) 第 321785 号

中国文化系列丛书

主 编: 王岳川
出 版 人: 荆孝敏
统 筹: 付 平

中国文化·汉字

著 者: 韩鉴堂
翻 译: 王国政 周 玲
责任编辑: 苏 谦
插图绘制: 韩鉴堂 韩 宇
图片提供: CFP FOTOE 东方 IC
装帧设计: 丰饶文化传播有限责任公司
出版发行: 五洲传播出版社
地 址: 北京市海淀区北三环中路 31 号生产力大楼 B 座 7 层
邮 编: 100088
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网 址: www.cicc.org.cn
承 印 者: 北京光之彩印刷有限公司
版 次: 2015 年 5 月第 1 版第 1 次印刷
开 本: 889×1194mm 1/16
印 张: 14.5
字 数: 200 千字
定 价: 128.00 元

Contents

Preface	6
The Dawn of Civilization	8
The Graphic Characters of the River Civilization	10
The Fate of the Graphic Characters of the River Civilization	15
Using Pictures to Express Ideas	18
The Origin of Han Characters	22
Legends from Ancient Times	24
Discovering the Origins of Han Characters	28
The Evolution of Han Characters	34
Ancient Drawing-like Characters	36
The Development of Modern Characters	54
The Main Aspects of the Development of Han Characters	65
The Formation of Han Characters	70
The Development of the “Six Categories”	72
How Han Characters were Formed	76
The Form and Structure of Modern Han Characters	96
The Square Form of Han Characters	102

The Mystery of Modern Han Characters	106
Pictographic Elements in Modern Han Characters	108
The Use of Pictographic Elements in Modern Han Characters	116

Han Characters and the Chinese Language	122
Why Han Characters are Well Suited to the Chinese Language	124
Han Characters Are the Basic Structural Units of the Chinese Language	127
The Word-making Ability of Han Characters	128
Han Characters Bridge the Gap Between Dialects and Eras	131
The “Sinosphere”	133

Chinese History Told in Han Characters 140

China in Ancient Times 142

China's Ancient Civilization
Shown Through Han
Characters 155

The Art of Han Characters 192

The Calligraphic Art of Han
Characters 194

Famous Calligraphic
Treasures 199

Commercial-art Han
Characters 207

The Seal Art of Han
Characters 215

Stepping into the Information Age 222

The Computerization of
Han Characters 224

Fears and Worries for
Han Characters in
the Information Age 229



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装帧设计: 丰饶文化传播有限责任公司
出版发行: 五洲传播出版社
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The Development of the “Six Categories”	72
How Han Characters were Formed	76
The Form and Structure of Modern Han Characters	96
The Square Form of Han Characters	102

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Han Characters** _____ 106

Pictographic Elements in
Modern Han Characters _____ 108

The Use of Pictographic
Elements in Modern Han
Characters _____ 116

**Han Characters and the
Chinese Language** _____ 122

Why Han Characters are
Well Suited to the Chinese
Language _____ 124

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Basic Structural Units of the
Chinese Language _____ 127

The Word-making Ability of
Han Characters _____ 128

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the Gap Between Dialects
and Eras _____ 131

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140
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Characters 155

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Characters 194
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Treasures 199
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Characters 207
The Seal Art of Han
Characters 215

Stepping into the Information Age 222

The Computerization of
Han Characters 224
Fears and Worries for
Han Characters in
the Information Age 229

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.



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".

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