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中石送



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In September 1793 the British peer Lord Macartney, after a whole year of traveling and leading a large trade mission, was received in audience by Qing Dynasty Emperor Qianlong. This was the first official meeting between a newly-risen oceanic empire and an ancient continental empire.

For this meeting, the British side had specially prepared gifts which represented the latest discoveries in science and technology. There were some 590 items, including astronomical and geographical instruments, chiming clocks, modern firearms, and portable models of carriages and boats. In addition, this impressive delegation contained 135 scientists, painters, surveyors and physicians, as well as 650 soldiers and sailors.

The delegation greatly impressed both the Qing court officials and the Chinese people, but what really puzzled them was the fact that only one of them had some grasp of the Chinese language, and so effective communication was a problem. As a matter of fact, in those days there could not have been more than 100 people in the whole of the Western world who could read and write Chinese characters. For a considerable period of time after this, China's national strength declined, as a result of its long-term closed-door policy. As a result, Chinese characters shared the calamitous fate of the land which had given birth to and nourished them.

Much time has passed, and we now stand on the threshold of the 21st century, and a brand-new era on a worldwide scale awaits the Chinese language! Right now, there are more than 40 million people from other countries studying Chinese—and this is only the first wave in a surging tide of enthusiasm for learning Chinese which is rising right now.

From 1793 to today, only a little more than 200 years has passed. This has been a turbulent period in both Chinese and world history, and it is a mirror in which we can look back and gain another perspective on ourselves, whether in the aspect of our society, our traditions or our unique writing system.



PART ONE

A Unique Blossom in Civilization





“Tian” as in the phrase “Tian Ren He Yi”
(meaning Heaven and Man as one)

The *Roots of Characters* [Shuo Wen Jie Zi] defines the character “tian” as “the summit.”

One day in March 1899, in the course of excavations, a German archeologist named Robert Koldewey discovered the huge base of a tower.

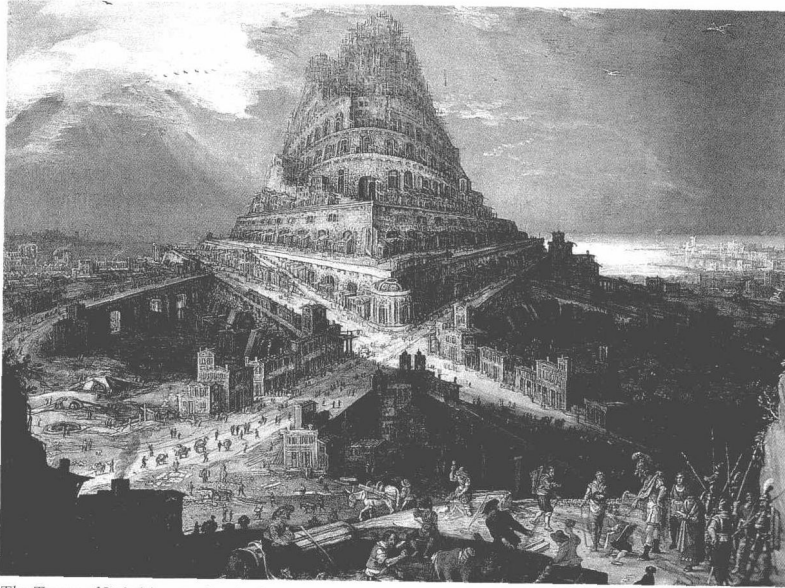
The base was seven stories high, and each side measured 87.78 m, and it is estimated that 58 million bricks went into making the original tower. It had squatted like a huge monster, looking down on the valleys of two rivers. Archeologists identified it as the Tower of Babel described in the Bible.

According to the Old Testament, the ancestors of the human race had originally spoken but one language. Because there were no obstacles to communication in those days, everybody lived and worked in harmony, and built the thriving city of Babylon between the two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates.

◆ *Maurizia Sacchetti, professor of Oriental Studies, University of Naples, Italy*

Babylon was a very wealthy city. Its officials wanted to leave behind for the world buildings which would last forever, and decided to build a tower which would reach into the heavens. The objective was to show that they were so powerful that they could stand shoulder to shoulder with God.

But this ambition brought about a disaster. As the construction grew higher and higher, and began to near the clouds, God became



The Tower of Babel in an oil painting

alarmed and incensed at the hubris of ordinary mortals trying to put themselves on the same plane as himself.

◆ **Yang Huilin, professor of the College of Literature, Renmin University of China**

Thereupon, God decided to sow confusion in the language of men: When men's channels of linguistic communication were blocked, their power of mutual production would be limited. So one day, when the people building the Tower of Babel found that they could no longer interact or communicate easily, work on the construction stopped, and the project was abandoned.

◆ **Maurizia Sacchetti, professor of Oriental Studies, University of Naples, Italy**

This indicates that at that time and in that way—whether we call it a miracle or simply a normal action—God showed himself wiser than mankind. The tower to Heaven was only half-finished, and in the Western world the word Babel came to denote confusion.

The legend of the abandonment of the construction of the Tower of Babel is the earliest one we can nowadays find concerning the power of language. But did mankind originally speak one language and one language only?



Hieroglyphics
of Egypt



Cuneiform script of Babylon



Harappa symbols of
ancient India

Circumstances change with the passage of time. We cannot know what mankind's original language was, and the Biblical story about the Tower of Babel may just be a pious expression of mankind's natural longing for an unrestricted channel of communication.

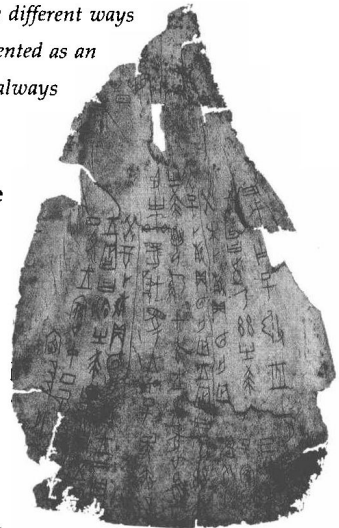
It is common knowledge these days that the world's four great civilizations sprang up independently; contacts and fusion came only a long time after they emerged, and their languages and writing systems were innate products of their individual cultural environments.

Archeological discoveries have brought man very close indeed to his ancestors. Historical records present a chart which shows that writing can be traced back to the 15th century B.C. in the four great ancient civilizations. From west to east, we can identify the hieroglyphics of Egypt, the cuneiform script of Babylon, the Harappa symbols of ancient India and the oracle bone inscriptions of ancient China. Archeologists have discovered that while these, the earliest and most primitive attempts at writing, probably could not perfectly record actual speech, nevertheless the important information contained in spoken language is encapsulated in these symbols.

◆ *Zhou Youguang, philologist*

The earliest-devised method of writing was by drawing pictures, a system known as hieroglyphics. Because all earliest scripts used this method, they are all quite similar. The sun is always represented as round, although there are different ways of depicting roundness, and the moon is always represented as an incomplete moon. The symbol for man, however, is always drawn differently.

It happened virtually by coincidence some 4,000 or 5,000 years ago that a longing for exchanges and records sprang up among all these children of the great rivers. Thereupon, depending on the benefits of their environment and experience, they separately drew beautiful pictures to record their thoughts, wishes and aspirations. These ancient ruins we look upon today contain within themselves the living environ-



Oracle bone inscriptions of ancient China

ment of the people of those days.

The hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt, the cuneiform writing of ancient Babylon, the Harappa symbols of ancient India and the oracle bone characters of ancient China...they are each a sort of "Tower of Babel" constructed by mankind. Stored in them are the abilities of those peoples, and their achievements. They cultivate in us a reverence for our ancestors, and shape our spiritual core. In addition, they encapsulate the cultural bonds that hold each of their peoples together.

Today three of the four ancient scripts have disappeared. What are the special qualities of the Chinese characters that help their existence until today?

人 rén

"Ren" as in the phrase "Tian Ren He Yi"

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character "ren" as "the most precious part of the nature of Heaven and Earth."

Five thousand years ago the Land of the Two Rivers (Mesopotamia—present-day Iraq) was covered in lush forests. But incessant warfare between and conquests of the various peoples who lived there resulted in the fertile soil of the two river basins being gradually covered with sand, and in the process the magnificent civilization of Sumer was buried too.

In the first century B.C. the Sumerian's cuneiform script, which had been impressed on clay tablets, was replaced by an alphabetic system written on a kind of paper made out of reeds called papyrus. But since then, this script, which was once widely used in Mesopotamia, and the culture which it represented, vanished beneath the dust of history for 1,500 years.

In 1472, an Italian traveler noticed in the ruins of the palace in

Persepolis, the capital of ancient Persia, these signs inscribed on a wall. Filled with curiosity, he took copies of the signs back home with him, but could find nobody interested in his discovery.

◆ *Giuseppina Merchionni, professor of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Italy*

One hundred and forty years after the discovery of cuneiform writing, another Italian made a very important discovery when he took back to Europe specimens of what seemed to be the writing of the ancient Egyptians.



A page from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, written on papyrus

What did these primitive signs mean? It was only during the European Renaissance and its modern enlightenment thinking that the enthusiasm for tracing mankind's ancestors boiled over.

But these strange cuneiform characters, arranged in no apparent order, puzzled European scholars for centuries, and if it hadn't been for a certain huge rock it is not certain how long the riddle would have remained unsolved.

◆ *Gong Yushu, professor of the Foreign Languages College, Peking University*

On this rock is what is called the Behistun Inscription. It is carved on a cliff face near the village of the same name. It dates from 519 B.C., following the putting down of a revolt of nine tribes by the Persian king Darius I, and its purpose was to extol the king's

mighty deeds. The inscription is in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian.

◆ **Liu Jian, research fellow of the Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences**

This inscription was carved very high up on a cliff face to stress the fact that the king possessed supreme power. It was not easy for travelers on the nearby road to see the details of it clearly, for the same reason. For over 2,300 years, little attention was paid to this inscription.



The Behistun Inscription

Then, in 1835, the inscription drew the attention of a young British army officer called Rawlinson.

Intrigued, he made rubbings of the texts and took them back to Europe. After 12 years of painstaking study, Rawlinson managed to read the section in the most recent language—Old Persian, and with this as a reference point, he deciphered the texts in the other two languages. Rediscovered after 1,500 years, the cuneiform script puzzled Europeans for another 300 years until, with the Behistun inscription as the key, the script revealed its secrets bit by bit—and the civilization of Mesopotamia, which had been hidden behind a veil, showed its enchanting smile to the rest of the world.

History always has surprises in store! The pyramids of Egypt have stood, lofty and magnificent, by the River Nile for more than 5,000 years. But before the 19th century nobody knew who their builders were, and nobody knew of the splendor that lay beneath the endlessly undulating sand dunes.

In the fifth century A.D. a conqueror from Europe shut the last batch of ancient Egypt's shrines and strictly forbade the use of the script of the pharaohs, and the sands of time sealed the doom of the civilization of ancient Egypt.

A hundred years passed—and then a thousand, and nobody could understand the sigh of the pyramids. And then in May 1798, Napoleon led a huge fleet of warships carrying 50,000 infantrymen and cavalry to invade Egypt. This unusual expedition also contained over 150 scientists, scholars and artists.

Misfortune and fortune accompany each other. The mysterious veils that covered the historical secrets of the Oriental world were almost all torn away by European hands, including the decipherment of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics.



The pyramids of Egypt

In July of the following year, while constructing defensive works at a small town by the mouth of the Nile called Rosetta, French soldiers discovered what later became known as the “Rosetta Stone.”

◆ *Yan Haiying, professor of the Department of History, Peking University*

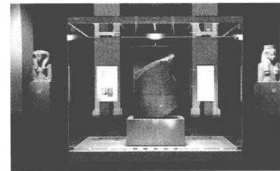
The soldiers were astonished at what they had found, and lost no time conveying the news to the linguists on the scientific staff of the expedition. The latter discovered that the stone bore inscriptions in three different languages, one of which—Greek—the linguists were well acquainted with. They surmised that the three texts contained the same content, and indeed it turned out that the Rosetta Stone provided the key to the decipherment of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Today, the Rosetta Stone—the “tablet which can speak”—stands at the entrance to the Egyptian Room of the British Museum. It is labeled a “spoil of war.”

Napoleon failed to secure the rich fruits of his far-flung expedition, and lost his Egyptian acquisitions, including the Rosetta Stone, to the British at the Battle of the Nile in September 1799. After that, British and French scholars engaged in a long-drawn-out competition to decipher the clue to reading Egyptian hieroglyphs.



The place where the Rosetta Stone was discovered



The Rosetta Stone is now at the entrance to the Egyptian Room of the British Museum.

Ready access to the Rosetta Stone enabled the British physicist Thomas Young to quickly identify several Greek names among the hieroglyphs. But this was far from being able to understand the whole text.

The turning point came 20 years later in France in 1822, when Jean-Francois Champollion, who had mastered a dozen ancient tongues, made a breakthrough in the work of deciphering the hieroglyphs.

◆ **Yan Haiying, professor of the Department of History, Peking University**

He decided that some of the signs represented meanings while others represented sounds. At the same time, some were radicals like we have in Chinese writing, standing at the side of other symbols to modify them. This way, Champollion hit upon the right way to decipher the hieroglyphs. One of Champollion's greatest contributions was that he was the first to interpret the names of the pharaohs of ancient Egypt. In both these achievements, he far outstripped Thomas Young.



Champollion



Thomas Young

Although it lost the Rosetta Stone, in the end France defeated Britain in the race to decipher the hieroglyphs, and mankind could finally hear voices which had been mute for 2,000 years:

"My daughter's lips are lotus buds, her breasts fruits of the mandrake, her jade arms are like vines, her eyes as calm and still as kernels and her eyebrows curl like osiers."

In fact, before the oracle bone inscriptions were discovered, the earliest years of Chinese characters, which coincided with the ancient dynasties of this land, were well and truly hidden in layers of thick, sandy soil. In the autumn of 1899, the same year in which the Tower of Babel was discovered, Imperial Academician Wang Yirong fell ill with malaria. Seeking a cure at the famous traditional Chinese medicine shop Darentang, located at Xuanwumen Wai, Beijing, he was intrigued by one of the ingredients in the concoction being prepared for him—so-called "dragon bones."

◆ **Li Xueqin, professor of the Department of History, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tsinghua University**

In the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) the Imperial Academy was the highest institution

of learning in China, and at that time Wang Yirong was one of its top scholars. As such, he had the opportunity to study archeological findings from all over the country.

He was not the only one interested in the “dragon bones.” Before long, an antiquary in Shandong Province named Fan Weiqing found some of the inscribed bones in Anyang, in Henan Province, and sent them to Wang Yirong, and asked his fellow-townsmen to help him examine them.

◆ *Li Min, deputy director of the China Society of Yin-Shang Civilization*

Fan Weiqing sold his “dragon bones” to Wang Yirong, who was an expert in this field and was convinced that the bones were different from the ordinary bones used to make medicine. He suspected that the carvings on them were a type of writing, and was prepared to pay a great deal of money to acquire more of them.

Eventually, searching some classical histories, Wang found the evidence he needed that the carvings were indeed primitive Chinese characters used before the first unification of China by the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.). The information was contained in the *Rites of Zhou* and the *Records of the Historian*.

This sensational story was first published in a supplement to the *North China Daily* in July 1931. However, its authenticity was later called into question by some scholars, and nowadays the academic world accepts that this report was a distortion by a journalist. The truth of this matter still awaits clarification, but one thing is certain: In 1899, the “dragon bones” stopped disappearing into medicinal stews!

Wang Yirong took his bones to his old friend Liu E, the author of *Travels of Lao Can*, and together they studied them. It did not take them long to discover from them some long-hidden secrets of Chinese society of high antiquity.



Wang Yirong



Liu E