

# CHINESE CHARACTERS



Han Jiantang



China Intercontinental Press



Sharing the Beauty of China

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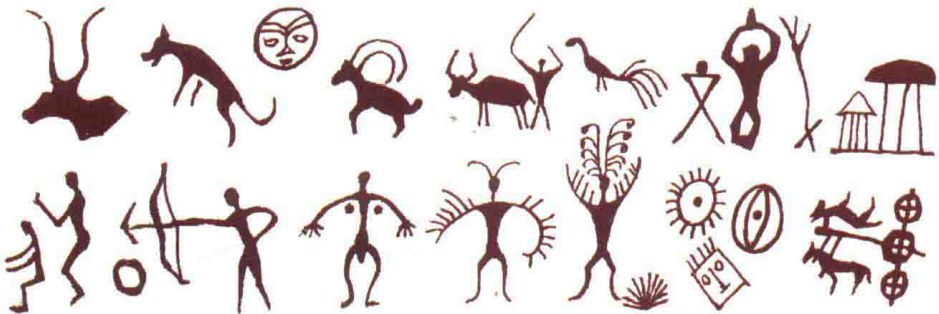
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# Foreword

**T**he Chinese Culture: Chinese Characters is written at invitation of China Intercontinental Press.

This book is written in simple words and plentiful pictures, and makes a brief introduction to the basic knowledge of great and profound Han character culture, which is designed to enable foreign friends to set foot on a relaxed and beneficial journey to the “Kingdom of Han Characters”. I sincerely hope it can help its readers to get a general knowledge of and become interested in the Han character culture, thus improve their ability to recognize and use the Han characters, and play a role in Sino-foreign cultural exchanges.

Han characters are square graphic characters and the only ancient characters have being used up to now and called the “living fossils”, which is regarded as a miracle in the history of human civilization.

Han characters originated from drawings. The forms of the Han characters evolved through 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 (official script in the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD)), and Kaishu (regular script). Gradually drawings evolved into strokes, pictographic characters became symbols, and complex characters changed into simple ones. Simplification has always been the mainstream in the development of the Han characters. All these are covered in this book with plenty of statements and pictures.

As a kind of graphic written language, Han characters have unique

intrinsic graphic feature and pictographic visual feature, which are highlighted throughout the book. As we know, modern Han characters are no longer pictographic characters but with unchanged graphic feature, and keep the forms of ancient pictographic characters to varying degrees. Fully exploring the dominant or recessive pictographic element in modern Han characters is of some value for recognition and use of Han characters.

As the “living fossils”, Han characters have the square structure containing a wealth of information, concentrate civilization of the Chinese nation for thousands of years. The book also introduces and appreciates these heavy elements of Chinese culture, and Han characters’ excellent performance as an art.

As the ancient characters used by the largest number of people in the world, Han characters themselves are still in development and bound to maintain their youth forever.

In brief:

*Han characters*

*The written symbols of Chinese language*

*Han characters*

*Unique graphic characters*

*They date back to ancient times*

*Originate from drawings*

*They are notable and glamorous*

*Shoulder profound history*

*Progress in a thriving manner*

*They stride gorgeously forward*

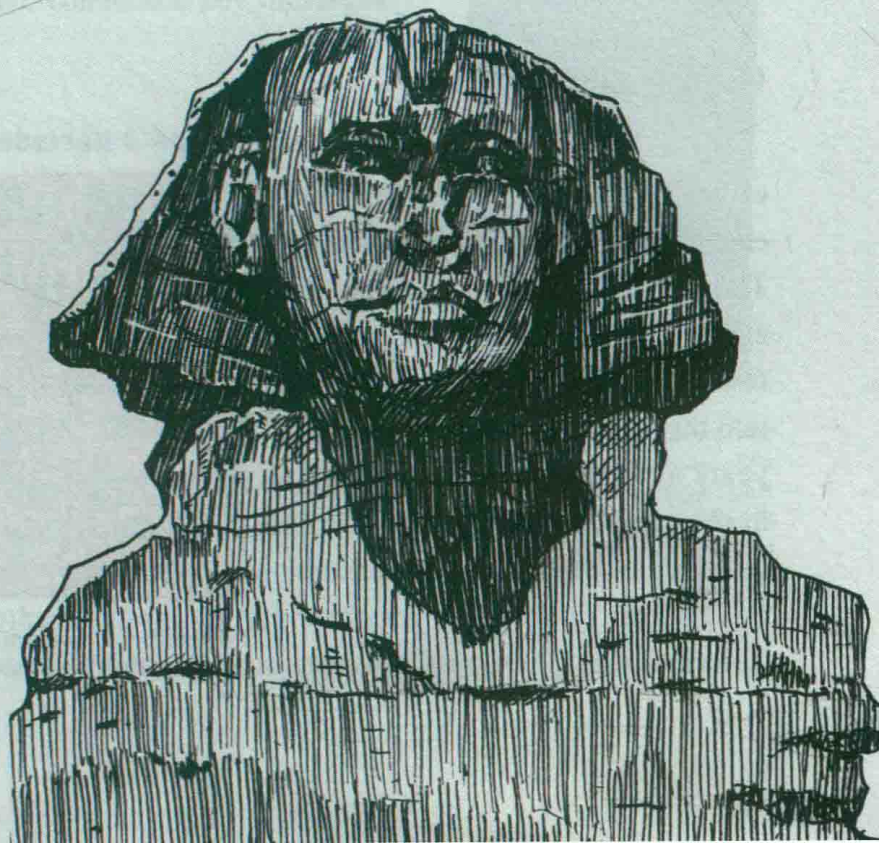
*Constantly self-improve*

*Firmly self-perfect*

*Like a long river*

*Running forward with resounding songs*

# THE DAWN OF CIVILIZATION



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

The first few characters appeared in what we call the River Civilization of some Oriental societies. Dating back to around 5,000 years ago, with a desire raised to communicate and record, ancestors living in these societies almost coincidentally kept track of their thoughts using drawing-like written symbols, which is a recording way generally accepted as being their original common choice.

## **Graphic Characters of the River Civilization**

Human beings witnessed a great leap in their evolutionary history when they developed from no language to the emergence of language. And they subsequently witnessed another important leap forward when they progressed from no characters to the emergence of characters.

### **On Way to Civilization**

Characters can be broadly categorized into two kinds: Graphic characters and alphabetic writing. The oldest characters, created in ancient Oriental nations, evolved from drawings, and therefore fall into the first category. About 5,500 years ago, the Sumerians living in the areas drained by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers invented cuneiform characters on clay tablets. Some 5,000 years ago, the



The cuneiform characters on clay tablets in early times were pictographic symbols.

Egyptians living the Nile River Valley wrote pictographic characters on papyrus. Some 500 years later, the Indian ancients living in the Indus River Valley invented seal characters of their own. All of these belong to the category of pictographs. At the time between 5,000–3,000 years ago, the Chinese people living in the Yellow and Yangtze River Valleys wrote characters on pottery, tortoise shells and bones and bronze utensils, and these characters also belong to the pictographic category. These ancient characters demonstrated the exceptional intelligence of the River Civilizations. These earliest original ancient symbols as known to man, though not entirely documented the language, have condensed key messages of it.

### **Ancient Sumerian Cuneiform Characters**

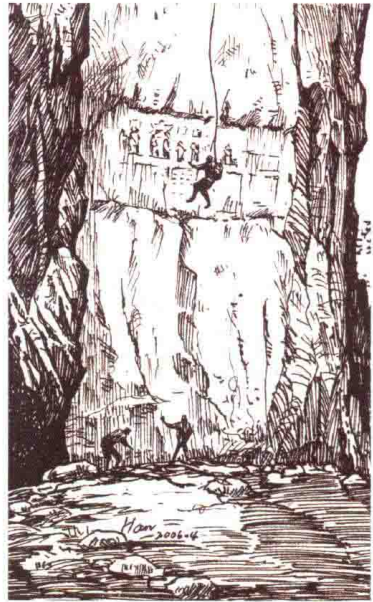
Cuneiform characters are generally accepted as being the earliest of their kind in the world. They were created by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia some 5,500 years ago. They were symbols impressed into clay tablets using pens which were actually reeds. The strokes of these characters are thick at one end and thin at the other, giving the impression of being wedges or nails. People of later



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, inscribed in 8,000 cuneiform characters on clay tablets.

generations called them cuneiform characters on clay tablets or T-shaped characters. The cuneiform characters on clay tablets evolved from drawings, belonging to the pictographic category mentioned above. The cuneiform characters on clay tablets were 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 with cuneiform characters have been found. In addition, many cuneiform characters have been found on mountainsides, as well as on stone tablets and pillars. The cuneiform characters representing the Code of Hammurabi on the pillars and the Behistun Inscriptions inscribed on pieces of stone wall are the most spectacular of all. Nevertheless, the cuneiform, with meanings that have been lost long ago, have made European scholars being at sea for centuries.

Rawlinson (1810–1859), a British scholar, decoded the Behistun Inscriptions inscribed on pieces of stone wall in 1851, unveiling the secrets of cuneiform characters. On 91-meter-high cliffs in Behistun village, the Behistun Inscriptions were inscribed with three languages, the upper part



H.C. Rawlinson, a British scholar, made rubbings of cuneiform characters on clay tablets on the side of a steep cliff. Rawlinson subsequently took at least a dozen years to successfully break down all the cuneiform characters on the rock engraving, who is called "The Father of Cuneiform Characters on Clay Tablets".

is Babylonian cuneiform, the middle part Elamite and the lower part ancient Persian. Rawlison started his efforts with ancient Persian, the most familiar one to him. The decoding of the Behistun Inscriptions makes it possible for people to have some understanding of the ancient civilization in the two river valleys. Otherwise, the brilliant ancient civilization will be buried in the dust of history forever.

## Ancient Egyptian Pictographs

Some 5,000 years ago, ancient Egyptians living in the Nile River Valley created their pictographs, and these can still be seen on Egyptian pyramids, temples, stone objects and pottery. They inscribed these pictographs on a kind of papyrus, using reed pens, and bound them into rolls which subsequently became the world's most ancient books. In 525, when the Persians conquered the Egyptians, Egyptian pictographs that had existed for some 3,000 years died out. When the monk as the last person to understand the Egyptian pictographs passed away, their meaning became lost.

Ancient Egyptian pictographs had been covered by mysterious veils for a long time. In 1798, French troops of Napoléon Bonaparte (August 15, 1769–May 5, 1821) went on an expedition to Egypt. One



Pictographic Characters in Ancient Egypt

year later, when French soldiers built the fortifications in Rosetta town at the mouth of the Nile, a piece of stone covered with carved inscriptions in ancient Egyptian pictographs, demotic pictographs and Greek characters, was discovered among the pile of rocks in a quarry. This is the famous Rosetta Stone. By virtue of Greek inscriptions, Champollion (1790–1832), a French genius scholar who is proficient in dozens of archaism, decoded the pictographs on the Stone in 1824. And then, the mysteries of ancient Egyptian pictographs were solved, with ancient Egyptian civilization revealed itself, contributing to the appearance of the “Egyptology”.

### **Ancient Indian Harappa Seal Characters**

Ancient India, one of the cradles of human civilization, made a uniquely original contribution to that civilization in the spheres of philosophy, literature, and natural science. The ancient civilization of India was rediscovered in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically the Harappa Culture in the drainage areas of the Indus River. Harappa bronze-age culture emerged about 4,500 years ago and disappeared quite suddenly 800 years later. It existed at almost the same time as the Xia Dynasty (2070–1600 BC) in China. Archaeologists subsequently discovered the ruins of several cities,



- Seal Characters in Ancient India. These mysterious symbols, engraved on a square seal, are obviously pictographic characters, and they are waiting quietly for their mysteries to be decoded.



City Ruins of Harappa Culture. The cities of Harappa Culture that have been discovered in the drainage area of the Indus River are all of great size. Exquisite seal characters were discovered in the ruins of these cities.

including Harappa, and some of these were of considerable size. They have even been called the “Manhattan of the Bronze-Ware Age”. Archaeologists discovered characters from the Harappa period in the city ruins, inscribed on seals made of stone, pottery, or ivory and thus called “Seal Characters”. More than 2,500 seals and over 500 character symbols have been discovered, and these symbols are mostly pictographic characters, although some are alphabetic writings. It is astonishing to find exquisite engravings of animal images on each small seal, and the artistic level is considerably high.

Different from Mesopotamian cuneiform characters and Egyptian pictographs, the seal characters of ancient India have not been translated. Furthermore, the Harappa Culture disappeared suddenly after an existence of only hundreds of years, so the seal characters, as well as ancient Harappa Culture itself, remain mysteries to philologists and



Jiaguwen Recording Sacrificial Hunting

historians. As for the well-known ancient Sanskrit, it emerged later and in all probability has no direct connection with the seal characters.

### **Ancient Chinese Pictographs**

China, one of the ancient civilized countries in the East, has a 5,000-year history of characters. Image symbols carved and painted on the potteries during the Dawenkou Culture in Shandong Province of the lower reach of the Yellow River, should be recognized as the earliest characters in China. While Jiaguwen inscribed on tortoise shells and animal bones some 3,000 years ago, on which the development of the later characters based, should be systematic and comparatively mature one. No less than the ancient characters created by other oriental civilizations, the character symbols in early China were so much like drawings, both using pictographic forms to express meanings.

## Different Fates of Graphic Characters of the River Civilization

A seafaring nation with a mysterious source, turned out to reverse the trend of graphic characters of at least two River civilizations.

### The Creation of Alphabetic Characters

At the time between the 13<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century BC, there was a nation that good at seafaring and commercial activities, in the east coast of the Mediterranean (currently the areas of Syria and Lebanon). They were always dressed in bright purple robes and known as “the Phoenicians” (it means “purple” in Greek). In response to the need of bookkeeping in a faster and more effective manner, resulting from the frequent communication in the spheres of business and seafaring, also in the light of Babylonian cuneiform and Egyptian pictographs, the Phoenicians created the simple Phoenician alphabet (including 22 alphabets), a sort of convenient and practical civilian characters.

On this basis, the Greeks created the Greek alphabet, from which the Latin alphabet coined in Roman Empire originated. But Sumerian



Phoenicians Creating 22 Alphabets

cuneiform and ancient Egyptian pictographs, at the same time, gradually died out completely. Alphabetic characters combined with any language are likely to form a new kind of characters. Thus, so many different types of alphabetic characters emerged, in continents of Europe diversified in nationalities and languages. Europe was dotted with nationalities using various alphabetic, drawing the foreshadowing of the later formation of a state-lined political pattern. We can say that almost all phonetic alphabets of today's European countries evolved from the Greek and Latin one, also say that the characters of Phoenician alphabet is their ancestor.

Over the time, however, the graphic characters of ancient Egypt, Babylon and ancient India eventually disappeared or were replaced by alphabetic characters, which should be attributable to the fate of history.

### **The Only Living Ancient Characters**

When it comes to China's pictographs, the fate becomes different. For Jiaguwen discovered in 1899, it only took Chinese scholars a

The Yellow River Fostering Chinese Civilization

