

CHINESE CHARACTER IN CHINESE CHARACTERS

汉字中的中国品格

高原著

南开大学出版社

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Every Chinese character is a story of our forefathers' as well as a story of our own, for the characters nurtured by our forefathers' life have passed down their pains and glories into our life, our mind, our blood, and our character.

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Hand 手



Hand [Bronze Script]

Long time ago, in the far distant past, there was a God of Chaos 混沌 who cannot tell right from wrong or good from evil. This is not a surprise since the God of Chaos cannot see or hear, and possibly cannot touch for there was no hands on the arms and no feet on the legs^①. Our poor little God was like a lonely baby, the innocent child born out of the earliest time, bumping around right in the center of the universe, a mirror image^② of the self-centered human primitive selves who measured the world by their own hands which did not even exist in the ancient myth.

① Luan, B. *Dictionary of Chinese Gods and Spirits* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009: 210.

(栾保群. 中国神怪大辞典[M]. 北京: 人民出版社, 2009: 210.)

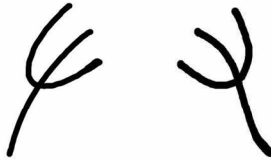
② Yan, Y. *Chinese Gods* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2017: 7.

(严优. 诸神纪[M]. 北京: 北京大学出版社, 2017: 7.)



God of Chaos [A Drawing based on Yan^①]

Our five-fingered hand is often simplified into three fingers, an ancient Chinese cartoon drawing of a hand in profile.



Left Hand and Right Hand [Bronze Script]

The three-fingered hand, which makes its appearance into many Chinese characters, enjoys much higher publicity than the five-fingered one. This of course is not because its simplicity adds to its cuteness, but because it looks very similar to the branches of a tree, the feathers of a bird, and the blades of a grass. In this way, human hand is an inseparable part of nature, reaching high up into the sky with birds and deep down into the earth with grass and trees so that “the whole world is in human hand”^②.

① Yan, Y. *Chinese Gods* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2017: 4.

(严优. 诸神纪[M]. 北京: 北京大学出版社, 2017: 4.)

② Wan, L. *Chinese Characters Have a Word to Say* [M]. Beijing: Oriental Press, 2017: 240.

(老湾. 汉字有话说[M]. 北京: 东方出版社, 2017: 240.)



Feather [Bronze Script]



Grass [Oracle Script]



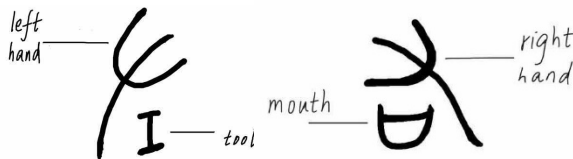
Tree [Bronze Script]

Chaos was in the shape of an egg in the myth of Big God Pangu, a growing giant who split Chaos into the heaven and the earth by standing for 18000 years with the heaven lifted in his hands and the earth trodden hard on his feet so that a new world was created between the further-and-further-apart heaven and earth. The giant was finally tired of growing and died with his body incarnated into nature: his left eye into the sun, his right eye into the moon, his hair and beard into stars, his blood into rivers, his sweat into raindrops and lakes...and his hands and feet along with his limbs into towering mountains.

The growing up of Pangu caused the end of Chaos, who died a more explicit death in another myth. The God of Chaos lived in the central place, while his two colleagues with the names Shu and Hu, meaning *quick* and *sudden* both related to the concept of time, were

the God of the South Sea and the God of the North Sea. The two Gods who often travelled across Chaos' home were treated with kindness, and one day they decided to pay back to Chaos' generosity by offering him seven apertures of eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth so that Chaos could see, hear, taste, and breathe. Shu and Hu's good will killed Chaos who lost his life in the chiseling of the holes, which might symbolize the loss of ignorance, the end of innocence, and the opening up of a new era by time.

Man who is a much later creation than Pangu trod on the earth following not only the giant's steps but also his spirit that man and nature are an integrated whole constituting each other. Man is much luckier than Chaos, capable of experiencing the beauty of the world created by Pangu, and thus, gaining some control over nature by working in nature, instead of totally being contained in the self and blindly stumbling around knowing nothing about the surroundings. The course of development from Chaos to Pangu and then to man was a degrading process from the divine being to the worldly one, but it is also an upgrading process for man who has engaged more and more actively and extensively with nature.



Left and Right [Bronze Script]

In man's interactions with nature, hands have played an irreplaceable role, as is shown in the characters 左 *left* and 右 *right*. 左 *left* is a picture of a tool in the left hand, whereas 右 *right* is a blend

of two characters with right hand the upper part and mouth the lower one, suggesting that man has the words in his hand. Chinese people embrace the world with their hands^① through work and words, the physical and mental involvement with nature, which, on the other hand, makes nature a physical and spiritual existence. In Chinese eyes, nature is not objectively out there independent of man; it is what makes man and what made of man.

① Wan, L. *Chinese Characters Have a Word to Say*[M]. Beijing: Oriental Press, 2017: 242.

(老湾. 汉字有话说[M]. 北京: 东方出版社, 2017: 242.)

Left and Right 左右



Left and Right [Bronze Script]

Among the collections of the British Museum, there is a hand, made of bronze, an offering to the lunar deity in a temple in the Ancient Arabian city of Zafar, an area now in the country of Yemen. The life size bronze hand has a half artistic and half realistic flavor. It is believed to be modeled on a real person, who in the surgeon's eyes, might suffer from anemia due to the shape of his nails^①. The inscription on the hand reveals that it was offered in exchange for well-being. And the dedication of the right hand instead of the left one was a traditional practice as a plea for good luck, since the right hand was a symbol of noble aspirations. The presenter might hope to put his hand in the hand of the worshipped God so that he was able to hold the God's favor in return.

^① MacGregor, N. *A History of the World in 100 Objects*[M]. Beijing: New Star Press, 2014: 258.

(尼尔·麦格雷戈. 大英博物馆世界简史[M]. 余燕, 译. 北京: 新星出版社, 2014: 258.)



(A picture derived from

<https://cn.bing.com/images/search?q=the+Bronz+hand&FORM=HDRSC2>)

The respect innately attached to *right* and the discrimination posed against *left* seem to be a universal phenomenon. In English language, the skillful worker is “adroit” (from French à droit, “to the right”) and “dexterous” (from Latin dexter, “right” or “right hand”). Every boss would like to have a “right-handed man” to rely on, just as General Lee said, when Stonewall Jackson was severely wounded, “He has lost his left arm. I have lost my right arm.” It would be very strange if Lee said, “He has lost his left arm. I have lost my left arm, too.”

But the story of *left* and *right* in Chinese characters is a little more complicated. In his classic work of wisdom *Tao and Teh* 《道德经》 (Translation by Lin Yutang), the Taoist Master Laozi stated: “The gentleman favors the left in civilian life, but on military occasions favors the right 君子居则贵左，用兵则贵右。” “The things of good omen favor the left. The things of ill omen favor the right 吉事尚左，凶事尚右.” Honor was conferred upon *left* by Laozi, a very early

Chinese cultural tradition and a phenomenon rarely seen since the Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C.—256 B.C.), because *right* at that time had gained the foremost priority as written down in the Confucian classic *The Book of Rites* 《礼记》, and has remained so ever since. For example, right general was a higher official rank than left general through many dynasties. Likewise, official historians, an important part of ancient Chinese political system whose major responsibilities were to record the kings' daily life, were also divided into left and right ranks, with the left official historians taking note of the kings' deeds while the right the kings' words. Again the right historical official was ranked as a higher position than the left historical official, indicating that words were much valued than deeds, which explains that the most influential Confucian classic *The Analects* 《论语》 is a collection of Confucius' statements rather than his actions.

People in control of the right to speak were regarded as the most respectable. In Xia and Shang, the first two Chinese patrimonial dynasties (2070 B.C.—1046 B.C.), the leader of the whole country was referred to as 后, whose left hand had the power over words, whereas the officials 司, who could control words using their right hands, governed such everyday affairs as taking charge of horses 司马, lands 司徒, prisons 司寇, and construction engineering 司空, by obeying their leader's orders^①. However, after the Xia and Shang Dynasties, the character 后 was substituted by 君, a sign created much later than 后 to represent *king* who was portrayed as running his country by holding language in both its written and spoken forms

^① Xie, F., Nie, H. *To Know China through Chinese Characters*[M]. Beijing: Writers Publishing House, 2016: 21.

(谢飞东, 聂晖. 读字识中国[M]. 北京: 作家出版社, 2016: 21.)

with his right hand. And the character 后 lowered its dignity into *queen*, a less important person compared with king. This dynamic change of the character 后 might suggest a possible link with the transition process from the matriarchal society to the later dominant patriarchal system in Chinese history.^①

left
hand — 后 — mouth

Queen [Bronze Script]

mouth — 司 — right
hand

Official [Bronze Script]

writing
brush — 王 — right
hand
mouth

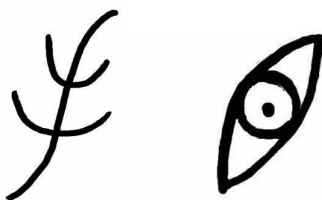
King [Bronze Script]

Did the general public in Chinese society share the same story about left and right with their kings or queens who needed to demonstrate their control, power, or dominance? The answer probably is negative. We can see from Chinese characters a much

^① Zhang, S., Song, C., Na, H. *China in Characters* [M]. Beijing: China Publishing House, 2017: 4.

(张素凤, 宋春淑, 娜红. 字里中国[M]. 北京: 中华书局, 2017: 4.)

modest philosophy of life valued by ordinary people in Chinese society. Although the human body is symmetrically structured with two hands and two eyes, the ancient Chinese language system particularly favored the images of the left hand and the left eye^①, a choice that may present a more humbled self in relation with others, because left has for long been treated as the less important.



Hand and Eye [Bronze Script]

Unlike the Arabic presenter of the bronze hand who exhibited the better part of himself, the right hand, to show respect, Chinese people tend to belittle themselves, a common communicative strategy as a polite gesture, to guarantee the positive face of the other side, which reflects that the traditional Chinese culture in the spirit of collectivism would encourage the care about others rather than the display of the self.

^① Tang, H. *Discover Chinese Characters* [M]. Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press, 2007: 48.

(唐汉. 发现汉字: 图说字根[M]. 西安: 陕西师范大学出版社, 2007: 48.)

Heart 心

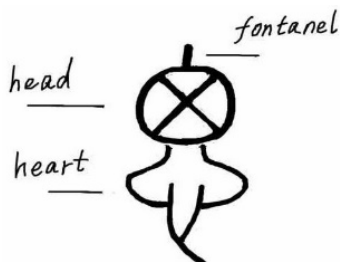


Heart [Small Seal Script]

The French philosopher Descartes' heart-stirring principle of wisdom "I think, therefore I am." is a high-key celebration of human reasoning, which being a human specific capacity, distinguishes us as the most advanced form of life on earth. The father of modern philosophy divided the world into two: the mental and the physical or the rational and the material. And man is likewise into: the mind and the body or the soul and the heart, so that man, an existence in this unstable reality, is able to strive for the certain and the ideal. In Descartes' dualistic eyes, the pure reasoning is given the priority over the sensual perception.

The traditional Chinese philosophy, on the contrary, takes a holistic view without separating mind from heart or considering one as more important than the other. In Chinese language, the expressions like 心碎 or 心动 can easily find their counterparts *heart-*

broken or *touch one's heart* in English, indicating that both languages treat heart as the home of feelings and emotions, which probably is a universal practice across different cultures. However, what is special about the Chinese culture is that heart is the dwelling place not only for emotion but for thought as well, clearly shown in the Chinese character 思, both a noun *thinking* and a verb *think*, which consists of two parts, with the upper half meaning *head*, in fact an infant's head with the anterior fontanel still open, and lower half *heart*. Therefore, head and heart are the co-workers in their generations of human thought, which however naïve it may be, is the integration of the open-minded spirit and the never-ending beat of life in our long journey of seeking truth.



Thinking [Small Seal Script]

The long-term philosophical concern over heart in Chinese tradition is manifest in the mythological character Bi Gan (1110 B.C.—1047 B.C.)^①, who was regarded as the smartest person at his age, later immortalized as a Taoist deity and honored by Confucius as “a great man of virtue”. He was ruthlessly killed by the command of

^① Yu, D. *Yu Dan's Thoughts on Chinese Characters*[M]. Beijing: Jiu Zhou Press, 2018: 7.
(于丹. 于丹趣品汉字[M]. 北京: 九州出版社, 2018: 7.)