

FIVE THOUSAND  
YEARS OF CHINESE  
CHARACTERS

汉字五千年  
何群

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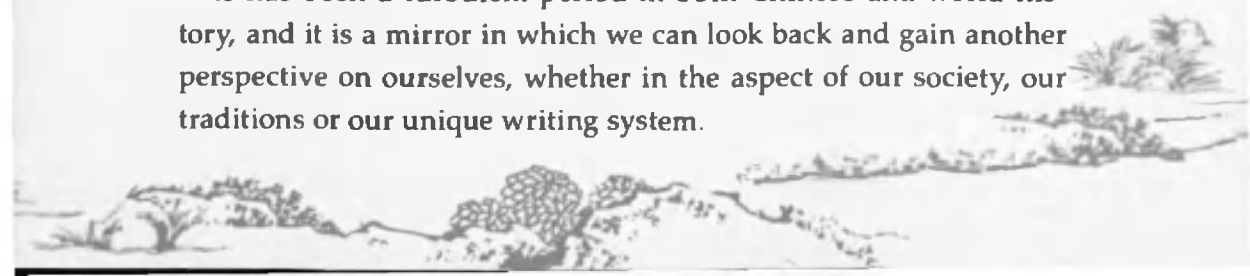
In September 1793 the British peer Lord Macartney, after a whole year of traveling and leading a large trade mission, was received in audience by Qing Dynasty Emperor Qianlong. This was the first official meeting between a newly-risen oceanic empire and an ancient continental empire.

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.

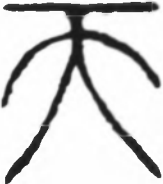
From 1793 to today, only a little more than 200 years has passed. This has been a turbulent period in both Chinese and world history, and it is a mirror in which we can look back and gain another perspective on ourselves, whether in the aspect of our society, our traditions or our unique writing system.



PART ONE

# A Unique Blossom in Civilization





tiān

**“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?



### "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 Merchiomni, 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**

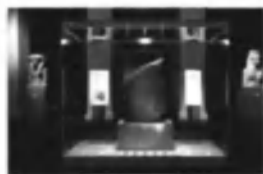
*The soldiers were astonished at what they had found, and lost no time conveying the news to the linguists on the scientific staff of the expedition. The latter discovered that the stone bore inscriptions in three different languages, one of which—Greek—the linguists were well acquainted with. They surmised 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-townsman 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

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

*To decipher ancient Chinese characters we need two things: One is an equivalent to the Behistun Inscription or the Rosetta Stone, which contain texts in more than one contemporary language, one of which could be easily read—Greek in the case of the Rosetta Stone and Old Persian in the case of Behistun. Once these were translated, the unknown languages quickly yielded to analysis. The other thing we need is continuity, so that we can confirm the identities of older characters by examining their later forms.*

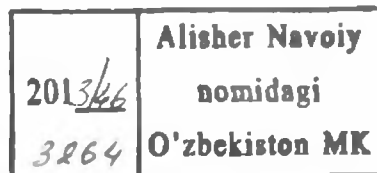
In the absence of a key to decipher an ancient script, people can only admire the characters as pretty pictures. This is why the ancient Indian inscriptions at Harappa, for which there is no corroborative evidence, remain an enigma.

So, where should we look for a key to deciphering the “dragon bones”? When it took Europeans hundreds of years to decipher the cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts, why did it only take a few Chinese scholars a very short time to succeed in understanding the ancient Chinese characters?

◆ **Zhou Youguang, philologist**

*The explanation of this lies in the fact that our culture has been continuous, handed down without a break. Whatever break there was has been healed with the discovery of the “dragon bones,” and now we can trace Chinese culture back in an unbroken line to 3,300 years ago.*

These ancient symbols, whether pictorial, associative, phonetic or homophonic, have preserved the flame of Chinese civilization, have ensured that China’s history has been recorded and that Chinese learning has been handed down to posterity.





## “He” as in the phrase “Tian Ren He Yi”

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “he” as “the closing of a gap.”

With the passage of time, the other three great civilizations faded away, to be replaced in Europe by the abrupt rise of a distant counterpart of China’s Han Empire—the Roman Empire.

To discuss either the Roman Empire or ancient Greece we must start with Phoenicia.

◆ *Guo Fang, research fellow of the Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*In Phoenicia there was a beautiful princess named Europa. The chief of the Greek gods, Zeus, desired her, and changed himself into a bull with golden hair. Emerging from the sea, he carried off Europa on his back to Greece. Since then, Greece and the continent to which it belongs have been known as Europe. It has been generally recognized that this legend represents the writing and civilization of Greece as originating in Phoenicia.*

“Phoenicia” is derived from a Greek word meaning “purple.” From the 13th to the 11th centuries B.C. in the area of present-day Syria and Lebanon there flourished a people whose origin is obscure. On account of the fact that they wore clothing of a bright purple color, which remained dazzling even when the clothes were worn out, they were known as Phoenicians.

The purple-clad merchants of these people devised a simple system of writing consisting of 22 letters, based on some of the special characteristics of the cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts. This Phoenician



Phoenicians

script was the origin of all the alphabetic forms of writing in the world.

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

*The Phoenicians were chiefly traders. They were astute businessmen and marketers, their ships chiefly plying Mediterranean and North African routes.*

◆ **Zhou Youguang, philologist**

*In the course of the business they needed to know what goods to buy, in what quantities and at what prices. So they devised a simple way of keeping accounts. How did they do it? They did not have a culture advanced enough to use the sacred hieroglyphs of the Egyptians or the cuneiform script of the Mesopotamians. At first, they tried using simple hieroglyphs which represented sounds. Initially there was much confusion, as different people used different combinations of sounds. Gradually, the symbols were standardized, until an alphabet emerged.*

The Greeks based their alphabet on that of the Phoenicians, and the Romans in turn created the Latin alphabet based on the Greek one. In this way, every independent language now had the basic means to be recorded in writing. Moreover, in a sense, this



A modern map of 5th-century Europe

discovery determined the future political framework of the continent of Europe.

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

*A letter of the alphabet is the smallest unit of a language. In theory, any language can be expressed in the form of an alphabet. Alphabetic systems are enormously adaptable, and new letters can be added as needed. It is because of these special characteristics that alphabets, with slight modifications, have been adopted to write all the national languages of Europe.*

We can see from a modern drawing of a map of 5th-century Europe that the boundaries of the Roman Empire stretched from Spain in the west, the British Isles in the north, the northern part of Africa in the south and through the Middle East as far as the Black Sea.

The Latin language, following Rome's military conquests, reached every corner of the Roman Empire. Moreover, as a result of the dominance of the conquerors, the empire's local languages were greatly weakened, if not destroyed.

In 392 Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire. With the power of this religion behind him, Theodosius was the absolute ruler of an empire which straddled Europe and Asia. But the era of the unified empire did not last long. Three years later, Theodosius fell critically ill, and the seemingly boundless Roman Empire faced crises on all sides.

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

*During the time of the Roman Empire, there was always a tension between society, politics and culture. While the empire was united, efforts were made to solve this contradiction, but seemingly without much success. When Christianity was made the state religion it was thought that the problem would be solved. But not only did the religion fail to heal the rifts and clashes in Roman society, politics and culture, various doctrinal and power struggles emerged within Christianity itself. And if we follow the development of these struggles, we find that they have various kinds of linguistic connections.*

In the Roman Empire at this time there were two dominant languages—Latin in the west and Greek in the east. The difference in the interpretation of the Bible in these two languages was the root cause of the split between the Christian Church in the west and in the east. That



being the case, how could the emperor ensure the stability of the empire after his death, and the continued rule of his family line?

On his deathbed, Theodosius divided the empire into two parts, giving each to one of his two sons. The Latin-speaking part became the Western Roman Empire, while the Greek-speaking part became the Eastern Roman Empire.

◆ *Federico Masini, professor of Rome University, Italy*

*So the countries in the part of the world where we are now developed their vernaculars on the basis of Latin. But, although they had this literary and cultural legacy, each country slowly developed its own language.*

This linguistic difference aggravated political instability. And although the Bible was the most important—and sometimes the only—common reading matter for the whole of Europe, the different forms of

speech and the emergence of differences in the alphabets used to write them doomed the continent of Europe to division.

At the same time as the division of the Roman Empire into its western and eastern parts was going on, China was divided into northern and southern entities. In the two relatively independent parts outstanding personages arose, and there was a constant struggle for the throne; emperors, both Han and barbarian, came and went in a bewildering succession.

In 386, a nomad tribe—the Xianbei—said to have originated in the



*The inscription on the memorial tablet to Yuan Zhen, 20th year (497) of the Taihe reign period of the Northern Wei Dynasty*



*Statue of the Buddha,  
Yungang Grottoes,  
Shanxi Province*

Daxing'an Mountains of Northeast China, set up a kingdom in northern China, known to history as Northern Wei. After over 40 years of campaigning, Northern Wei succeeded in uniting the whole of the northern part of China. The result was that China was divided into two independent political powers in the north and the south, respectively.

◆ **Zhu Yanmin, professor of the Institute of History, Nankai University**

*This was very similar to the splitting of the Roman Empire in Europe into western and eastern halves. The authorities in the Han part of China, the southern part, used Han Chinese as the official language, whereas the Xianbei in the north used their own language, although it had no written form. As conquerors, the Xianbei naturally used their own language and customs. So from whichever angle you look at it, the great, integrated Chinese Empire was no more.*

At this point in time, there seems to be no difference in the histories of the East and of the West. But from now on, the fates of the European



had the strength to found a powerful dynasty was nevertheless unable to create a culture or a script. For the sake of his country and his people he sacrificed his family feelings. This was the fate of Emperor Xiaowen.

◆ *Bu Xianqun, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*Emperor Xiaowen's slaying of his son was part of his overall policy of Sinitization. He was forced to do it for the benefit of his state of Northern Wei, and for the benefit of his dynasty.*

◆ *Ge Jianxiang, professor of the History and Geography Institute, Fudan University*

*Right down to the end of the Qing Dynasty, the connections that some of China's surrounding countries had with China to a great extent relied on the fact they used the same written characters. So, from this point of view a major factor in the success of Emperor Xiaowen's reform when he adopted the Han system of government and way of life was the adoption of the Han characters. In this way, he removed a barrier dividing the Xianbei and Han peoples, especially in the unification of their political systems.*

In April 499 Emperor Xiaowen, whose ambition was to unite the whole of China under his rule, passed away on an expedition to the south, his ambition unfulfilled. He was 33 years old. This setback was the harbinger of a new period of division for China. But at this moment, history offered two programs for the future: The European continent was headed for division on a greater scale, led by its alphabetical scripts, but in China new hope for unity was brewing amid chaos as the Chinese characters were building up the strength to bind together the disparate elements.

With the square characters as the tie, unification of the whole country was only a matter of time.

# YI

## “Yi” as in the phrase “Tian Ren He Yi”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “yi” as “what begets all things at the very beginning of the universe.”

The One begets the Two, the Two Begets the Three, the Three begets the myriad things.

It was after the 8th century A.D. that the alphabet invented by the Phoenicians began to split up into different versions. During the Cultural Renaissance of the 14th-16th centuries, in Europe phonetic spelling was applied to the continent's various languages, until there were over 40 types of script, eventually giving birth to the different countries on the modern European map.

In contrast, from the 8th to the 16th centuries A.D. China was fairly stable. Although this period saw the Tang, Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties come and go, the Chinese characters, like an invisible magic thread, sewed together the hearts and spirits of people of different languages, different customs and even of different blood throughout the vast territory of China, and made them conscious of being Chinese.

The American historian L. S. Stavriānos makes this analogy: “If a man of the Han Dynasty in the first century B.C. could have come back to life in the eighth century A.D., he would have found no inconvenience at all, he would have found, in fact, that the Tang Dynasty was very similar to the Han Dynasty. The people, the language, the Confucian doctrines, the worship of the ancestors and even the imperial system of government would all have been familiar to him. But if a Roman of the first century B.C. had come back to life in Europe in the 11th, 16th or 19th centuries he would have been astonished by the changes in language, clothing and brand-new ways of life in what had once been parts of the Roman Empire.”

This continuity in China was due to the nature of the Chinese characters, which keep within them the special nature of Chinese civilization.

◆ **Xu Jialu, vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress of China and president of the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching**

*But we cannot say that our Chinese characters are the best form of writing in the world. What is the best? If your writing system suits the mode of thought and expression of your nation, then it is a good writing system. We should rather say that as far as the Chinese language, the language of the Han people, is concerned, Chinese characters are the best form of expression. Alphabets are excellent scripts for the languages of the Western countries.*

The Oriental way of thought is made known through the Chinese characters—pictorial, metaphorical and compound—and such features of the Chinese characters are also key in passing on the Chinese civilization.

This brings us to think of one man, the man who founded the Qin Empire, China's first feudal dynasty—Qin Shi Huang.

◆ **Zhan Bohui, professor of the Department of Chinese, Ji'nan University**

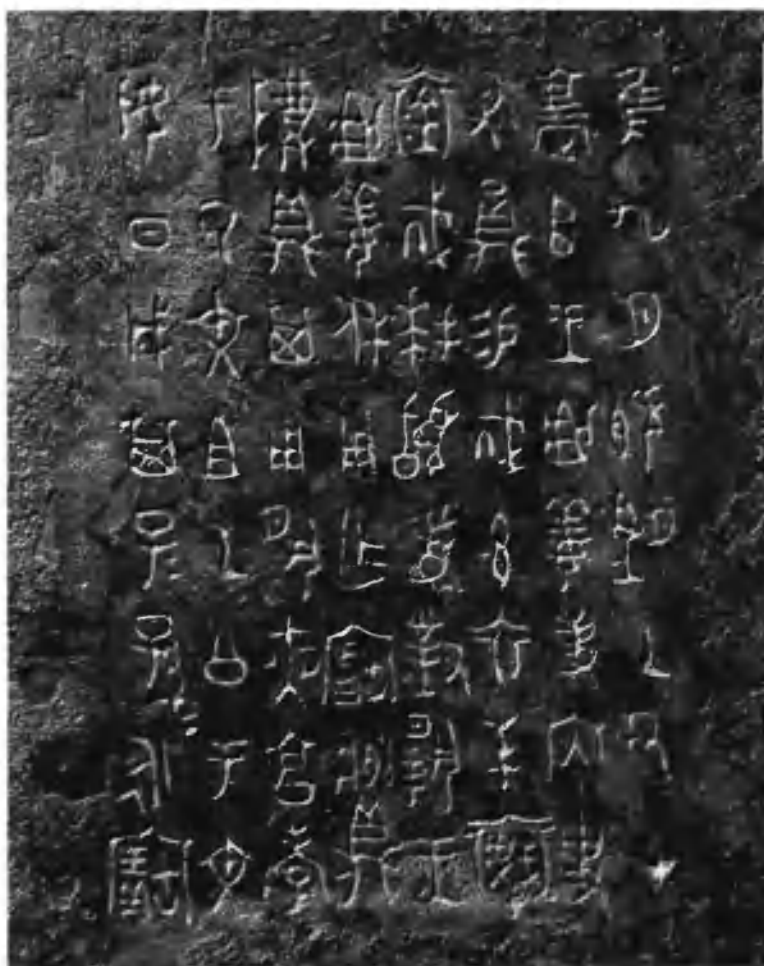
*Qin Shi Huang had two major accomplishments to his credit, which have been retained in the memories of later generations. One was the building of the Great Wall, and the other was the standardization of the Chinese characters. This systemization of the characters has lasted down to the present day. Although the development of the Chinese language resulted in the appearance of numerous dialects, for instance those of Guangdong and Fujian provinces in the south, the existence of the characters kept the mainstream culture together and ensured that it came down to us in one continuous stream.*

In 1848 the foundation stone of Chinese studies in America, *The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Literature, Social Life, Arts, and History of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants* was published. In this work, the "Father of Chinese Studies in America" Samuel Wells Williams drew on his 40 years of experience in China to tell the world: "If the Chinese characters fell into disuse, and an alphabetic system were used to write the Chinese dialects, China would cease to exist."

The Chinese characters are the quintessence of Chinese civilization. They are also carriers through which Chinese civilization is passed on from generation to generation. The Chinese writing form and civilization exist and thrive along each other without the slightest sign of decline.



*Portrait of Emperor Qin Shi Huang in the Sancai Tuhui, an illustrated encyclopedic book written in the late 16th century*



Inscription from a bronze vessel of the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 B.C.),  
excavated from a tomb in Fufeng Village, Shaanxi Province



Bird-shaped wine vessel of the  
Western Zhou Dynasty with  
examples of the inscription on  
its abdomen and cover, found  
in Beizhao Village, Quwo  
County, Shaanxi Province









PART TWO

# High as Heaven, Long as the River



Xi'an was one of the greatest capitals in Chinese history. The Qin, Han and Tang dynasties all had their capitals here.

In this city there is a palace dedicated to Chinese characters—the Stele Forest Museum, where examples of characters from various dynasties and eras stand out in extraordinary self-confidence carved on stone columns of great dignity.





yuán

“Yuan” as in the phrase “Yuan Yuan Liu Chang”  
(meaning distant sources and long rivers)

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “yuan” as “the origin of a spring.”

Where was the source of the Chinese characters? Even today, most Chinese people believe that the Chinese characters were created by an ancient sage called Cang Jie, who was the historian of the Yellow Emperor, the ancestor of the Chinese race. In order to commemorate this achievement, a shrine was set up to offer sacrifices to Cang Jie over 1,800 years ago.

◆ *Huang Dekuan, head of the Chinese Characters Study Society*

*Xu Shen of the Eastern Han Dynasty says in the preface to his Roots of Characters: “Cang Jie, the historian of the Yellow Emperor, invented writing.” This sentence encompasses the following implications: One, that Cang Jie was a man of the*

*Yellow Emperor’s time; two, that his status was that of Grand Historian; and three, that writing in China started with him, and that by “writing” is meant the Chinese characters.*



Portrait of Cang  
Jie in the Sancai  
Tuhui

Ancient records claim that Cang Jie had four eyes, which is probably meant to stress his extraordinary investigative powers. It was this quality that enabled him

to extract the earliest form of Chinese characters from the tracks of birds and beasts.

When Chinese characters were created, Heaven, Earth and the spirits were shaken.

This is, of course, a myth. Any civilization in its formative period will attribute its major inventions and discoveries to someone with divine or sage-like qualities. Such a person represents that particular stage of culture.

Since the story of Cang Jie is mythical, where then were Chinese characters born? How were they produced?



*Marks incised on a Dawenkou culture pot*

◆ **Wang Zhenzhong**, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

*Speaking of the source of the Chinese characters, we have to rely on archeological discoveries. These embrace the Dawenkou culture of the lower reaches of the Yellow River, the Yangshao culture of the middle reaches of the same river, the Liangzhu culture of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River and the Daxi culture of the middle reaches of the same river. Marks incised on pottery and jade objects found at these prehistoric sites are thought to be connected with the later oracle bone script.*

The oracle bone script is a fairly mature writing system, and speaks a long course of development.

On display at the Shandong Province Archeological Research Center are gray pottery wine vessels bearing mysterious markings. They were fired 5,000 years ago, and were discovered in 1979 at the Dawenkou culture site in Shandong. On the belly of one of them is carved a round sun, beneath which are five connected mountain peaks. Scholars are uncertain about the central part of the symbols, whether it represents a flame, a crescent moon or a large bird. Notwithstanding, the experts all agree that the whole is one of the most ancient Chinese characters.

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

*We now know that similar symbols have been found not only in Ju County and*



Eye-like symbol on the right side of an incised tortoise shell



Zhang Juzhong at the Jiahu site

Zhucheng in Shandong, but also in Nanjing and in Anhui Province. And the same symbols are found in different cultures; in the Liangzhu culture, for instance, and even in Zhejiang Province.

◆ **Luan Fengshi, professor of the Center of Eastern Archeology, Shandong University**

*There is general recognition that these inscribed symbols represented something meaningful and had a spiritual content for different tribes and groups of people; in fact they can be called writing.*

The explorations of generations of scholars are difficult, full of twists and turns, but founded on solid ground. After half a century of work the academic world gradually formed a consensus that the Chinese characters emerged 4,000 or 5,000 years ago in the basins of the Yangtze and Yellow rivers.

But then the picture was thrown into confusion once more when, in 1987, excavations on the upper reaches of the Huai River revealed clearly that here was another source of the characters.

*"This looks very much like an eye."*

This was Zhang Juzhong's first reaction on seeing this symbol.

It had been discovered incised on a tortoise shell dug up from a burial mound one afternoon in May 1987 at the Jiahu archeological site. Zhang was the head of the excavation team.

◆ **Zhang Juzhong, professor of the Department of History and Archeology of Science and Technology, University of Science and Technology of China**

*The way this eye was carved is very much like the way the same symbol was carved on tortoise shells and bones discovered later in the Yin Ruins. But this one is more realistic. I was very excited. I cleaned the find with my own hands. It can be said without a doubt that it is the earliest symbol carved on a tortoise shell ever found.*

If it can be proved that this symbol is an example of primitive writing, it would be a discovery of world-shaking importance, shattering the long-held belief in academic circles that the earliest form of writing was the cuneiform characters which emerged in southern Iraq about 5,000 years ago. The Jiahu site dates back about 8,000 years to the New Stone Age. If the symbols found here turn out to be a form of writing, not only

will views on the origin of Chinese characters have to be revised, a new appraisal of the history of writing worldwide will have to be made.

"Will more symbols be found?" The excavation team was filled with enthusiasm and tense expectation for the next few days. And, sure enough, when a new burial mound was excavated and cleared many more incised symbols came to light.

◆ *Zhang Juzhong, professor of the Department of History and Archeology of Science and Technology, University of Science and Technology of China*

*We found over 20 individual symbols on a total of 17 items, nine of which were tortoise shells, two were stone vessels and three were pottery vessels. The rest were bones.*

The tortoise shells were both back and abdomen shells, with small stones inserted between them, making them a kind of divination instrument. This led us to speculate on the nature of the religious beliefs of the ancient people of Jiahu. But it also led us to wonder if the symbols had any connection with writing.

◆ *Cao Guicen, research fellow of the Institute for Cultural Relics and Archeology, Henan Province*

*Over 1,000 grains of carbonized paddy rice have been found at the Jiahu site. This indicates the evolution of agriculture from the gathering of wild rice to the cultivation of rice. So we can say that the people who resided in the Huai River basin—the Peiligang people of the Jiahu region—lived mainly on cultivated paddy rice. And the development of agricultural products necessitated some way to understand the changes in astronomy and the weather.*

◆ *Zhang Juzhong, professor of the Department of History and Archeology of Science and Technology, University of Science and Technology of China*

*There have been altogether seven excavations carried out at Jiahu. Among the items found were over 30 flutes made out of the wing bones of red-crowned cranes. Some had two finger holes, some five, some six, some seven and some eight. Music experts testify that they have complete four-, five-, six- and seven-note scales.*



*Bone flute found at the Jiahu site*

This is the most ancient flute so far discovered in the world.

Bone flutes and engraved tortoise shells are often discovered together. Scholars surmise that they were used in primitive religious rituals. If the Jiahu people prayed to Heaven and their ancestors for protection by means of divination to the high-pitched wailing of flutes it would mean that at that early period they had developed a comparatively sophisticated system of religious rites.

In March 2003, after over a decade of investigation, a research team set up to study ancient Chinese characters at the University of Science and Technology of China and Professor Garman Harbottle of the Brookhaven National Laboratory of the US jointly completed a thesis titled, "The Earliest Writing? Sign Use in the Seventh Millennium B.C. at Jiahu, Henan Province, China." It was carried in "Antiquity," a journal authoritative in archeological and cultural artifacts circles. The appearance of this thesis gave raise to sharply differing views, a controversy which lasts to this day.



"Yuan" as in the phrase "Yuan Yuan Liu Chang"

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character "yuan" as "remote."

Xiaotun Village near the city of Anyang is located at the northern edge of Henan Province. The Huan River flows northeast through the village. Beginning in 1928, a total of 15 excavations have been carried out in Xiaotun by an archeological team organized by the Academia Sinica's Institute of History and Language.

On March 12, 1936, the team decided to make that day the last of the digging season. But at three p.m. the same day, team member Wang

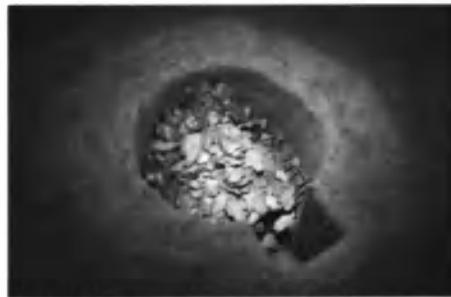


*Archeologists working at the Yin Ruins, Anyang*

Xiang, who was checking an already excavated pit in case something had been missed, by accident came across layer after layer of tortoise shells and animal bones. The heap was in the shape of a cylinder, two m high, one m in diameter, and weighed six tons. It took 64 laborers two days to transport the find to the Anyang railway station five km away.

◆ *Meng Shikai, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*Pit No. 127 turned out to contain over 17,000 of the so-called "oracle bones." This figure was arrived at after they had been separated and counted in Nanjing. It was a sensational discovery. Starting in the spring of 1929, there were a total of 15 excavations at the Yin Ruins, of which 13 yielded oracle bones, but none on a scale such as this.*



*Pit No. 127, Yin Ruins*

After 80 years of generation after generation of archeologists sorting and studying the oracle bones, a world lost for 3,000 years was brought back to life. With a little imagination, the following picture could come floating before our eyes:

During the Shang Dynasty, the people of the capital greeted the rising of the sun every day, and naturally connected it with roundness, depicting it using the round character for "sun." Looking down at their hands and feet, they likewise depicted them as pictographs. The characters for "face" and "eye" represented what they saw reflected in water or mirrors.

A hand holding a writing brush by the side of a major street is what is depicted by the oracle bone character meaning "build." This hand could belong to an architect planning a construction project. Perhaps those distant "palaces" and the "halls" of the shrines where ancestral rites were held were products of his hand.

Now, the architect has to get out of the middle of the road when a "man driving an ox" comes along. Perhaps behind the herder comes a sedan chair held on the shoulders by four hands. On a crowded street it's hard to avoid a collision, and maybe there are two men by the roadside fighting, with their hair in disorder, like the character "struggling."

At night, the double doors of the main entrances to the houses facing the street are lightly closed, and the people of the household, or "door," settle down to sleep. The silvery "moon" casts its light alike on all the round "windows" made from pottery...

It seems that every character is like a picture, they are the products of meticulous observation and a surprising power of imagination. Every character is worth putting in a picture frame and saving to be admired constantly. But what were these beautiful characters used for?

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

*A question that I myself have long pondered is why have none of the oracle bones been discovered in ordinary burial sites? This has prompted some people to speculate that they were actually archives. We still don't know all the uses the oracle bones were put to in the Shang Dynasty; all we can be certain about is that they were used to record divinations.*

The process of divination was probably as follows: First a tortoise shell or ox bone was prepared. Then some oval-shaped grooves were dug in its back, and a blazing stick of wood was applied to the grooves. The heat would cause a number of cracks to appear in the shell or bone. The divination consisted of interpreting the meaning of the cracks. The



Chinese characters for “divination” and “omen” themselves originate in such cracks. The Shang people would often write the person who conducted the divination, the place and purpose of the divination, and the results of the divination on the shells or bones actually used for the purpose. So this type of writing is called “oracle bone script.”

There is an oracle bone record concerning the wife of the Shang king Wuding, the first great lady in Chinese history whose name we know—Fu Hao. The inscription deals with her giving birth.

◆ *Guo Qingping, professor of Anyang Normal College*

*You would think that this would be an auspicious occasion, but the oracle bone records it as “unfortunate.” This was because Fu Hao gave birth to a baby girl. From this inscription, we can see that even at this early period the preference for males over females was already well ingrained in Chinese culture.*

Although both the question put to the spirits and the result of the divination are clearly recorded on the oracle bones, still today we are not sure how the diviners interpreted the cracks as “auspicious” or “inauspicious”; nor do we know how the shapes of the cracks directed human actions. In addition, who were the people who undertook the task of divination for the Shang kings?



*The tomb of Fu Hao*

◆ **Fang Hui, professor of the Center of Eastern Archeology, Shandong University**

*Attached to the Shang royal household was a regular body of specialists in divination and the celebration of the religious rituals.*



*Excavation work at the Yin Ruins*

When the massive find of oracle bones was made in 1936, the skeleton of a huddled human figure was found beside them. Mr. Dong Zuobin, who had been in charge of several excavations of the Yin Ruins, gave it as his opinion that the

skeleton was that of a diviner. If he is correct, and the diviner was buried with the oracle bones, it would indicate that the oracle bones had a divine significance and needed to be carefully preserved and guarded.

Later excavations brought to light evidence that there is some basis to this judgment.

◆ **Song Zhenhao, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences**

*From the inscriptions on them we have noticed that the tortoise shells and ox bones found in the same pit could have been used in different times of the year, and the time span can be a year or longer. Sometimes hundreds, thousands or tens of thousands of tortoise shells and ox bones were discovered in the same pit. This is because they were put together before they were disposed of.*

◆ **Cecilia Lindqvist, Swedish sinologist**

*The people of that time would write on the oracle bones the questions they wanted to ask of their ancestors. They wanted to know about future events, such as the outcome of hunting or war. They could also ask about personal matters, for instance, the birth of children or their own destiny.*

From a modern-day perspective, there are few absolute mysteries about divination. So why were the oracle bones hidden? In fact, what the Shang rulers and their soothsayers guarded so closely was not just the

contents of the oracle bones themselves; it was the power to communicate with the ancestors. And for the Shang kings in particular this power was an essential means of controlling the dynasty.

◆ **Wang Hui, professor of the College of History and Culture, Shaanxi Normal University**

*The people of that time all believed in ghosts and spirits. And with the power to sacrifice to these supernatural beings and consult them through divination, the Shang kings ruled their subjects. They would, in fact, be saying, "This is not my will but that of the ghosts and spirits. They want it done this way."*

The Shang king entered his palace. In this palace the most awe-inspiring and mysterious institutions were the grandiose sacrificial ceremonies and divinations. In them lay the spiritual strength that held together the entire empire. And the importance of the Chinese characters as the sole channel for communicating with the ancestors is self-evident.

Today we can distinguish another kind of Shang Dynasty characters, called Jinwen. Whereas the oracle bone script was used for communicating with the ancestors, the Jinwen script was cast on bronze objects and meant to be handed down to posterity.

In 1978 archeologists unearthed 140 bronze vessels and 65 sets of bronze chimes from a Warring States tomb in Hubei Province's Sui County, as well as 4,500 bronze weapons. It is estimated that these finds would altogether weigh over ten tons.

◆ **Tan Derui, research fellow of Shanghai Museum**

*Bronze objects are not found in the graves of commoners, because in those days they were very precious. Making them involved the mining of copper and tin, the smelting of the resultant bronze and the molding of them into the required shapes.*

Some scholars have put forward the theory that the search for copper and tin ores might have been one of the reasons for the moving of the capitals of Xia and Shang. In ordering the bronze items cast, the Shang rulers and nobility probably believed that when they died they would still live on in the world of their descendents by means of the inscriptions on them. With the help of the characters on those bronze vessels, generation after generation of the Chinese people can express their veneration for their ancestors.



*Bronze chimes of the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.) found in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng, Sui County, Hubei Province*



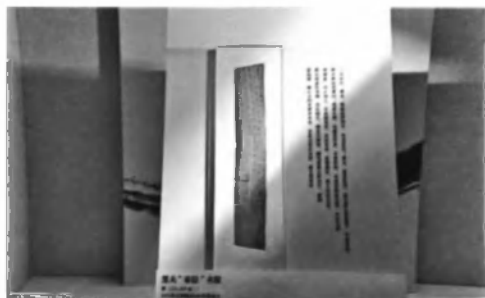
“Liu” as in the phrase “Yuan Yuan Liu Chang”

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “liu” as “flowing water.”

“The characters were created by the working people.” This is an item of basic cultural knowledge passed down from generation to generation. However, in their childhood and adolescence, the characters could not give their creators any joy. Archeological evidence attests to the fact that the primitive characters appeared first on sacrificial utensils, and the mature script appeared in palaces. Although nowadays there is no way for us to retrieve the Shang Dynasty characters that were engraved on bamboo and wooden slips, we can be sure that they were not the property of the common people.

Nevertheless, when the characters reached their full stage of growth they could no longer be restricted to palaces and altars.

“Second month, day Xin Si. Heifu and Jing greet Zhong. Is mother in good health?”



*Letter written by Heifu on a strip of wood, Warring States Period*

This is part of the earliest private letter so far found in China. It is written in a closely packed style on two wooden slips 2,200 years ago. The writer was “Heifu,” and the man named “Jing” in

the letter was very likely his brother. They were ordinary soldiers of the State of Qin taking part in an expedition against the State of Chu.

◆ *Chen Zhenyu, research fellow of the Institute for Cultural Relics and Archeology, Hubei Province*

*The expedition they took part in had a ruinous aftermath. After they took the Huaiyang City, robbers and bandits ran rampant in the city. There was a complete breakdown of law and order. In the letter, the writer requests that clothing and money be sent, otherwise they will have no means to live.*

Although a huge number of texts dating from before the Qin Dynasty have been unearthed, they have all been official documents and the writings of sagely scholars. This letter is the only specimen discovered so far which brings down to us the feelings and requirements of the common people. This is what makes it so especially valuable in the history of the Chinese characters; it shows that the characters had trickled down from the lofty heights of ancestor worship and regal power to the world of ordinary folk. How did this significant change come about?

The Confucius Temple in Qufu, Shandong Province, is traditional China's holiest place. It was here that the emperors, the supreme power in the land, would come to prostrate themselves. In the main hall hangs a signboard inscribed with the words "Paragon for All Ages," in the personal calligraphy of Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty.



*Entrance to the Confucius Temple, Qufu, Shandong Province*

Confucius (551-479 B.C.) was not the first teacher in Chinese history, but he was the first to pass on knowledge to the common people.

◆ *Zhao Xueqing, professor of the International Chinese Studies Academy, Shaanxi Normal University*

*Before Confucius, ordinary people had no opportunity to receive education. In Confucius' time, the power of the feudal lords was growing gradually, at the expense of the authority of the Zhou dynasty, and learning was beginning to migrate from the palace to the people.*

Confucius was born after his father died. His father had been a member of the minor aristocracy of the State of Lu, and it was due to his father's influence that Confucius received a rudimentary education at the ancestral temple of the ruler of Lu.

◆ *Wu Jiulong, research fellow of the Historical Relics Research Institute of China*

*Later he became an official, and at one time the minister of justice of the State of Lu. He then traveled to various places, together with his disciples. In fact, he was trying to get his political ideas put into practice, but his career path was not a smooth one.*

From about the age of 30, Confucius started to advocate "teaching without distinction of rank," and founded the first system of "private schooling" in Chinese history. Xingtan (Apricot Terrace), where Confucius lectured, was perhaps one of the sources of the flow of Chinese characters to the people.

Chinese characters, and the transmission of knowledge via them to the common people, opened up a lively and splendid era, known as that of the "Hundred Schools of Thought," in the history of Chinese philosophy. Every scholar who founded a school of thought had his own "Apricot Terrace," and it was from all these that Chinese characters spread among the broad masses of the people. As the number of writers increased and writing tools evolved, it was inevitable for the shapes of the characters to undergo change.

In December 1965, in the eastern suburbs of the city of Houma, in Shanxi Province, a number of stone and jade tablets were unearthed, covered in writing. The characters had been brushed on, using ink made



Apricot Terrace

of a mixture of cinnabar and soot. Archeologists identified the texts as the official documents of the State of Jin in the late Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.). The texts were records of treaties and oaths between the feudal lords. Thus, it came to be known in archeological circles as "Houma treaties."

◆ **Zhang Chunsheng, deputy head of the Museum of Shanxi Province**

*A total of 5,000 inscribed items were unearthed at Houma, and over 500 of them bearing characters that can be recognized with more than 3,000 characters in total. Apart from the repeated characters, there were more than 500 characters. These precious cultural relics are reliable materials for the study of the writing of the Eastern Zhou period (770-256 B.C.).*

◆ **Zhang Han, paleographer**

*At that time the characters used in each of the states had their own peculiarities. We can see from the Houma treaty script of the State of Jin that in this system of writing alone there were several ways of writing the same character. And so there were even more variations between the states.*



*The right and reverse sides of jade tablets bearing the "Houma Treaty" and calligraphic reproductions, found in Houma, Shanxi Province*

There were over 90 ways of writing the character for "dare," and over 100 for the character for "excellent" in the Houma treaty script. In fact, for his own convenience, each scribe seems to have had his own preferred way of simplifying the characters. This is attested to on the coins and weapons of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States (475-221 B.C.) periods.

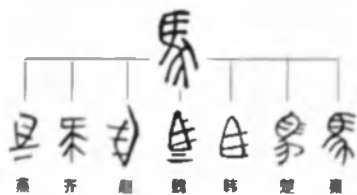
The Eastern Han Dynasty scholar Xu Shen, the first to make an academic study of Chinese characters, describes conditions in those days as follows: "The seven major states had their own systems of government. They had abandoned the traditional rules of the rites and music, and



*Shang Yang cubic liter of the Warring States Period*

this led to a situation in which the width of the cart tracks was different, the laws and statutes were different, the language was different and the writing was different.” How could the Chinese characters overcome this history of confusion?

The Han’gu Pass in present-day Henan Province was, during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the only way to enter the State of Qin. The flat land of the Central Plains lay before the pass, while beyond it was Qin, perched on the loess highlands. Because this



*The character for “horse” as written in the official Qin Dynasty script (above, and on the far right below) and as written in the six major states (below) conquered by Qin to unify China*



*Official Qin coin (above, and on the far right below) and coins of the six major states (below) conquered by Qin to unify China*

was the area which saw the birth of Zhou Dynasty culture, the characters used in Qin preserved more of the Zhou tradition than other places.

Here was unearthed a bronze vessel, known as the “Shang Yang cubic liter.” An inscription on the left side informs us that it was cast in



the 12th month of the year 344 B.C., by Shang Yang, the prime minister of Duke Zhao of Qin, as part of his efforts to standardize capacity measures. It contains exactly one sheng, or cubic liter.

Over 100 years later, in 221 B.C., Duke Yingzheng of Qin, having accumulated power by utilizing the “Shang Yang reforms,” swallowed up all the other six states. The unification of China paved the way for the standardization of the Chinese characters.

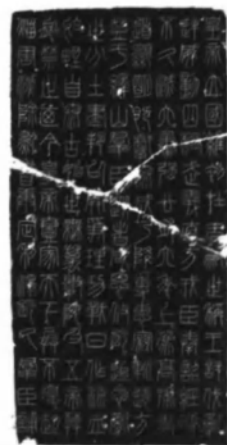
In 223 B.C. Qin’s Chief Minister, Li Si, was commissioned to overhaul the writing systems of the six defunct states, “removing characters that did not conform to the Qin script.” The result was a unified system called the “small seal” script.

◆ *Zhao Ping'an, professor of the College of Literature, Beijing Normal University*


*The method of writing both simple and compound characters was standardized, both as to the left-right structure and the top-bottom structure. Moreover, the arrangement of single characters and groups of characters was also standardized. Thus, the “small seal” script was fashioned as a disciplined system of writing.*

In 223 B.C. the First Emperor of Qin, in a message to the whole empire, ranked the reform of the Chinese writing system among his greatest achievements. This was the first time in the history of the Chinese characters that the characters “wen,” meaning “writing,” and “zi,” meaning “character” had been combined in a phrase. Henceforth, there was only one writing form—the Chinese characters—to be used in this vast country under the rule of the Chinese emperors, despite the coexistence of hundreds of different dialects. The unified characters welded together different nationalities into the same great nation. With the passage of time and the rise and fall of dynasties, there were changes in the characters, but the unity of “writing” and “the characters” was the source of the robust endurance of the Chinese script.

On a stone tablet dating from Qin times, known as the “Mount Yi Stele,” there is an inscription in “small seal” characters purporting to be from the hand of Li Si himself. Because of the ravages of wind and weather, the surface of the stele has been damaged and crumbled. Nevertheless, every stroke of the inscription stands out bold and enticing.



*The inscription on the Mount Yi Stele*



cháng

“Chang” as in the phrase “Yuan Yuan Liu Chang”

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “chang” as “long-lasting.”

In Chinese history, the Qin era was a short-lived dynasty, and in the history of Chinese writing, the “small seal” script it produced was an intermediate phenomenon, doomed almost from the moment it was created to be replaced by another form of characters.

◆ **Zhao Xueqing**, professor of the International Chinese Studies Academy, Shaanxi Normal University

*The trend in writing is toward simplicity and ease of use of this tool of communication. The characters of the “small seal” script, however, took a long time to write.*

◆ **Wang Ning**, professor of the Chinese Language Department, Beijing Normal University

*To write the character for “horse” in the “small seal” script actually required the drawing of a horse. The character for “phoenix” involved the representation of its comb, wings, feathers and feet, which all had to be depicted clearly. The time this took led to the emergence of two systems of writing.*



*An earve tile of the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-25 A.D.) engraved with four Chinese characters meaning “Han has unified the country”*

The “small seal” script was the standard of writing decreed by the Qin Dynasty. But the characters were very complicated—like drawing a picture. To become proficient in this script took many years of dedicated practice. However, the majority of Qin officials had risen to their



*Confucian classics engraved on stone tablets in the year 175*

positions because of their military prowess, and were largely unlettered. Another problem was that after the unification of the country, the number of documents needed to carry on administrative affairs increased enormously. The result was that lower-ranking officials embarked on the task of simplifying the characters of the "small seal" script. As time went on and the simplified characters became sanctioned by popular usage, a new system of characters emerged—the "official script."

In the history of Chinese characters, this change is called the "official script revolution," and the Qin Dynasty is regarded as the watershed in the evolution of ancient characters into modern forms.

◆ *Huang Tianshu, professor of the College of Literature, Capital Normal University*

*The stage of ancient Chinese characters, starting with the oracle bone inscriptions, was marked by the pictorial principle. In general, the characters were close to the things*



The Zhang Qian Stele, Han  
Dynasty

they depicted. But, with the "official script revolution," this principle was largely abandoned, together with the forms of the "small seal" script, and writing now became a system of four basic brush strokes. In addition, the characters adopted their now-familiar square form.

In 206 B.C. the ephemeral Qin Dynasty was replaced by that of the Han. The Han scribes began to advocate the making of what they regarded as the rather coarse characters used during the previous dynasty somewhat more dignified and imposing. In the time of Emperor Wu (reigned 140-87 B.C.) the "official script" reached its maturity. The number of characters had increased greatly over the centuries, and from the first isolated scratched symbols had grown to form a huge family of written symbols.

But this very expansion produced an inevitable problem: The Chinese characters relied on different forms of symbols to distinguish meanings. As new concepts constantly emerged, new characters were constantly having to be invented to represent them. But how could the limited human memory be expected to retain the endlessly increasing number of characters?

In the year 100, the 12th year of the Yongyuan reign period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, in a village in Luohe, Henan Province, a scholar named Xu Shen started to compile a study of the Chinese characters. His work is known as the *Roots of Characters*.

◆ *Huang Tianshu, professor of the College of Literature, Capital Normal University*

*The Roots of Characters was China's first dictionary. Xu Shen analyzed the structures of over 10,000 characters, which up to that time had been in complete disorder, and marshaled them into 540 categories. For the first time, it became possible to reference all the Chinese characters.*

The categories, known as "radicals," made it relatively easy to identify the different characters. Nearly all of them were made up of different arrangements of the radicals, so memoriza-



A wall in the Confucius residence

tion of the radicals was the key to grasping the Chinese writing system. Xu Shen's system is still basically in use today.

◆ **Wang Ning, professor of the Chinese Language Department, Beijing Normal University**

*The Roots of Characters captures the Chinese characters as they had evolved up to the time of the Eastern Han. The 540 radicals made it easy to look up a character, and also to pin down its meaning. In addition, the system traced the meaning of each character back to the way it was used in the classics.*

Political stability and continuous economic growth resulted in rapid cultural development in the Han Dynasty. *The Roots of Characters* was an expression of the temperament of the age. It was through the efforts of Han Dynasty

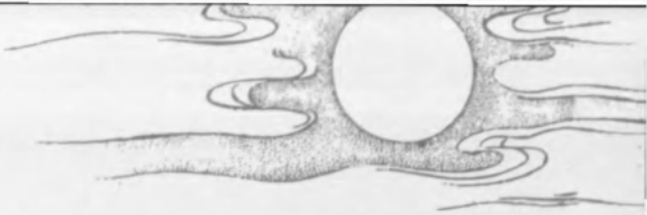
Confucian scholars to arrange them that the characters which were to accompany the Chinese people for thousands of years, attained their standard forms.

A script is just a collection of images and symbols representing a particular way of life. Only if we understand the type of life, different from that of the West, which has been led for thousands of years on this vast land will we be able to understand this brilliant exception.




*Xu Shen (c.58-147), author of the Roots of Characters*






PART THREE

# Radiance from All Directions



After the Phoenicians invented their alphabet around 1,500 B.C. this simple and easily-learned system of symbols spread throughout the Mediterranean and then into Europe, becoming the forefather of a plethora of national writing systems throughout the continent.

In the huge area which encompasses East Asian civilizations, the course of history took a different turn: Here, where Westerners believe the sun rises the earliest, lives a quarter of the world's population, with China in the center. The Chinese characters, which have been in use in China since the dawn of time, spread from the territory directly controlled by China's various dynasties, to influence almost the whole of the East Asian region.



𡗗 chūn

“Chun” as in the phrase “Chun Xia Qiu Dong”  
(meaning spring, summer, autumn, winter)

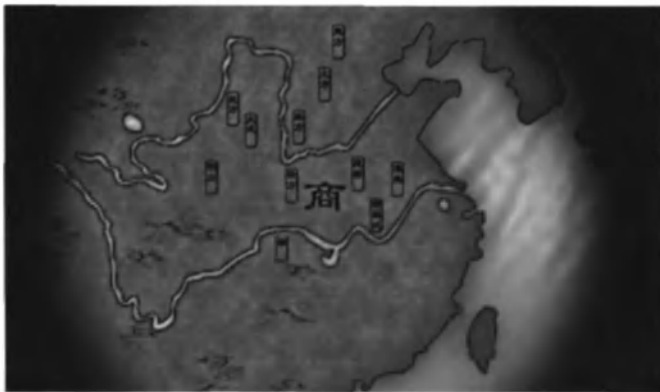
*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “chun” as “pushing.”

In 1928 Chinese archeologists made a series of finds in the area surrounding Xiaotun Village outside Anyang, in Henan Province. They unearthed pits containing ceremonial objects, and buried horses and chariots, and discovered the foundations of palaces and a large number of royal tombs, all dating back over 3,000 years. Suddenly a dynasty long lost in the mists of time appeared again, in all its vibrant diversity.

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

*There used to be a lot of doubts and questions about ancient Chinese history, the so-called*

*‘school of doubters.’ Five thousand years of history was cut back to 2,000 because people did not dare write about anything earlier. Archeology thus became an important tool to resolve these questions. The double discovery of the Yin Ruins near Anyang and their ancient tortoise-shell-and-bone inscriptions finally confirmed the existence of the Shang Dynasty. These excavations left no doubt about the high level of civilization attained by the people of that period.*



*Modern depiction of the Shang Dynasty's territory*



From the first, it was believed that the inscriptions were the ancestors of the Chinese written script. Along with their discovery, other mysteries have gradually come to light. For instance, in all the volumes of historical archives there have never been any detailed descriptions of how large an area the Shang Dynasty covered. Now, thanks to the scraps of information in the inscriptions, and to comparative studies of cultural artifacts, we can draw the following conclusions.

◆ **Luan Fengshi, professor of the Center of Eastern Archeology, Shandong University**

*We now know that the Shang Dynasty controlled a huge area, stretching south to Hunan and Jiangxi, west to central Shaanxi, north to the line of the present Great Wall and eastward to not far from the ocean.*

◆ **Liu Yu, research fellow of the Palace Museum**

*Its influence spread outwards from the Yellow River Basin southward all the way to the Yangtze and Huai river basins, and northward as far as Inner Mongolia and the Northeast.*



*This is where the oracle bone inscriptions were found.*



Zhou Plain ruins



Zhou Plain Museum, Qishan County, Shaanxi Province

But there was something very strange: For decades, the only specimens of oracle bone scripts were unearthed in an area covering 24 sq km centered on Xiaotun Village. In nearly half a century from the first excavation at the Yin Ruins in the late 1920s no other samples anywhere else had come to light. Could such a mature script exist only in this small area? People were searching for answers.

At the foot of Mount Qi in Shaanxi Province, on the boundary of Fufeng and Qishan counties lie some 20-odd villages. Historians also call this place the Zhou Plain, where, about 3,000 years ago, a tribe by the name of Zhou lived.

Over the last century, since the end of the Qing Dynasty, tens of thousands of cultural relics have been unearthed in this area covering over 100 sq km. Some 30-odd caches have come to light, revealing over 1,000 bronze objects, among them the famous Dayu *ding* and Maogong *ding* cooking vessels, all first-class national treasures. Archeologists call this place Home of the Bronzes. Then, in 1976, during another dig, the unexpected occurred.

◆ *Cao Wei, deputy curator of the Qin Terracotta Warriors Museum, Shaanxi Province*

*A large number of Western Zhou (1046-771 B.C.) oracle bones were discovered—27,000 pieces in total. We found that 58 fragments contained non-carved inscriptions, the signs on 16 fragments were not script at all, and 19 were pieced together into nine bigger fragments. This has given us a total of over 200 pieces with inscriptions. This has totally refuted the claim that the oracle bone inscriptions only belonged to the Shang period.*

Ancient inscriptions were used in divination for the royal family,

and all oracles were kept secret. They were buried in caches, and preserved as part of the family archives.

For a long time archeologists believed that only the royal family of the Shang Dynasty possessed the secret of writing inscriptions. None outside this circle, including the rulers of adjoining states had any chance of coming into contact with the script. So how did these oracle bone inscriptions end up on Zhou Plain, hundreds of km away from the Shang capital?

The *Ligui* preserved in the National Museum of China is a bronze vessel from the Western Zhou. Inside, on the bottom, are cast just 32 characters, which tersely recount an event that changed the course of Chinese history some 3,000 years ago.

On the 26th day of the 2nd lunar month in 1046 B.C. a decisive battle was fought between King Wu of Zhou and King Zhou, the last ruler of Shang. King Wu, who believed he had been given the Mandate of Heaven, led an army of 50,000 men from eight adjoining states and defeated King Zhou outside the city of Chaoge, the political center of the Shang Dynasty. The battle took place on the pasturelands to the southwest of the city, and has gone down in history as the Battle of the Pasture.

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

*In Chinese history, the Battle of the Pasture is a classic example of a small army defeating a larger one, and was one of China's earliest major battles. The difference in the size of the armies was huge: 40,000 to 50,000 for King Wu against several hundred thousand for King Zhou.*

There was great slaughter. The historical account says the amount of blood shed caused sticks to float. Some historians claim that, had it not been for a mutiny of the slaves fighting in the frontlines of the Shang army, things might have turned out quite differently.

The story goes that the tyrannical King Zhou burned himself to death on Lutai, thus bringing to an end the 600 years of the Shang Dynasty. For his part, King Wu, to commemorate his great victory and honor his ancestors, had the *Ligui* vessel cast eight days after the Battle of the Pasture.



*Ligui, excavated in Lintong County, Shaanxi Province*



*Inscription inside the Ligui*



*Lutai site*

It seems inevitable that the Zhou Dynasty, after seizing political power from the Shang, would inherit and carry on its cultural legacy. This seems to be the most obvious answer to the puzzle of the Zhou Plain inscriptions.

◆ ***Cao Wei, deputy curator of the Qin Terracotta Warriors Museum, Shaanxi Province***

*Compared to the Shang oracle bone inscriptions, the Zhou ones reveal some differences. For instance, though the Shang script varies somewhat from period to period, none of the signs is as small as the ones from the Zhou Plain, some of which are hardly visible to the naked eye. Some scholars describe them as China's earliest mini-carvings. However, overall, the Zhou Plain script belongs to the same writing system as that of the Shang.*

In fact, the characters cast on bronzeware are all from the same period as the oracle bone inscriptions. Those on many of the bronze vessels unearthed from the Zhou Plain are clear evidence that the mature ideograms of the Shang had already spread from the middle reaches of the Yellow River around today's Anyang in Henan Province, up northward to the plains of the Wei River in Shaanxi Province. The question now becomes, apart from the Yin Ruins and Zhou Plain, are there any signs of Chinese characters in other places? The answer is a resounding yes.

On March 17, 2003, an archeological team from Shandong University began excavating an ancient Shang site at Daxin Village. After three days, more and more fragments with oracle bone inscriptions began turning up. They were identical to those found at the Yin Ruins and those cast on Zhou Dynasty bronzeware. There were no signs of local differentiation. Once again, 104 years after the amazing discovery of the

Yin Ruins, Shang Dynasty oracle bone scripts were the focus of attention.

◆ *Fang Hui, professor of the Center of Eastern Archeology, Shandong University*

*In the Shang inscriptions, maternal ancestors are all called mu. In sacrificial ceremonies to four maternal ancestors, the symbols of four pigs are used. The first is a wild pig, the second a piglet, and the third and fourth ordinary pigs.*

*At that time, we had only found fragments and were not able to give a complete reading as we can today. However, there was already enough to show that, after the Shang, writing was no longer restricted to the capital city, and that the aristocracy in the provinces also knew how to use a written script.*

So writing clearly did not belong only to the ruler in his capital, but to a whole dominant class. What's more, in order to rule successfully, any king would need to extend his power over a much broader area than just his capital.



*Oracle bone inscriptions found in the Yin Ruins*



*Inscribed oracle bone, Shang Dynasty, found in Daxin Village, Shandong Province*

The new Zhou Dynasty took over the best of the Shang culture, but changed the system of governance. The Zhou set up a system of feudal fiefdoms in an effort to consolidate and strengthen the power of the king, by awarding land and the people who worked it to all direct blood relatives, and to meritorious officials.

Starting from the capital and fanning outwards, bronze vessels symbolizing royal authority were dispatched to the fiefdoms of the nobles; along the same routes, the royal historians sent out their archival scrolls; and thus Chinese characters, cast into bronze or inscribed on bamboo slips, began their spread to a wider world.



xià

## “Xia” as in the phrase “Chun Xia Qiu Dong”

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “xia” as “people of the middle kingdom.”

“What night is tonight? Pull over to the sandbar in the river. What day is today? When I can travel in the same boat as the prince...” This folk song from 2,500 years ago takes us back to that ancient time.

In 528 B.C., Zi Xi, a high official of the State of Chu, was taking an outing on a river surrounded by a large number of courtiers and officials. At the banquet, a boatman from the State of Yue sang that song as he rowed.

Zi Xi did not understand the language of Yue, and asked for a translation. He was moved by the song, and, following the custom of Chu, placed both hands on the boatman’s shoulders. Then he solemnly draped a length of fine silk around him. Why was this ordinary song rewarded with such high honor? And why was this so carefully recorded by Liu Xiang, imperial historian of the Western Han Dynasty?

During the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.), the State of Chu covered a vast territory from the Jing Mountains to today’s Han River basin. Since time immemorial, this area has been inhabited by many different ethnic groups and tribes.

Towards the end of the Shang Dynasty, a tribe from the Central Plains migrated here, intermarried with the local inhabitants, and slowly grew in numbers and strength. It established a new kingdom, the State of Chu.

◆ **Lu Xixing, professor of the College of Liberal Arts, Nanchang University**

*One would think that the Central Plains tribe would have brought its written script to use with the people of Chu, but in fact it turned out to be very difficult, because the two languages were quite different. This is clear later from the Lyrics of Chu. For example, the word for tiger is very different in the two languages. So in practice, the writing of the Central Plains could not be used directly to write the language of Chu.*

This is not an exceptional phenomenon. China is a vast land, and home to many different ethnic groups. The region south of the Yangtze Delta is known as the Land of the Hundred Yue. There might not really be 100 different peoples of Yue, but there certainly are a great many dialects and sub-dialects that are mutually incomprehensible.

That's why Zi Xi had to rely on a translator to understand the words of the folksong. So, with that many language barriers from region to region, how did the ancient Chinese achieve a unified written script?

Xun Kuang (313-238 B.C.), a philosopher of the Warring States Period, wrote in his *Xunzi: On Honor and Shame*, that "the people of Yue speak their own tongue, the people of Chu speak theirs, but the gentleman who recognizes honor and shame should speak elegantly."

Linking language with morality was an attempt to put an end to the confusion in languages at the end of the Zhou Dynasty, and thus to end the fragmentation of the land between warring overlords, and the misery this brought to the ordinary people.



Xun Kuang

So what is elegant language?

◆ **Zheng Zhang Shangfang, research fellow at the Institute of Languages, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences**

*"Elegant language," or yayan was the standard language of ancient times, the equivalent of today's Putonghua. The character for "elegant," or ya (雅) was interchangeable with xia (夏 (summer)). The reason ya or xia was considered the standard*

pronunciation was because it represented the language of the written script. When people of the Zhou Dynasty wanted to learn to write, they learned from the Yin (i.e. the Shang Dynasty), and the Yin had learned from the Xia Dynasty. So the three dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou all learned the same ideograms, the same standard language or yayan, and that's how the culture was carried down through the ages.

The tribe that had migrated from the Central Plains eventually evolved into the Chu nobility. They knew the language of the Central Plains, and were emulated by others. Speaking elegantly became the fashion in Chu, and everyone gradually began to speak the standard language.

However, this was still limited to the official class of Chu. Other kingdoms and peoples still used their own tongues for everyday speech. Without an integrating vehicle that transcends oral pronunciation, communication and exchange would still be difficult.

That integrating vehicle was the Chinese characters.

◆ *Liu Lening, professor of Columbia University, United States*

*An ideographic writing system transcends dialect since it does not represent any specific pronunciation, but instead expresses meaning directly. In this way, a character may be pronounced differently, but everyone can read and understand it. This was very important for linking different regions and creating a sense of cohesion. Quite possibly, our ancestors became aware of this bond, this cohesive effect, and that is why they retained this writing system through the ages.*

"The fishhawks sing *gwan gwan* on sandbars of the stream. Gentle maiden, pure and fair, fit pair for a prince." This is an ancient folksong that is well-known to all. From the connotations of the words, it is clear that the ideographic writing system limited the proliferation of dialect and the disintegration of common cultural meanings. *Book of Songs*, collated by Confucius, is a collection of folksongs from 15 principalities, yet if they are recited according to the standard ancient pronunciation, the lines still all pretty much rhyme.

◆ *Kristofer Schipper, member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a sinologist*

*Did they all speak the same tongue? That would have been impossible. Even today, China has a large number of dialects. The folksongs are from different states, and presumably each of the state should have something unique, but in the folksongs it is hard*



Book of Songs published by  
Jinling Book Company in 1896



*to find any local linguistic features, whether in grammar or usage.*

Writing is a representation of language. Experts deduce that the earliest forms of Chinese characters probably represented a language similar to today's Putonghua (or Mandarin), and this was probably the standard language. With this linguistic form acting as a medium, the mature writing system of the Central Plains spread hand in hand with the expansion of royal authority to gradually become the common language of all the ancient peoples. Similarly, the independent political power of these groups gradually coalesced around the authority of the Central Plains monarch.

However, just as this writing system was slowly taking root in the State of Chu, the central pillar of royal power there, the Son of Heaven of Zhou, was gradually losing his authority and hold over his nobles. Chu also had its own indigenous customs and beliefs that differed from the Central Plains culture, so, quite naturally, the people of Chu began to adapt the language to their own circumstances.

◆ *Lu Xixing, professor of the College of Liberal Arts, Nanchang University*

*By the late Spring and Autumn Period, the State of Chu had developed an original form of writing called the "bird and insect script." They embellished their characters with birds and insects, making them very complicated. Why? Perhaps it had something to do with their belief system. For example, they added birds because of their veneration of the phoenix. There were a lot of snakes and other insects in Chu, so decorating their writing with insects or snakes might have been a way of warding off bad luck.*



*The sword of Gou Jian, king of Yue, unearthed in the Wangshan Mountains near Jingzhou, Hubei Province*

The Hubei Museum has in its collection a bronze sword cast 2,500 years ago, in the Spring and Autumn Period. It belonged to Gou Jian, the king of Yue, and was unearthed in the Wangshan Mountains near Jingzhou, in Hubei Province. Even now, thousands of years later, it still gleams balefully.

Experts have tested the blade, and found that it easily cuts through 20 layers of paper. So it is known as the “first sword under Heaven,” but what experts find even more intriguing are the eight characters engraved on it. The “bird and insect script” was created in the State of Chu, so what was it doing on a sword from the distant State of Yue?

◆ **Zhou Youguang, philologist**

*Present day research has shown that ancient Chinese culture probably originated in several places, springing from several different sources. However, the culture that grew up in the Yellow River Basin evolved to the highest degree. Culture generally tends to spread from well-developed areas to less-developed ones. Other places were less evolved, and so the more sophisticated culture dominated and was passed down.*

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

*The State of Chu became one of the most powerful fiefdoms in the southern part of China. By the late Spring and Autumn Period it had expanded eastwards to cover over half the territory of what was then China, so it exerted a wide influence.*

“Fire is passed down in an endless chain.” This is how the people of Chu became, wittingly or unwittingly, the faithful propagators of Central Plains culture, and an important link in the history of Chinese writing. Even today, their anthology of poems and songs in the *Lyrics of Chu* are considered, together with the *Book of Songs*, to be one of the sources of Chinese literature.

As we trace the evolution of Chinese ideograms in the land of Chu, we can probably assume that other local cultures were also transformed along similar lines in the course of the assimilation and formation of a national Chinese culture.

Possibly for these very reasons, the Grand Historian Liu Xiang, in his work *Shuo Yuan* noted in great detail that incident of the Chu noble Zi Xi meeting the Yue boatman. Thanks to its recording in the Chinese written language, *Song of the Yue Boatman* has come down to us from 2,500 years ago.



*Gold-inlaid bronze halberds embellished with "bird script" characters of the Warring States Period, excavated in Luonan County, Shaanxi Province*

秋 qiū

“Qiu” as in the phrase “Chun Xia Qiu Dong”

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “qiu” as “time of ripening grain.”

A map made today of Chinese territory at the end of the Warring States Period shows that, apart from the State of Chu, the hegemon of the south, there were six other states: Qin, Qi, Han, Yan, Zhao and Wei. Han, Zhao and Wei were smaller than the others, but the remaining four look equally matched. So how is it that only the State of Qin was finally able to conquer and unify them all under one ruler?

Wang Guowei, a scholar living in the final years of the Qing Dynasty, had his viewpoint about the quick rise of the State of Qin.



A modern map showing the territories of different states during the Warring States Period

◆ **Yao Ganming, professor of the College of Literature, Jiangnan University**

*Wang Guowei points out that the State of Qin was geographically situated in the heartland of the Western Zhou Dynasty, while the other six states were further to the east and thus farther away from this source. From a cultural perspective, Qin thus had a stronger link with the past. Wang notes that the scripts of the Qin, from the Zhou style of the History of Zhou, to the "big seal" and later to the "small seal" characters can all trace their roots back to forms used during the time of Western Zhou.*

The scripts of the six other, distant, states, freed from the conventions imposed by the ruler of Western Zhou, evolved independently and began to take on distinctive features, but the writing in the State of Qin, located in the west, continued to follow the original Zhou forms, even as it gradually changed over time. It's possible that the Qin rulers understood that one day the turbulence and internecine wars would inevitably come to an end, and anyone with the ambition to rule over all would need to have deep roots in the rich and fertile soil of the civilization of the Central Plains. In other words, it was precisely this ability to inherit and carry on the legacy of the past that made it possible for Qin to eventually prevail.

In 316 B.C., a Qin army marched along the notoriously difficult roads of the Kingdom of Shu, to suddenly appear in the Sichuan Basin. Very quickly, the Kingdom of Shu became the Prefecture of Shu, part of the Qin territory.

◆ **Duan Yu, professor of the Research Center of Ba-Shu Culture, Sichuan Normal University**

*The Shu were an ancient tribe. The character for shu (蜀) appears first in oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty, where it seems to refer to an ethnic group, a kingdom or a community. Historical records show that the Kingdom of Shu joined the alliance headed by King Wu of Zhou in his battle against the last Shang ruler.*

◆ **He Zheng, professor of the College of History and Culture, Sichuan University**

*We used to think that the Shu did not have a written script, but this has been disproved by recent research and archeological findings.*

In 1921 nearly 1,000 bronze items were unearthed at Baimasi and Tanjunmiao, north of Chengdu. Everyone was amazed to find they were



Strange symbols found  
on objects unearthed at  
Baimesi

covered with strange symbols. Were these the signs of that remote ancient language that philologists had been seeking? Could they be the writing of the Xia Dynasty?

Unfortunately, the objects disappeared soon after they were unearthed, and later ended up in private collections. After half a century's study, experts still could not agree on what the symbols were. Then, in the 1970s another kind of Ba-Shu script composed of block-shaped characters was discovered, and it was finally concluded that they belonged to a mature writing system completely distinct from Chinese ideograms.

Once again, nearly 50 years have passed, and still no one has deciphered these familiar-looking yet incomprehensible characters. What historical events do they record? We still do not know. How did they become lost in the mists of time?

◆ *He Zheng, professor of the College of History and Culture, Sichuan University*

*After Qin conquered the lands of Ba-Shu, the script of the Central Plains was introduced, and gradually the original writing fell out of use.*

The great Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai described his native Shu, remarking on its remoteness and the impassable roads that made it "harder to reach than climbing to Heaven." According to legend, the kingdom, surrounded by steep mountain ranges, had been cut off for 48,000 years, until the arrival of the people of Qin. Of course, the Qin not only brought their written language, but, more importantly, introduced a sophisticated farming culture inherited from the Zhou Dynasty.

In 251 B.C., some 60 years after the Qin invaded Shu, a man named Li Bing was appointed head of the Prefecture of Shu.

◆ *Duan Yu, professor of the Research Center of Ba-Shu Culture, Sichuan Normal University*

*The Min River has always been difficult to tame. The historical records show that since time immemorial the Min River flooded in the summers and autumns, fed by mountain torrents. After the Qin conquered Shu, Li Bing, as prefect of Shu, led the population*



Li Bing and his son

*in a massive water-diversion-and-control project. Using local materials like bamboo and bamboo baskets filled with stones, he successfully constructed the Dujiangyan irrigation infrastructure. From that time on, "floods and droughts obeyed man," and Chengdu became known as the "City of Abundance." Even today, the irrigation system is vital to the city's economy.*

Li Bing's—and later his son's—huge achievements have gone down in history. These, together with the introduction of the "small seal" script, brought great cultural and material prosperity to ancient Shu.

In 221 B.C. Emperor Qin Shi Huang completed his conquest of the remaining six states, and established a single unified empire. He standardized weights and measures throughout the land, and also decreed that the "small seal" script, which had evolved from the Shang and Zhou scripts, was now the only one to be used throughout the empire. Once again, a single writing system of Chinese characters was in use throughout the territory of China.

◆ *He Chengxuan, research fellow of the Institute of Philosophy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*Emperor Qin Shi Huang's territorial expansion was primarily towards the south, towards Lingnan in today's Guangdong and Guangxi regions. These were inhabited by the Baiyue peoples, who were still living in a state of primitive society with very low productivity, surviving mainly on slash-and-burn farming, fishing and hunting. The*

*tribes spoke different languages, and had difficulty interacting amongst themselves. The newcomers from Qin were even more in need of translators.*



*Zhao Tuo*

This water passage, the Ling Canal, was dug by Qin troops for the transport of military supplies. It has been in use now for over 2,000 years. The mighty Qin army conquered Lingnan, and set up the three administrative districts of Guilin, Nanhai and Xiangjun. It seemed in-

vincible, and yet in a short span of 15 years, the arrogant and mighty Qin Dynasty collapsed and disappeared forever.

One of the generals who had headed the army sent to Lingnan was the well-read Zhao Tuo. He and his 500,000 troops remained there, and after the fall of the Qin Dynasty he established the Kingdom of Nanyue. The written script of the Qin continued to be used, and thus the whole of Nanyue became incorporated into the domain of Chinese characters.

In 196 B.C. Zhao Tuo accepted the royal seal of Nanyue bestowed on him by the Han Dynasty emperor Liu Bang, and after performing the rituals of kneeling and kowtowing towards the north, became a vassal of the Han. The numerous objects unearthed from the royal tombs of Nanyue show that the kingdom entirely followed the systems and forms of the Central Plains. Thanks to this common culture, there was no need for the Han to conquer the land by force to incorporate it into its territory. The people of Nanyue were thus spared the misery and destruction of war.

This was the first time that the Chinese characters and the culture they represented demonstrated their amazing binding force over a vast empire.

The Han Dynasty was the first high water mark in traditional Chinese society. It stretched east to the East China Sea, south to the South China Sea, west to Yunnan and Guangxi, north to the Gobi Desert, and incorporated the lands of the Western Regions. It initiated a corridor



*Site of the government office of the Nanyue Imperial Palace*



starting at the capital Chang'an which passed through the Western Regions to reach the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, forming what later was called the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was the only meeting place of four ancient cultures: the Indian, Greco-Roman, Persian and Han-Tang Chinese. Large numbers of decorated grottoes along its length attest to the bustling and prosperous trade that followed its dusty paths.

Along this road, caravans carried silk, porcelain and tea from China to enrich the lives of the peoples of the Middle East and Europe, and along the same road there came back into the Chinese culture and language a rich new vocabulary: grapes, water melons, alfalfa, Buddha, Nirvana, enlightenment...



dōng

“Dong” as in the phrase “Chun Xia Qiu Dong”

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “dong” as “the end of the four seasons.”

In the 12th month of 1443, King Sejong, fourth monarch of the Joseon Dynasty of Korea, announced that he had completed the invention of a new, alphabetic script. This came like a bolt out of the blue to his court officials.

The new script was known as *Hunminjeongeum*, literally *The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People*. Most court officials had never heard of it before, and had not even known that the king was working on a new script. They reacted very strong-



*King Sejong of Korea*



*A page of The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People*

ly to this strange new writing, so completely different from the Chinese characters they were accustomed to. They criticized it vehemently: How ridiculous to invent a new form of writing when Koreans already had the Chinese characters with which to express themselves!

◆ *Korenaga Shun, former president of Osaka University of Foreign Studies, Japan*

*Language and culture are closely intertwined. From ancient times until fairly recently, the countries of East Asia, including Japan, Korea and Vietnam, all used Chinese characters, and on that basis developed their own writing systems.*

◆ *Li Chong-sik, professor of the Confucius Institute of Honam University, Republic of Korea*

*Before the invention of Hunminjeongeum, Chinese characters were the only script used in ancient Korea. No one really knows when they were first introduced, but it is generally thought that in the first century A.D., Chinese characters were brought over the Changbai Mountains and the Yalu River to become the official script of ancient Korea.*

At one time the Koreans were proficient at using the Chinese script and they were very proud of that. So why at this particular time did the king of Korea decide to defy criticisms of betrayal, to break with tradition and invent a completely new script?

◆ *Yan Guide, professor of the Confucius Institute, Chungnam University, Republic of Korea*

*Korea under King Sejong was at one of its strongest periods in history. Political stability, economic growth and advancement of knowledge all led him to invent the Korean alphabet to record his nation's culture and ideas.*



*Western Xia characters*

Of all the nations that used Chinese characters, Korea was not the first to invent its own script. Many other nations, when they were ready to establish an independent state or in the process of becoming strong, had also decided to develop a script for their own language.

◆ *Shi Jinbo, professor of the Center for Western Xia Culture, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*In the 10th century, the Khitan tribe of the northeast established the Liao Dynasty. In the 11th century, the Dangxiang gradually became more powerful and set up the Western Xia Dynasty. Not long afterwards, the Nuzhen began to flourish, and established*

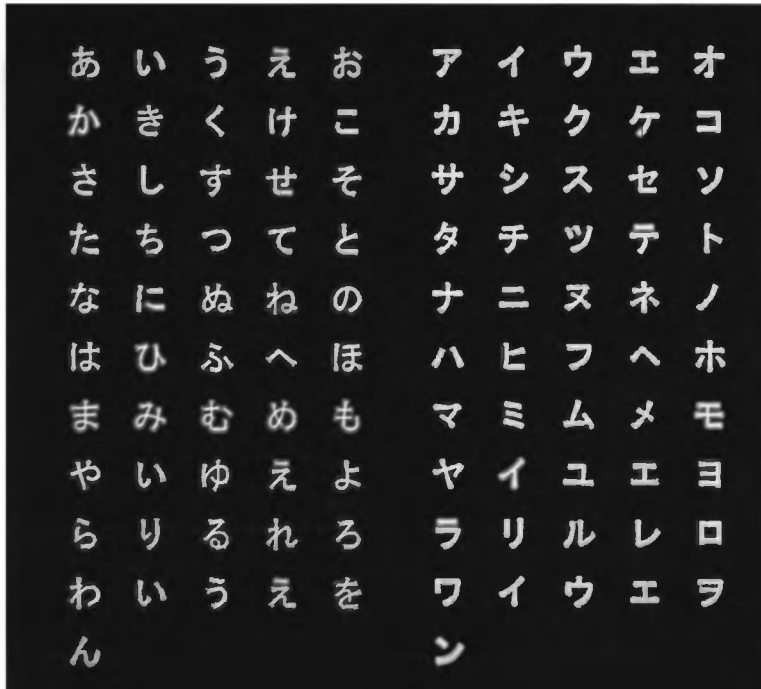
*the Jin Dynasty. All these nations were strong enough to counter the power of the Song Dynasty, and at one point counterbalanced each other. Each of them had a strong need to invent their own writing system after they became established.*

It's gratifying to note that never once did the central Chinese imperial court, which considered itself supreme, ever try to intervene in or meddle with these attempts to create new scripts, no matter how far away they were, or how close their relations were with the central authority.

◆ *Kagami Mitsuyuki, professor of the International Center for Chinese Studies, Aichi University, Japan*

*Why did the Japanese invent kana? Because the huge number of Chinese characters made it hard for ordinary people to learn to read and write. Simplification of the characters produced 55 kana, which were much easier for ordinary people to master.*

The history of culture follows its own course, and is not easily re-directed. The creators of the new scripts tried very hard to break free



*Japanese hiragana (left) and katakana (right) syllables*



*Fragment of, stele bearing Western Xia characters, unearthed at a royal tomb of the Western Xia Dynasty, Yinchuan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region*


from the strong influence of the source, but despite many changes, these languages still show the distinct influence of Chinese characters.

◆ **Phung Thi Hue, professor of the Institute for Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences**

*In those days people's knowledge was limited. New creations were made on the basis of the Chinese characters. For example, the character nan in Vietnamese was a loanword from Chinese, written with a Chinese radical.*

◆ **Shen Guowei, professor of the Institute of Foreign Language Education and Research, Kansai University, Japan**


*During the Edo period there was a scholar who said, "Japan is like a pot of soybean milk which becomes tofu when you add brine." Is it possible then to separate the brine out again? Of course not.*



The Shanghai Museum has in its collection a distinctive bronze vessel called the *Liangqi Gui*. Cast over 2,000 years ago during the late Western Zhou period, it was a ceremonial object used in rituals for ancestor worship. Within the inscription is a sign of a small child standing under a symbolic roof representing the shrine of the ancestors. This is the Chinese pictograph for *zi* 字, or “character.” It can be explained as “bring a newborn life before Heaven, Earth and the ancestors, and, through a naming ritual, express the hope that it will act as a link between the eternal ancestors and the boundless future.”

Around 240 B.C., Lü Buwei, the prime minister of the State of Qin, ordered the court scholars to write a book that would incorporate all past history up until their own time, to serve as a reference for future rulers. The 3,000 scholars set to work, and after a few years the book was finished. It was called the *Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*. Eager to get everything just right, Lü Buwei ordered that the book be displayed in the center of Xianyang city, the Qin capital, and announced that he would award 1,000 ounces of gold to anyone who could add to or delete anything from it.

Study of the historical records indicates that by that time, *zi* 字 had already evolved from the concept of lineage and a symbol of a flourishing clan into the general name for the symbols of the Chinese writing system as we know it today.



PART FOUR

# Heart and Spirit of the Chinese People





shēn

“Shen” as in the phrase “Shen Jia Xing Ming” (meaning one’s own life and the fate of the whole family)

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “shen” as “a person bowing.”

Everyone on earth, no matter where he/she lives, exists in a constantly recurring cycle of the four changing seasons. However, according to the oracle bone inscriptions, the people of the Shang Dynasty 3,000 years ago only recognized two seasons: spring and autumn.

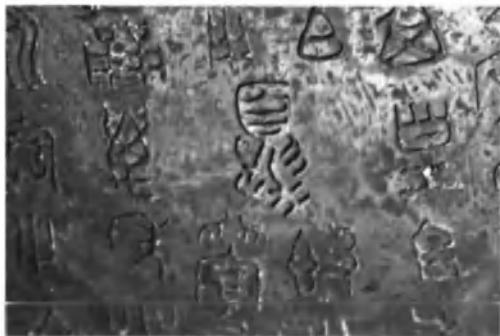
◆ *Meng Shikai, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*During the Shang Dynasty, the year began in the 11th month, and their spring lasted until the fifth month of the following year. So their autumn began in either the fifth or sixth month, and lasted until the 11th, when the harvest began.*

Some philologists believe that the character for *xia* 夏 or summer on bronze objects of the Shang or Western Zhou Dynasty looks like a barefoot person working in the fields. Perhaps it originally represented the ancient people of the Yellow River Basin, who lived by farming. The use of *xia* to represent a season first began in the Western Zhou Dynasty.

Like *xia*, the earliest symbol for *dong* 冬 (winter) did not depict a “season” as such, but represented the “end” of things, so it looks like a rope with a knot at both ends. During the Western Zhou, the sign for *ri* 日 (sun) was placed inside the rope, symbolizing the waning of the sun’s warmth and the arrival of winter.





The character xia 夏 (summer) inscribed on bronze vessels in the Shang or Western Zhou Dynasty



Oracle bone character dong 冬 (winter)

◆ **Zhang Han, paleographer**

*In an agricultural society, spring sacrifices expressed the hope for good planting and strong growth. The autumn harvests were also celebrated with sacrifices. The heat of summer and the cold of winter were not as important, so that's why they are not mentioned.*

When the harvests came in, it was cause for rejoicing amongst people of the Shang Dynasty who depended on farming for survival. At the close of the harvest season, the Shang king would preside in person over a number of solemn "report on the autumn" ceremonies, to express thanks to the ancestors and to Heaven.

Such autumnal rituals have continued in China for thousands of years. A people's understanding of nature is molded by its patterns of existence over a very long time. In fact, by the Shang Dynasty Chinese agriculture already had a history of nearly 5,000 years.

◆ **Wang Zhenzhong, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences**

*In 1973, some 88 grain storage caves were discovered at Cishan, Wuan, Hebei Province. Based on their height, archeologists were able to calculate the amount of grain they could contain, and it came to a total of nearly 70,000 kg. In those days, the grain was a kind of millet. This huge quantity shows that farming in north China had by then already developed to quite a high level.*

The archeological record can only give us a rough picture of the farming life of our forbears. However, things changed radically when pictograms began to appear in inscriptions on tortoise shells and bones,



*A bronze ding of the Western Zhou Dynasty unearthed at Yangjiacun Village, Meixian County, Shaanxi Province*

and then subsequently in large numbers on valuable bronze artifacts. Now, through these vivid and lively images we can get a graphic idea of how the ancients lived.

Two primitive farming implements, the *li* 力 and the *lei* 耒 were both used, but being made of wood, none have survived to this day. However, the pictograms representing them very clearly show their shape: a fork at one end with a wooden crosspiece that looks like a foot-board. Stepping on it made it an effective instrument for breaking up the soil.

◆ *An Zhisheng, academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences*

*The loess plateau is composed of layers of accumulated loess material. It's very homogenous, loose and porous and fractures vertically. A wooden tool or an iron plowshare can easily break up this kind of soil.*

In the Greek language there are many words for agricultural products that are of foreign origin, for example, wheat, olives, grapes and figs. There are many reasons for this, but poor farming conditions are probably one of them. In contrast, we find in Shang-Zhou ancient inscriptions different pictograms for such grains as *ji* 稷 (a variety of broomcorn

millet), *shu* 黍 (broomcorn millet), *su* 粟 (millet), *mai* 麦 (wheat), *dao* 稻 (paddy rice), *shu* 菽 (pulses), and other non-grain crops such as *sang* 桑 (mulberry), *ma* 麻 (jute), *gua* 瓜 (melon), *guo* 果 (fruit).

This contrast shows that the thick loess plateau not only fed and supported the Chinese people, it also nurtured a very distinctive agricultural civilization.

◆ *Xu Jialu, vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress of China and president of the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching*

*Farming involves a lot of detail and techniques. You may get 120 catties from a plot of land, while I only get 80. One must have a "knack." Techniques, means of production, tools, farming methods, and handicraft and spinning skills must all be passed on. So an agricultural society will place a lot of weight on inheriting and continuing. This means venerating the ancestors and carrying on the traditions. It also means fostering harmony and unity, but also knowing that Nature has its limits.*

Nomads consider the whole world as their home. They can enjoy everything on the earth. In the Bible it says God is the creator, we are all His creations, so everyone is equal. All members of the church are like brothers, even fathers and sons. The advantage of this is the concept of equality.

|   |                           |
|---|---------------------------|
|  | (黍) 现在的田即为黍，由成之后即为大粟。     |
|  | (粟) 现在即为谷子，由成之后即为小米。      |
|  | (麦) 现在即为小麦。               |
|  | (稻) 是在周代可能中为大。            |
|  | (菽) 在周代已有菽，有人说“菽”字应改成“豆”。 |

*Pictograms of major grains found in Shang Dynasty inscriptions*



*Pictograms of farm tools found in Shang Dynasty inscriptions and their uses*



*The Loess Plateau*

Thanks to the gifts of Nature, right from the very beginning the Western world and China followed very different paths of development. As Europe embarked upon the road to industrialization under the double pressures of a growing population and a shortage of resources, the ancient land of China continued its age-

old farming ways. How is it that the agricultural civilization in China showed such great resilience and tenacity? Or, to put another way, before the light of industrialization shone on China, how is it that the sons and daughters of Huaxia did not seem to feel the harsh pressures of survival?

In many ways, this has a great deal to do with the fact that our people were born, grew up and were buried in this yellow loess earth.

◆ *An Zhisheng, academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences*

*To this day, the loess plateau is still replenished every year by minerals and other nutrients blown over it by sandstorms, so it's constantly getting thicker. Even if it is intensively planted, which uses up the earth's nutrients, or the surface is washed away by water erosion, there is still a very thick older layer underneath that supports farming.*

This self-replenishing capacity of the loess plateau meant that 5,000 or 6,000 years ago our ancestors had settled and developed an agricultural lifestyle. Their farms and lands were passed down from generation to generation. In the Guanzhong region alone over 400 farming settlements have been unearthed from that period. The number of remains of villages in the Wei River Basin at that time was about the same as the number there today.

This land that nurtured them and their children, that contained the bones of their ancestors and would one day be their own burial ground was, for the Chinese people, much more than just a place where they sweated and labored; it took on a near-sacred meaning to them. For this reason, the earliest symbol for *yi* 艺 (art) is composed of a farmer planting saplings.

Millennia of farming shaped the consciousness of the early Chinese people. To them, the most *xiang* 香 “fragrant” things were grain, farming was what a *nan* 男 “man” did, the most *xiu* 秀 “beautiful” spectacle was fields of ripening grain, and bringing in the harvest meant the end of a *nian* 年 “year.” Even the characters for such mighty dynasties as the 周 *Zhou* and the 秦 *Qin* have their origins in agriculture and farming activities.

◆ **Zhu Dake, director of the Institute of Cultural Criticism, Tongji University**

*The character Zhou 周 is thought to represent fields surrounded by an outer boundary, which could be the boundary of the state. The character Qin 秦 seems to be a combination of pictograph and associative symbol: On the top are two hands holding a pestle, and below is a pictograph of two ears of grain, denoting ripe paddy rice.*

◆ **Wang Hongxing, curator of Hubei Museum**

*When agriculture is fairly primitive, farming depends mainly on the weather. Any kind of disaster such as a drought or flood will affect the harvest. As they developed, agricultural societies tried to find some kind of supernatural force that would protect them from Nature, and to whom they could pray for good weather.*

Nature is mysterious. It is also sacred. The symbol for *ren* 人 (person) is thought to represent a cypress bending respectfully forward, which was the correct position to adopt toward the all-embracing heavens.

*Ren* 人 is also part of *Tian* 天 (Heaven). People can plow in the spring, plant in the summer, harvest in the autumn and store in the winter, a never-ending cycle that manifests the goodwill of Heaven.

This is how Heaven, Earth and Man rely on each other even as they exist independently. This dialectical view formed the basis of the Chinese people’s concepts of the relations between Man and Nature, and of the ethical order that should exist in human relations.



*A cypress in the shape of the Chinese character ren 人 (person)*




jiā

“Jia” as in the phrase “Shen Jia Xing Ming”

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “jia” as “place of abode.”

One day 1,300 years ago, King Wuding of Shang was unsure about an important matter. In those times, when the king was uncertain about anything, he would resort to divination and oracles through which to consult the gods and the ancestors.

This particular oracle was inscribed on a fragment of tortoise shell.

◆ *Meng Shikai, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*What was the divination about? He wanted to know whether the concubine E's son was his blood child. On the inscription, the symbol yu 余 means “I,” just as it does in later classical Chinese.*

King Wuding was one of the most able monarchs of the Shang Dynasty. Under his rule, the country flourished and reached its peak. Because of this, Wuding was later given the honorific title of Diding 帝丁 or “Emperor Ding.”

In the earliest oracle bone inscriptions, the character for *di* 帝 meant the ruler of the universe, what we today call the “Lord of Heaven.” Wuding was the first person in Chinese history to be so titled. So how could someone as clever as Wuding be so foolish as not to know his own son?

◆ *Zhao Cheng, senior editor at the Zhonghua Book Company*

*In fact, he was not foolish at all. In those days, anyone of one's father's generation was called fu 父 (father); anyone of an earlier generation was called zu 祖 (ancestor); and anyone of a younger generation was called zi 子 (son). So what he wanted to know*



*Inscribed tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty used for divination*

*was what kind of a "son" was the child. Should he treat him as an ordinary "son" or as someone much closer to him by blood? This was important, since it involved the inheritance of the throne and of property.*

In man's experience most things go from small to large, and it seems that the growth of the clan is no exception. All families start off with one couple and their children, and then gradually expand and grow as their descendents multiply and flourish. However, the earliest oracle bone inscriptions tell us that things were once the other way round, and that small families evolved from larger ones. For our farming ancestors over the centuries, small families could be considered a luxury.

Here is a genealogical table carved on one of the earliest oracle bone inscriptions: Just as the character *zi* 子 represented all children, so *zu* 祖 represented all male ancestors, and *bi* 妣 all female ones. *Fu* 父 could be one's own father, but it could also mean paternal or maternal uncle. *Mu* 母 could mean one's mother, but also one's paternal or maternal aunt, both older or younger than one's mother. Those of one's own generation and blood kin, no matter how closely or distantly related, male or female, were all called *xiong* 兄 (elder brother) or *di* 弟 (younger brother).

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

*Written and archeological records show that in those days people lived in clan clusters. This is particularly clear from the various clan graves on the western side of the Yin Ruins. Each clan had a different way of burying its dead, from the direction of the corpse's head to the articles in the grave.*

◆ ***Zhu Fenghan, professor of the Department of History, Peking University***

*Primitive tools meant that a small family could not work the land alone, and would be wiped out by any kind of natural disaster. So a larger unit of production was needed to farm successfully. The early inscriptions clearly show that the "family" groups of ordinary people, those at the bottom of society, were actually quite large.*

The earliest symbol for *zu* 族 (clan) is written with a fluttering banner above some arrows. This indicates that a clan was a fighting unit as well as a production one.

In 1971 a number of large Shang Dynasty graveyards were discovered at the Yin Ruins in Anyang. Some of the clans were large, with dozens, even hundreds, of members, others smaller with fewer than 20. On



A map of the distribution of the Yin Ruins in Anyang, Henan Province

average, every fifth tomb contained weapons.

◆ *Song Zhenhao, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*Based on this proportion, we can deduce the relative social obligations of a clan, or its duties toward the state. What sort of duties? The duty to provide armed men to fight in an emergency.*

Whether carrying on the activities of daily life or taking up arms to fight, certain rules were needed. So how did families develop their rules?

The oracle bone sign for *fu* 父 (father) is a pictogram showing a man holding an object aloft. Scholars still argue over whether it's a wooden club or an ancestral symbol, but no matter how it is interpreted there is no doubting the symbolism of power and authority.

These kinship clans dominated the different areas in which they lived. They became linked by inter-marriage, or fought each other. This was the structure of Chinese society in those earliest days.

Since *jia* 家 (family) began as a large clan, when did the small family we are familiar with today separate out?

◆ *Yang Zhimin, professor of the China Agricultural University*

*The appearance of metal, especially iron implements, including the iron plow, and the use of oxen, were important factors in this transformation.*

◆ *Zhu Fenghan, professor of the Department of History, Peking University*

*Another factor was the weakening of the feudal vassal state, and the rise of centralized rule. No central monarch wanted to share his authority with the vassal lords, or with any other powerful family. Too much power in the hands of large hereditary clans would inevitably dilute that of the center. These political considerations led to the gradual disintegration of the large noble clans.*

The immediate family shrank in size, but the number of kin grew





A horse-and-chariot burial pit at the Yin Ruins in Anyang

exponentially.

Anthropologists have calculated the number of different kinship titles different cultures have created, and China tops the list with 350. Next come the ancient Romans with about 122, while most other national cultures have between 20 and 30.

Available records give us no clue as to when each title appeared. But one thing is clear: China's earliest dictionary *Er Ya*, compiled over 2,000 years ago during the Spring and Autumn Period, found it necessary to devote one whole chapter to describing and defining the complicated kinship titles of the day. So why did the less-than-a-dozen titles on the oracle bone inscriptions suddenly multiply 20 to 30 times? Why was it only the Chinese who developed such a huge network of blood kin?

◆ *Guo Fang, research fellow of the Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*



The oracle bone pictogram fu 父 (father)

*In the West, the development of Roman Law established the supremacy of private property, which gradually transferred property to the members of*

*the nuclear family. Therefore, complicated kinship titles became superfluous. However, in China, after the Spring and Autumn Period, the country was likened to a big family. Rulers were supposed to govern through propriety, and since they considered themselves to be the head of a huge family, also to govern according to the norms of filial piety. Kinship titles thus became very complicated, with rank, status and degree of distance becoming enshrined in a comprehensive system. That's why there were so many titles.*

Separation into smaller family units gave greater freedom for marriage, but also made the relationships between people more complicated. During periods of war and turmoil an individual's only hope for and source of support and help came from family members and close kin. This necessity formed the basis for the growth of such a thick, comforting network of blood ties.

Just as a family changes as it grows, so do the relationships between its members. The *fu* 父 or "father" could, in his prime, use his axe or club to defend his clan from outsiders, and maintain order within. But what happened as he grew older and weaker? How were the family ties maintained?

As human beings progress from a primitive state to civilization, the vestiges of their early savage are inevitably found in their written languages. Chinese characters are no exception in this respect.

◆ *Zhao Cheng, senior editor at the Zhonghua Book Company*

*The earliest form of the character qi 弃 (reject, abandon) is drawn as two hands holding a winnowing pan with a child in it. The explanation is that if there was no way of feeding a newborn child, it could be thrown out.*

*The original pictogram wei 微 resembles the character lao 老 (old, elderly). so placed here it seems to imply dalao 打老 or "beating the elderly." In ancient times, when it was not possible to feed everyone, the very young and the old were often "discarded." The young were more important than the elderly.*

In times of shortage, when survival became uncertain, the weak and the old were abandoned in an attempt to lighten the load. This was a natural choice, so that the community could continue. Many early societies had this custom. So how did the Chinese nation abandon this cruel practice?

A Western Zhou bronze dating back to 900 B.C. was unearthed at Fufeng, in Shaanxi Province. It was cast for an official named Qiang,



*The pictogram xiao 孝 (filial piety) on a bronze object buried with an official named Qiang*

who wished to honor his ancestor *Weizi* 微子 with a ritual vessel. In the inscription, not far from the pictogram for *wei* 微 is another pictogram showing a child supporting an old person with a cane. This is the original *xiao* 孝 (filial piety), a virtue that has warmed the hearts of countless Chinese families over millennia.

“Of all the virtues, filial piety comes first.” This is the foundation upon which the Chinese nation gradually walked out of the uncivilized state and established mature social ethics and morality.

Morality and culture depended on blood lineage and kinship. Was this why our ancestors chose to replace *wen* 文 with *zi* 字, which symbolized the hereditary bloodline of a clan, to designate the signs that composed their writing system?



### “Xing” as in the phrase “Shen Jia Xing Ming”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “xing” as “those who do good display ‘yang’.”



A copy of Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals, published during the Republic of China period (1912-1949)

Stories that move us today also moved our ancestors.

Lü's *Spring and Autumn Annals* is a historical work which compiled a great many touching and moving stories in this work from the ancient world.

◆ *Bu Xianqun, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

One day, King Wen of Zhou was out on an inspection tour, and noticed a corpse lying by the road. He ordered his followers to bury it. His officials advised him not to bother with a nameless body. King Wen was very displeased, and scolded his courtiers, saying that he who lives under Heaven must take care of others, and he who leads a state is like the head of a family and must care for his people. He said that as he was the head of the unknown person's family, he had a duty to see that the corpse was decently buried.

The story is told in just 65 characters, but King Wen's benevolence and compassion are striking.

In ancient China, there was never a clear demarcation between “family” and “state.” The ruler very often took on the role of the head of the family.

In the earliest inscriptions, there are several ways of writing *guo* 國 (state, nation). But no matter which side the *kou* 口 was on, the meaning was crystal clear: Defend one's clansmen by force of arms. The highest

ruler of the land—the king—was the leader who fought the most bravely. That's why the earliest characters for king include a battle axe, even more authoritative than the wooden club in the father's hand.

A ruler must have courtiers. The earliest symbol for *chen* 臣 (courtier) was a large upright eye.

The eminent historian Guo Moruo explains this as follows: 臣 originally meant "slave," whose gaze was upwards, expressing subservience and fear. This can be substantiated by another ancient character, the symbol for today's *min* 民 (people, subject) which, in its most ancient form, was a drawing of an eye with a sharp spike through it.



The oracle bone pictogram  
chen 臣 (courtier)

◆ *Liu Yu, research fellow of the Palace Museum*

*Some scholars say that the earliest chen 臣 were in fact slaves. Later, low-ranking courtiers with greater access to the ruler, were put in charge of many matters of increasing importance, and so the position gradually evolved. In the Western Zhou, the character zai 宰 first appeared, and generally meant a general housekeeper or steward.*

Just as the smaller family unit grew out of the larger clan, so the systems of officialdom of the various dynasties also evolved from the different management roles within the clan.

In the earliest inscriptions, the sign *zai* 宰 is written as a roof with a *xin* 辛 beneath. A *xin* was a kind of instrument of torture, a hot iron for burning the face. So *zai* 宰 meant he who has a brand on his face, or a house slave.

By the Shang Dynasty, *zai* 宰 had gradually evolved into the head of all house servants, and this role continued into the Zhou. In the *Rites of the Zhou Dynasty* the term *zaizhong* 宰冢 heads the list of officials, but 60% of the courtiers working under this person were in charge of the food and meals of the royal family.

In 1754 B.C., King Tang, founder of the Shang Dynasty, was on his deathbed. Before he died, he conferred a new official title, *baoheng* 保衡 on his old courtier, Yi Yin, who had fought alongside him in the early days.



The pictogram zai 宰 (steward)  
from bronze vessels of the Zhou  
or Shang Dynasty

◆ **Zhao Ping'an, professor of the College of Literature, Beijing Normal University**

Bao means "calm," and heng means "peace." So baoheng 保衡, or "keeping the peace," can be considered Yi Yin's job, or his responsibility as a senior official. The name was not only a title of respect but also of a specific post.

The pictogram for *bao* 保 from the inscriptions on bronze vessels of the Zhou Dynasty shows a man holding a child, a familiar sight these days too. Clearly, the post of *bao* 保 denoted an important responsibility toward the young king and the whole land.

The divination texts show that the Shang Dynasty already had about 70 official posts. Many of the familiar later titles like *taishi* 太師,



The pictogram bao 保 (preserve)  
from bronze vessels of the Zhou  
or Shang Dynasty

*taifu* 太傅, *taishi* 太史, *sima* 司马, *cishi* 刺史 began to appear in their initial forms.

In 1046 B.C. Shang was replaced by Zhou. In order to stabilize the country and establish its rule as quickly as possible, the Zhou Dynasty created a completely new system of government.

◆ **Wang Hui, professor of the College of History and Culture, Shaanxi Normal University**

*The relationship between the Shang ruler and the various states in the Central Plains was more like a kind of alliance, very similar to that between the hegemon and the other noble houses in the later Spring and Autumn Period.*

◆ **Liu Yu, research fellow of the Palace Museum**

*A small tribe called Ji was able to defeat the much larger Shang tribe and establish the Zhou Dynasty. However, in the beginning, the new regime was quite precarious, and there was every chance of the old dynasty regaining power. That is why, in its early years, Zhou adopted a new policy of dividing up its huge territory into fiefdoms, and granting them to royal kinsmen and meritorious officials, who ruled them independently.*

The historical records show that 71 fiefdoms were created in the early days, 53 being conferred upon kinsmen of the Ji tribe. The other vassals from different tribes also became related to the Ji through intermarriage. This mighty empire based on blood lineage inherited 80% of the official posts created under the Shang. However, as public affairs increased, the Zhou bureaucratic system gradually expanded.

Inscriptions from the Western Zhou period mention some 210 different official posts, four times the number under the Shang. The most prominent were the series of *zongbo* 宗伯 positions responsible for rites and music, and *sikong* 司空 positions responsible for public works.

◆ **Meng Shikai, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences**

*The Shang kings believed in the supernatural, and the Shang King had absolute power. The Western Zhou kings were not as superstitious. There was veneration of Heaven, but not of ghosts and spirits. Their rule was based on a complete system suited to the rule of the Son of Heaven. This system of rites and ceremonies spread to all corners of the land, and resulted in 200 years of peaceful development at the start of the dynasty.*



*Bronze vessel known as Liangqi Gui*



*The pictogram zi 字 (character) on the bronze vessel to the left*

Western Zhou lasted 300 years (1100-771 B.C.), unique in the ancient world. Based on blood lineage and a system of ethical values, the founders of the dynasty created a highly sophisticated political example in both models of governance and imperial form.

Later, the Qin and the Han dynasties dismantled the suzerain-and-fiefdom system, replacing it with a structure of prefectures and counties. Both used the rule of law to enhance rule by virtuous personality, and refined and expanded the methods for bringing order to society. However, all rulers down the centuries have cultivated a common ideal, and that is that the country should be ruled by a long-lasting and stable imperial order.





## “Ming” as in the phrase “Shen Jia Xing Ming”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “ming” as “to cause to happen.”

Confucius said, “When names are not properly applied, what is said is not attuned; when what is said is not attuned, things will not be done successfully.”

One day in the 5th century B.C. one of Confucius’ disciples asked about the way to bring order to a state. Confucius replied that it was necessary to start by “rectifying names” *zheng ming* 正名. Philologists suggest that the *ming* 名 he referred to was what we call today *zi* 字 (character). According to this interpretation, what he meant was that each character had to be thoroughly understood in all its implications.

What is the connection between ruling a state and Chinese characters? Confucius explained this by using the all-powerful character *wang* 王 (king) to illustrate his point.

◆ *Luan Fengshi, professor of the Center of Eastern Archeology, Shandong University*

*Confucius believed that the three horizontal strokes represented Heaven, Earth and Man, and the vertical stroke down the middle linked them together. We now know that this is a misinterpretation.*

Some say that if Confucius had seen the earliest oracle bone pictographs of the big axe, he would not have given this explanation. We do not know if he did see them, but we can be sure that if he had he would still have given the same explanation, because by his time, Chinese characters were not just simple signs for recording language, but had become

imbued with an intrinsic value—good or bad, beautiful or ugly.

◆ *Torbjörn Lodén, Swedish sinologist*

*The people of the Zhou and of Confucius' era believed in the "virtuous" reigns of Yao and Shun, and that they had an obligation to restore those ideals. During Confucius' time, in the Spring and Autumn Period, there was huge social disruption and conflict, people felt that they were living in a time of crisis, and that the only way out was to return to the virtues of the past.*

For Confucius, the ancestors had already built an ideal society—with the country unified and everything in good order. He believed the doctrines for governing the country had been noted down in their writings, but these classics had become distorted and misrepresented through the ages. So Confucius, the founder of Confucianism venerated with the title of Sage by later generations, never actually wrote anything of his own, but spent all his energies, when he was not teaching, editing and revising the classics of former ages. Perhaps for Confucius, if the

original message of the classics could be restored, so could the ideal society.

大  
道  
至  
聖  
文  
王

◆ *Kristofer Schipper, member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and sciences, and a sinologist*

*Many ancient thinkers developed their philosophies based on their religious beliefs, but only in China are such philosophical concepts so concrete and practical. This has a lot to do with a person's thoughts and feelings.*




Confucius

◆ **Tu Wei-ming, director of the Yenching Institute, Harvard University, United States**

*Western humanism grew out of the Renaissance, and from the 18th century it was anti-religion, primarily anti-Christianity. In addition, it encouraged scientific rationalism, a strong "Faustian spirit" of conquering Nature, so the relationship with nature has always been tense. Chinese humanism, for example Confucian humanism, on the other hand, took into account Man and Nature, and also the spirit. Why? Because it is constructed out of four elements: the individual, the community, social order and the way of Heaven.*

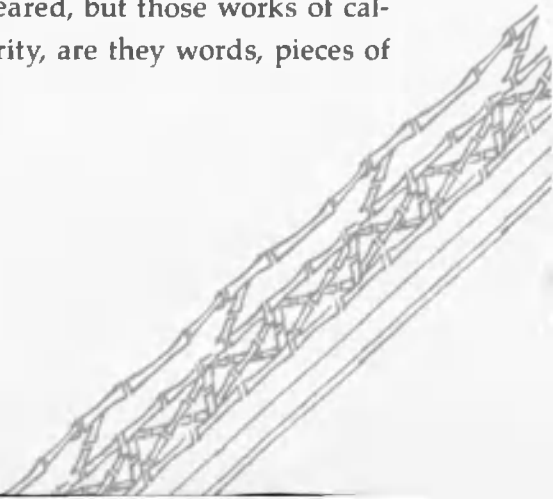
Based on this Confucian humanism, people—officials, peasants, scholars and merchants, no matter rich or poor, all agree that *ren* 仁, *yi* 义, *li* 礼, *zhi* 智, *xin* 信 (benevolence, righteousness, ritual, wisdom, trust) should be their common beliefs and values.



The Forbidden City was the center of power of the Ming and Qing dynasties. It was here that a total of 24 emperors held court and ruled their vast empire for more than 500 years.

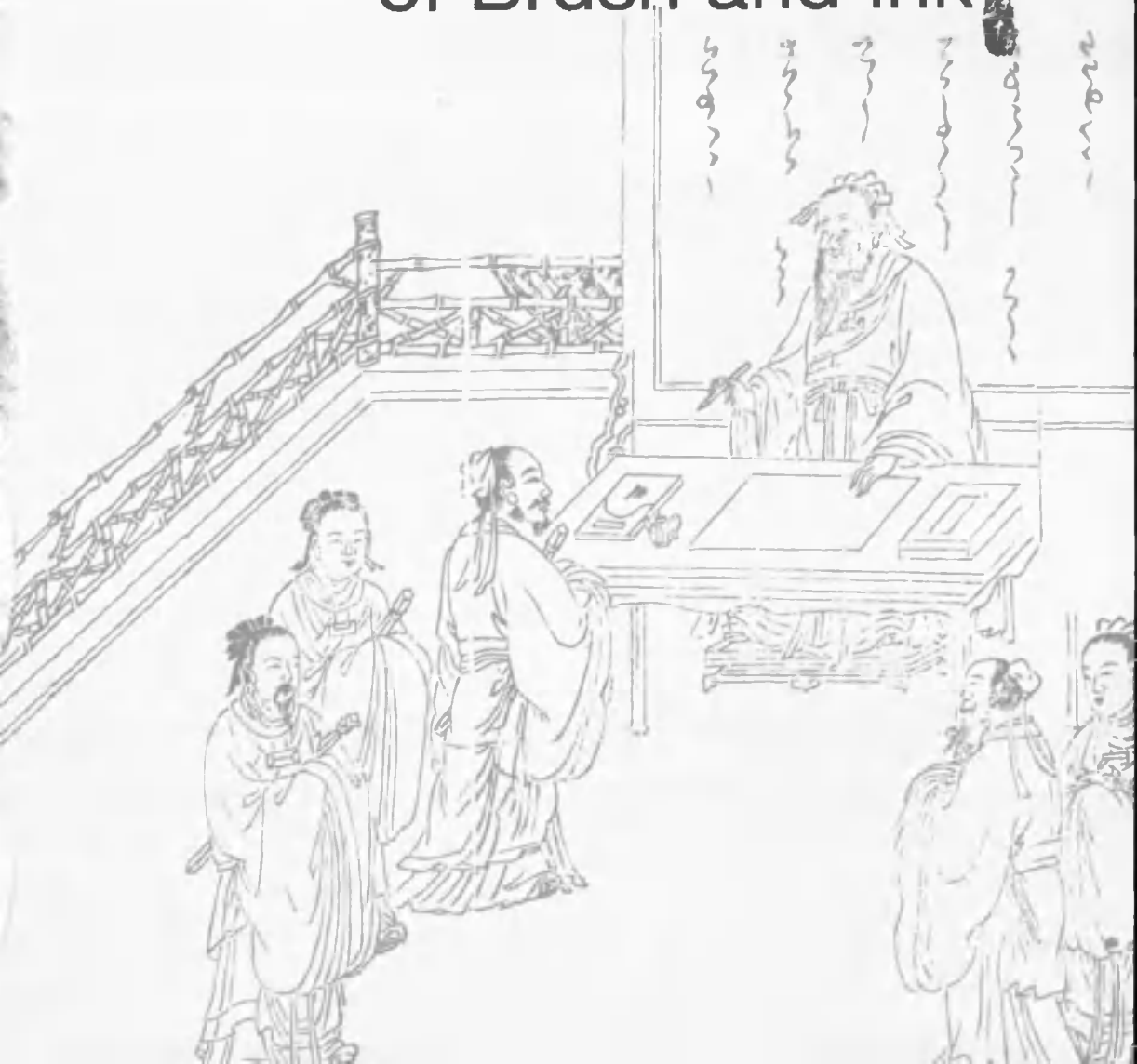
In the center of each magnificent hall there stood high on a platform the “dragon throne” of the emperor, and behind the throne one can always find a marvelous work of calligraphy. This is perhaps a unique phenomenon among the world’s palaces.

Today, the emperors have disappeared, but those works of calligraphy remain. In the eyes of posterity, are they words, pieces of art, or canons?



PART FIVE

# Expressions of Brush and Ink





dào

“Dao” as in the phrase “Dao Fa Zi Ran” (meaning follow the way of nature)

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “dao” as “the way one goes.”

As he slowly rubs a bar of ink on an ink slab, the calligrapher is already planning the words he is going to write. When his brush licks the ink, the calligrapher is already envisioning how the words will appear on the piece of *xuan* paper spread out before him. As the brush moves over the paper, square-shaped characters pour out from the tip of his brush and create a contrast in black and white, and between solid and void. Pouring out at the same time from the brush tip are the calligrapher’s mind and emotions. This is Chinese calligraphy.

At the Paris exhibition of modern Chinese calligraphy in 1998, Jacques Chirac, the former president of France, wrote the following remark: “In China, calligraphy is the art of all arts. From generation to generation it carries on the memory of the nation. This type of artistic expression is little known to the Western world, where blending of writing and painting is rare. Chinese calligraphy is amazing, and yet fascinating.”

Simply put, Chinese calligraphy is writing with a brush. Then, why is this particular kind of writing acclaimed as the art of all arts? Why is it so fascinating?

◆ *Joël Bellassen, inspector-general of Chinese teaching of the French Ministry of Education*

*Chinese is unique, especially its characters. The characters are quite different from the Latin alphabet. A letter of the alphabet represents a single phoneme, while a character in Chinese is an integrated symbol of sound, shape and meaning. Among the world’s writing*

*systems, only the Chinese has raised the writing of words to an art.*

This is a rubbing from an oracle bone unearthed at the Yin Ruins in Henan Province at the turn of the 20th century. The inscription is a list of the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches which were used to record the dates. What is special about the inscription on this piece of bone is that there are six almost identical lists. Why did people carve the list six times?



*Guo Moruo*

The Chinese scholar Guo Moruo pointed out that the fourth column was neatly and beautifully written, while the other columns were poorly carved. He presumed that the fourth column was the master's model, and the other columns were copies made by his students, just as children today still learn calligraphy by copying models. Although this may be pure speculation, it does not fail to show that from the day of their birth the Chinese characters have had a strong aesthetic orientation.

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

*If you look at the characters on the oracle bones or ancient bronze wares, you may assume that the characters were randomly composed, for a certain radical can be placed either on the left or the right side, and either above or below the main part. And yet, despite the irregularities, you can feel that the character as a whole is well-balanced and has a strong aesthetic appeal.*

◆ *Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, professor of Munich University, Germany*

*There are of course many systems of handwriting, and before the invention of printing there was much handwriting in monasteries. Although there were also some calligraphers in European countries, people who were said to be very good writers, this is not comparable to calligraphy, because calligraphy in China, and in East Asia as a whole, became part of the cultivation of the personality in general.*

"The mastery of skills is like approaching the Way." When one becomes skillful with the writing brush, the beauty of calligraphy shows



*Glazed-porcelain writing brush of the Qing Dynasty decorated with gold cloud-and-dragon motifs*



*Ink stick engraved with the Chinese characters longde (龙德), made by Liu Yuan of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)*



*Xuan paper of the Qing Dynasty, decorated with a design of a pair of dragons playing with a ball*



in every stroke. However, there is still a gap between a skill and an art, as “approaching the Way” is not attaining the Way itself.

Beauty of shape and ease of writing are the aims of every writing system. However, there is a salient difference between Chinese calligraphy and the writing of other languages, that is, Chinese calligraphy aims at creating an artistic mood. Pablo Picasso, the master of Impressionism, once said, “If I had been born in China, I’m sure I would have become a calligrapher rather than a painter.”



Picasso

When looking at a work of calligraphy, every viewer, though he or she may not know a single Chinese character, will be impressed by the composition of the brush strokes, which can certainly be viewed as a piece of abstract painting. In fact, this is characteristic of the ideographic nature of the Chinese words.

◆ *Mei Mosheng, calligrapher and painter of the China Academy of Painting*

*Take the oracle bone character “木(tree)” for example. The vertical stroke in the center looks like the tree’s trunk. The two downward strokes in the lower part look like the roots, and the upward strokes look like the branches. This is a picture, isn’t it?*

*The meaning of a character can often be obtained by analyzing the combination of its component parts. Two trees make a wood, and three trees make a forest. In Chinese, “three” denotes “many.” As the ancient philosopher Lao Zi put it in: “Three begets the myriad creatures.” The ancient Chinese were very clever in the way they coined words.*

Yu Kuang-chung, a Taiwanese poet, after comparing Chinese with English and French, remarked, “With the creation of written symbols, Chinese people have found a carrier to entrust their soul, their memories of their ancestors, and their hopes for the future. Just take a look at the character ‘雨(rain).’ Aren’t the little dots like sprinkling raindrops or a slashing downpour under the vault of heaven? In your mind’s eye you can actually see the clouds and rain.”

It is this unique ideographic characteristic of Chinese writing that makes the writer strive for a pictographic effect when he is practicing his skills. For instance, when one writes the word “tiger 虎,” one would try to depict the ferocity of the animal in the character; when one writes

the word "dragon 龙," one envisions a dragon flying in and out of the clouds.

The ultimate goal of writing is to express our understanding of the world, that is, to use abstract dots and strokes to depict the nature of a thing. And this is the Way of Chinese calligraphy.

And because there has always been an artistic conception behind each character, from the day of its invention the Chinese way of writing, in addition to its practical purpose, adopted an artistic approach. While other languages turned toward phonetic symbols, the Chinese characters became a vehicle to carry their people's aesthetic perceptions.

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

*The brush was probably invented even before the written language. There is evidence of this in archeological findings. As the tip of the brush is made of animal hair, it is soft and resilient. When used in writing, the writer can easily control the force and speed of his movements, and thus create an artistic effect.*

◆ *A. Maslov, sinologist and member of the Russian Academy of Sciences*

*My calligraphy teacher told me that there's only one stroke, so called "一划." Because if you have one stroke "一划," when you put the first stroke, you divide into white and black, into something you already have and something that is empty, like a kind of yin and yang, void and solid, up and down.*

法 fǎ

## “Fa” as in the phrase “Dao Fa Zi Ran”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “fa” as “the rule.”

In June 649, when flowers and trees in the capital Chang’an were in bloom, the atmosphere in the imperial palace was suffocating.

Li Shimin, Emperor Taizong (ruled 627-649) of the Tang Dynasty was seriously ill. “I wish,” he said to his son from his deathbed, “that you will give me one thing. If you are a filial son, you won’t deny your father his last wish, will you?”

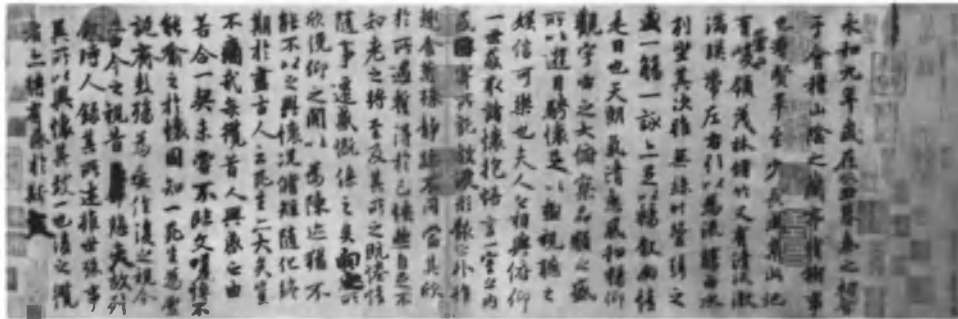
The emperor was testing his successor on his filial piety—one of the most sacredly held moral values in China. That of course would be no joking matter. What kind of treasure was it that he could not part with?



Emperor Li Shimin

◆ **Ye Peigui, director of the Research Institute of the Culture of Calligraphy of China, Capital Normal University**

*He was referring to the most famous piece of calligraphy, namely, Preface to Poems from Lanting written by Wang Xizhi. But if we could relive history, we would see that to the creator and to the participants, there was nothing extraordinary about that piece of work, for it was executed at an ordinary gathering. On that day, the third day of the third lunar month in the year 353, Wang Xizhi and some friends were having a wine party in Lanting Pavilion in Shanyin County, at which they sang and wrote poems, and Wang composed a preface to the collection of poems they wrote on that occasion.*



Preface to Poems from Lanting (copied by Feng Chengsu)

In the *History of the Jin Dynasty* compiled during the Tang Dynasty, Wang Xizhi's biography was written by Emperor Taizong himself, who praised Wang's penmanship as "the best and perfect in the entire history of man."

From the word "perfect" we can see how the emperor esteemed Wang's work. This stele has stood here for over 13 centuries. Engraved on it is a copy of the *Preface to Poems from Lanting* in Emperor Taizong's own handwriting. The character "之" appears more than 90 times, each having a slightly different shape, and each a marvelous reproduction of the original.

Li Shimin himself was a renowned calligrapher, one who made constant efforts to improve his art. At the same time, he was an ambitious statesman who cherished lofty ideals. Why did he praise Wang's penmanship so highly? Was it just an emotional impulse? It certainly wasn't. To understand his motives, we have to go further back in history.

Following the collapse of the Western Jin Dynasty (265-317), China went through three centuries of chaos. People were plunged into an abyss of misery, and tens of thousands died in the incessant wars. The wish for peace was strong. And catching the tide, Yang Jian united the kingdom and established the Sui Dynasty in 581.

But peace didn't last long. In just 30 years, Emperor Yangdi's extravagance and tyranny lit the fire of a peasant uprising, during which the Sui Dynasty collapsed and the Tang Dynasty was born.

◆ **Zhang Mingqia, research fellow of the Shaanxi Museum of History**

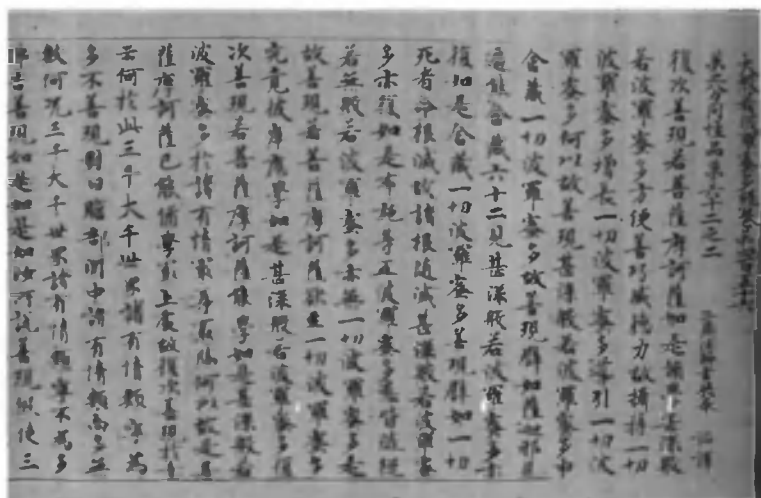
*At that time, the central government of the Tang Dynasty had no more than 730 officials in the capital city. It can therefore be deduced that the government was highly*

efficient and the cost of administration was low. Emperor Taizong was known for his modesty in following good advice. All these encouraged the development of learning and the arts. To enlist talented people of all kinds, he improved the imperial examination system to ensure that candidatedship was open to all, regardless of social status and family background. That changed the emphasis on family origin prevalent from the Wei up to the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

It is recorded in *The New History of the Tang Dynasty* that the examination system adopted the criteria of "selecting officials by the way they write." "Of the four ways used to pick talented people, the third one is calligraphy. A man is selected if his regular script (*kai shu*) is elegant and beautiful." To the candidates, such a criterion certainly became an objective toward which they dedicated their best efforts.

To assist in selecting candidates by the way they wrote, Emperor Taizong established an institute named the "Calligraphy Academy," where Masters of Calligraphy taught students calligraphy. It was stipulated that the students must hand in a copied page every day for assessment.

◆ *Kang Zhen, professor of the College of Literature, Beijing Normal University*  
*Handwriting held a very eminent place in ancient culture. As early as the Western Zhou Dynasty, penmanship was acclaimed as one of the six arts a gentleman should*



Buddhist sutra written in the Tang Dynasty (618-907)

acquire. But it was not until the Tang Dynasty, in the time of Emperor Taizong to be more exact, that penmanship was formally integrated into the national education and examination system.

◆ **Ni Wendong, professor of calligraphy, School of Arts and Communication, Beijing Normal University**

*The essence of "selecting officials by the way they write" was that "the man's regular script (kai shu) must be elegant and beautiful." Of the many styles of calligraphy, why was kai shu picked out as one of the basic writing requirements for the literati? The key point of kai shu is that the characters should be neatly written in an accepted, regular way.*

In the history of calligraphy, the Tang Dynasty is called "the era of rules." This of course was due to the historical trend, but on the other hand Emperor Taizong's open advocacy pushed the tide forward. An interesting question is: Why, of all the famous calligraphers before the Tang Dynasty, such as Li Si and Zhao Gao of the Qin Dynasty, Cai Yong and Zhang Zhi of the Han Dynasty, Zhong You, Suo Jing, Wei Guan, Wang Xizhi's teacher Lady Wei and his son Wang Xianzhi of the Wei and Jin dynasties, did Emperor Taizong favor Wang Xizhi in particular?

◆ **Bu Xianqun, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences**

*One opinion has it that he was aiming at winning popular support. Popular support didn't mean the support of the entire population; he was mainly aiming at the people south of the Yangtze River, especially the illustrious and powerful clans.*

◆ **Liu Zhengcheng, chairman of the International Calligraphy Association**

*A similar case can be found with Emperor Wudi of the Han Dynasty. Why did he prohibit all non-Confucian schools of thought and espouse Confucianism as the orthodox state ideology? Because Confucius is culturally symbolic. Although Wang Xizhi was a calligrapher, not a philosopher, he too is symbolic of Confucian culture.*

But if it were only for political reasons, Wang Xizhi would not have been regarded by later generations as the "Sage of Calligraphy," and Emperor Taizong would not have been able to establish one of the greatest dynasties in China's history.

From the first character to the last, the whole essay, *Preface to Poems*

from *Lanting*, seems to have been done in one breath. The writer's skill must have been highly concentrated, for there is no hesitation in, or straying from, the flow of thought. The nobleness of the heart and a natural beauty poured out from the tip of the brush—a perfect integration. So that is why up to this very day that the principles embodied in Wang Xizhi's writings are still considered guidelines for Chinese calligraphy.

Then what is the core of these insurmountable principles? Emperor Taizong has put it this way: "In essence his Way is comparable to the sacrificial utensil *qi* in Confucius' temple. Insufficient, it leans; excessive, it topples. It won't stand straight unless it is well balanced, and that is harmony."



Wang Xizhi

◆ *Xu Jialu, vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress of China and president of the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching*

*Qi is the most famous sacrificial utensil in Confucius' temple. Specifically, it is a water vessel. What is special about it is that it must be exactly half-filled to stand upright. If you fill it to the top, it will topple. The ethics, values and world outlook of the Chinese people are all embodied in this utensil.*



Qi, a sacrificial utensil

To Wang Xizhi this work of calligraphy might have just been an ordinary piece of writing, but when Li Shimin compared it to the sacred sacrificial utensil in Confucius' temple, Wang was raised to the status of a sage.

Advocated by Emperor Taizong, Chinese calligraphy viewed balance and harmony as its highest principle. Striving for balance between black and white, thick and thin, solid and void, motion and stillness, Chinese calligraphy gradually acquired its unique aesthetic standards.

Every calligraphic style then had its own standard model to follow, and only when a student could write in a good hand could he look forward to passing the imperial examination and winning a position in the government. Through calligraphy, the Tang Dynasty was able to bind the literati's ideology to the Confucian Golden Mean.

Even today, when one learns how to write with a writing brush, one must sit upright, holding the pen upright, and the paper must be placed straight. And if you are learning the *kai shu* style of the Tang Dynasty, you must carefully copy, stroke after stroke, the standard model that has been passed down to us for over a thousand years. What can modern learners learn from the Tang Dynasty models?

In the first lunar month of the year 783 Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty, was shrouded in the clouds of war. General Li Xilie had rebelled against the central government, and his army, after conquering



Yan Zhenqing

Ruzhou, was marching irresistibly toward the capital.

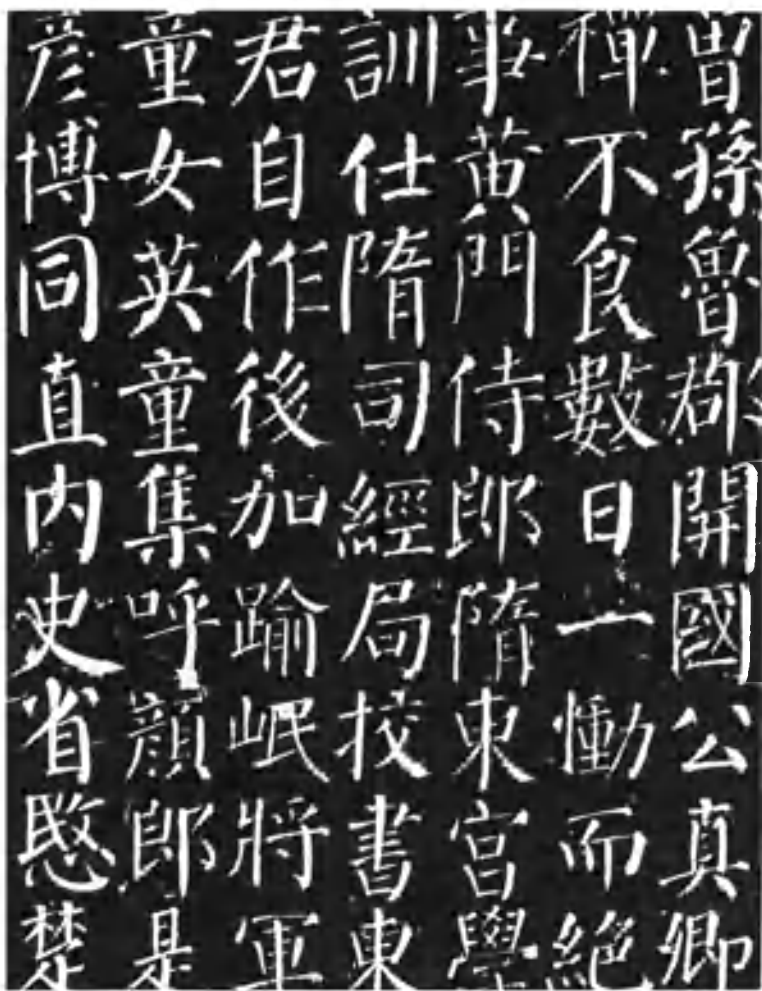
As the Tang Empire had been severely weakened by the An Lushan and Shi Siming rebellion, the central government could only pin its hopes on negotiations for peace. But who could be dispatched to the enemy camp to conduct the negotiations? The emperor's councilors suggested Yan Zhenqing, then minister of personnel.

◆ **Yao Ganming, professor of the College of Literature, Jiangnan University**

*Yan Zhenqing was one of the most renowned calligraphers of the time. He was also a statesman who dedicated his life to the unity of the country. His handwriting, known as "Yan's style," was like his personality, upright and orderly. Learners of this style are usually good at writing large characters, for this style has an intrinsic grandeur in it.*

At that time the rebels seemed invincible, and General Li Xilie thought that the throne was within his reach. Trying to persuade him to surrender to the central government was just like knocking one's head





Calligraphy by Yan Zhenqing on the Yan Qinli Stele

against a rock. Yan's friends advised the elderly statesman to decline the responsibility, and some even tried to stop him from going on his mission.

◆ *Ye Peigui, director of the Research Institute of the Culture of Calligraphy of China, Capital Normal University*

*Yan Zhenqing and his family had suffered great losses during the An Lushan and Shi Siming rebellion. More than 30 of his family members died when he and his brother led troops to defend the Pingyuan Prefecture. Yet despite the family loss, he was steadfast in face of the country's need, for he was the head of a family that had upheld the Confucian doctrines for five or six generations.*



*Draft of a funeral oration for his nephew by Yan Zhenqing*

Two years later his body was brought back to the capital. When his hearse passed through the city gate, the waiting crowds wailed loudly. He, like the characters he wrote, had remained straight and upright, bold and valiant to the last. Although this great calligrapher of the dynasty was not able to persuade the rebels to put down their arms, he used his indomitable dignity to write the last stroke of his life.

That is the spirit of Chinese calligraphy. Generation after generation spent their lives in studying and improving their handwriting, which was simultaneously a way to cultivate their integrity.

*Fa* is a model, an epitome. Yan's calligraphy erected a model, and his personality became a model for all Chinese to learn from. In fact, behind every piece of model calligraphy there is a perfect personality. These beautiful pieces of handwriting, which have been passed down through the centuries, and the spirit and soul they embody are no less the spirit and soul of Chinese culture.

◆ *Yao Ganming, professor of the College of Literature, Jiangnan University*

*How should we judge the calligraphic works of the infamous figures in history, such as Cai Jing, Yan Song or Qin Hui? In my opinion there are two ways to look at them. From a purely artistic point of view, we would agree that their penmanship is good. But considering their personalities, most people would depreciate their works.*

So, different from Yan Zhenqing and his revered calligraphic style, the works of those notorious courtiers were cast out of the hall of art. This is because in China the integrity of art and personality is really very important.



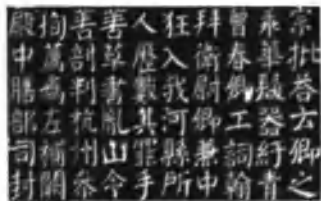
Calligraphy of Qin Hui

堂年寓

Calligraphy of Yan Song



Calligraphy of Cai Jing



Part of the inscription on the stone tablet at the Yan Family Shrine



The stone tablet at the Yan Family Shrine



## “Zi” as in the phrase “Dao Fa Zi Ran”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “zi” as “the nose, the self.”

While the knights of medieval Europe were diligently practicing swordsmanship to fight the pagans, in the east the affluent gentry of the Song Dynasty were practicing their penmanship. Their writing brush was their plow and paper was their field, and they tilled the land day after day.

After the Tang Dynasty, penmanship became an art of copying—copying the masters’ models, which was deemed more important than being innovative. Some people think that Chinese calligraphy has been constrained by the yoke of the orthodox ever since. Was it really like that? Has Chinese calligraphy lost its ability to progress and develop?

In the spring of 1057, an examination was underway in the then capital, Bianliang. It was the court examination, the highest level of examinations in imperial China. The topic of the composition was personally set by the emperor, and the examiners were the best scholars of the country. They were going to read the papers of the 338 finalists selected from the local examinations.

To pass the imperial examination and get an official position was the only way for intellectuals in feudal times to realize their political ambitions.

Among the papers there was one that strongly impressed the chief examiner Ouyang Xiu by its fresh ideas and unaffected style. But the paper was marked as second best. Why was that?

◆ *Kang Zhen, professor of the College of Literature, Beijing Normal University*

*In those days the name of the examinee on the test paper was sealed to make it*

anonymous. Ouyang Xiu had thought of placing that paper at the top of the winners' list, but as he speculated that the author was probably one of his students, Zeng Gong (one of the eight great writers of the Tang and Song dynasties), on second thoughts, he marked it as second best, because he was afraid that people might censure him for favoring his own student.

All the examiners were surprised when the list of successful candidates was released. The candidate they had considered best was not Ouyang Xiu's student, Zeng Gong, but an unknown twenty-something named Su Shi from the southwest.



The poet Su Shi

◆ **Ye Peigui, director of the Research Institute of the Culture of Calligraphy of China, Capital Normal University**

*There was a literary allusion in Su Shi's essay, which an examiner thought was a very good one, but was unable to find in any of his reference books. He later asked Su about the origin of the allusion, and Su said that he himself coined the term. That anecdote perhaps can illustrate the creativity of Su Shi.*

Su Shi started to show his unusual talents at an early age. Even in middle age, he would make his hat taller than others'. Those who were envious of him denounced him as an eccentric, and said that he had deviated from the Golden Mean; those who appreciated his talents lauded him as a "Muse on earth." In fact, Su Shi was the same as others in that his education started with the Confucian classics, and he too learned calligraphy by copying the great models.

◆ **Kang Zhen, professor of the College of Literature, Beijing Normal University**

*It cannot be denied that Su Shi was gifted. And giftedness often means that one is more diligent than others. He copied The History of the Han Dynasty three times from beginning to end. The book contains more than 700,000 characters. The first two times he copied it when he was young. The third time was when he was banished to Huangzhou (in present-day Hubei Province) in 1079. It is no exaggeration to say that he had the book virtually printed in his mind.*

Starting from an early age, Su Shi liked to copy Wang Xizhi's *Preface to Poems from Lanting*. And with the help of copying Buddhist scriptures, his handwriting became masterfully free. But if you compare the four characters on the copper coin cast in the Yuanyou reign period (1086-1094)

of the Song Dynasty, which he wrote in middle age with a rubbing from the Zhiping stele which he wrote when young, you can see that though both belong to the running scrip category, the two are obviously different in style. What changed his free-flow handwriting to the so-called "flat frog" style?

The seventh day of the third lunar month is the Cold Food Festival. In memory of the dead, no family would light a fire to cook on that day. On that chilly day in 1082 Su Shi was sitting alone in an unheated room in Huangzhou. Listening to the incessant drizzle outside, he couldn't help feeling lonely and melancholy. That was when he wrote his poem *Cold Food Festival at Huangzhou*.

◆ *Liu Zhengcheng, chairman of the International Calligraphy Association*

"Three Cold Food Festivals I've seen, since I was exiled to Huangzhou," the poem begins matter-of-factly, and we can see that his characters are small and neat. His mood changed when it came to his present condition and the incessant rain. "Wet reeds choke in the smoky stove," he wrote. As his emotions rose, his characters grew larger and larger, betraying the anguish in his heart. The last two lines are: "Like Ruan Ji I would like to cry; like doused ashes I no more fly." Was he really in such total despair that he would "no longer fly"?

◆ *Mei Mosheng, calligrapher and painter of the China Academy of Painting*

How do we judge Su Shi? I think he was a person who had integrated Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism into one. He held a very detached view of the world. So I think no matter how deeply in despair he was at that time, he was able to get himself out of his low spirits.

If one is too much restrained by rules and conventions, one's creativity will be clipped. Calligraphy, as well as the entire civilized estab-



Su Shi's Cold Food Festival at Huangzhou

ishment, seeks stability. But as history evolves and rolls forth, there is always room for idiosyncrasy and creativity, even in a civilization that seeks a unified value system. Idiosyncrasy, however, is always the outcome of suffering. Su Shi's uniqueness came from his unusual life.

Four months after he wrote the poem on the Cold Food Festival, he produced another masterpiece—a prose poem titled, *On the Red Cliff*. This was proof that physical sufferings and mental distress could push one up to an even loftier literary height.

◆ *He Chengxuan, research fellow of the Institute of Philosophy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*Although his life was at a political ebb, his poems and proses were still widely read and revered, both among the populace and in the palace. According to historical records, palace maids often heard the emperor comment at mealtimes, "Wonderful! Well written." What he was then reading was Su Shi's poetry.*



*On Returning Home, calligraphy by Su Shi*

One's personality decides one's handwriting, and one's handwriting shows what kind of person one is. People respect Su Shi and like his penmanship, and every piece of his writing became a learner's model, although he had no imperial backing. Thanks to the efforts of men of letters, Chinese calligraphy shook off the shackles of imperial power, and became a perfect form for people to express their ideals.

Like Su Shi himself, who went through many ups and downs, the rubbing of his *Cold Food Festival at Huangzhou* has also gone through a lot, which we can see from the scorch marks on the paper.



## “Ran” as in the phrase “Dao Fa Zi Ran”

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “ran” as “burning.”

“The teacher wrote large characters on a piece of paper using glossy black ink, and the students copied the characters by placing a translucent sheet over the teacher’s model. When they finished, they handed it in. If the teacher drew a line over a character, it meant the word was not well written. The teacher would draw a circle around the ones he thought good.”

That passage was written by Richard Wilhelm, a German missionary who lived in China for 25 years. He arrived in China in 1899, shortly after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. As a result of the war, the Qing government had been forced to lease Qingdao to Germany.

In Qingdao the scars of war could be seen everywhere. Although he didn’t understand and couldn’t read Chinese, Richard Wilhelm was deeply impressed by what he observed in a small village school. He recorded his China experiences in his book *The Soul of China*.



Richard Wilhelm

Although through the centuries calligraphy has long established itself as an art, the children who started to learn how to use the writing brush would hardly think of becoming calligraphers. When one’s future depended largely on how well one wrote, writing to them was no more than a tool which could open the door to an official career and bring glory to their family and ancestors.



◆ *Mei Mosheng, calligrapher and painter of the China Academy of Painting*

*Starting in the Tang Dynasty, penmanship was considered a decisive factor in passing the imperial examination. This requirement was pushed to an extreme in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when all candidates were asked to write in the guange ti (academy style).*

*If one's handwriting did not conform to the academy style, one could never hope to pass the imperial examination, no matter how good one's essay might be.*



The Soul of China

In the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) candidates were told that their characters should be large, the tips of the strokes should be round and the ink dark and glossy—the basic requirements of the academy style. A contemporary scholar remarked, “Nowadays people are asked to make their characters bold and balanced, in what is called the academy style. Henceforth, the distinction between a thousand hands has been obliterated.”



*A paper submitted at a final imperial examination of the Qing Dynasty*

The Qing rulers' sensitivity to words and writing reached its height during the Yongzheng (1723-1735) and Qianlong (1736-1795) reign periods. Writers were often imprisoned or even executed for writing something considered offensive by the imperial court. Calligraphic circles were silenced, and feudal society made a downhill turn.

In 1839 Gong Zizhen, a famous thinker and poet, was forced to resign from his official position in the capital, and left for his hometown in the south.

◆ *He Chengxuan, research fellow of the Institute of Philosophy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*Gong Zizhen was born into an intellectual family. He passed the provincial examination at the age of 27, and finally passed the imperial examination at 38. Although he won the title of junshi, he was not appointed to the Imperial Academy, and one of the reasons was that his handwriting was "sloppy," that is, not in line with the prevailing academy style.*

◆ *Du Linying, curator of the Gong Zizhen Memorial Hall*

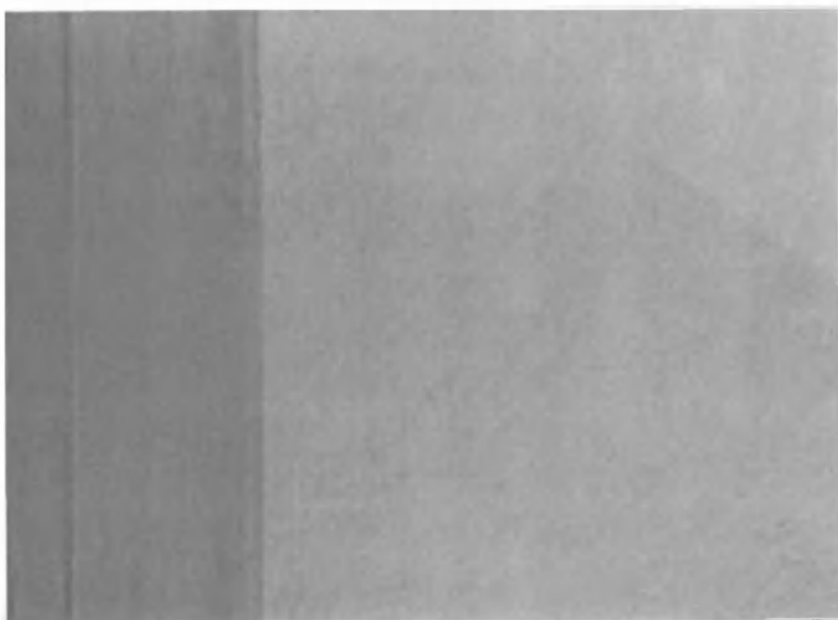
*To express his resentment at a system that selected officials on the basis of their handwriting, he asked his daughter, daughter-in-law, concubine and maids to practice calligraphy every day, in the academy style only. Should anybody mention the Imperial Academy in front of him, he would sneer and say, "What's the point of being a member of the Imperial Academy? They know nothing more than writing in the academy style. Look here at these illiterate women in my family. Every one of them can use a brush and write in the academy style!"*



*Gong Zizhen*

In the long history of authoritarian rule in China, Gong Zizhen was an exception. Most learners, however, spent their time and energy practicing the academy style, perfecting their skills in making the characters "large, round, dark and glossy," just in order to succeed in the examinations. It can be said that the water a scholar used in his lifetime to rinse his writing brush could fill ponds and lakes.

When an art has lost its vitality, and stopped changing and improving, it is certainly going to decline. Nevertheless, we can always find the seeds of the new breeding in the dying old, and this is true of calligraphy, too. When the academy style fettered its progress, spring quietly arrived.



*A piece of yellow writing paper made during Qing Emperor Kangxi's reign (1662-1722)*



*Inkstone with a design of a pair of dragons, made of Duan stone by Liu Yuan of the Qing Dynasty*



*Vairocana*

Most visitors to the Longmen Grottoes near Luoyang have their attention directed at the famous statue of Vairocana, because it is said to represent the height of China's sculptural art.

But to fans of calligraphy, the epigraph on the Northern Wei statues in the less famous Guyang Grotto might be more appealing.

◆ *Liu Zhengcheng, chairman of the International Calligraphy Association*

*A new trend was forming toward the end of the Qing Dynasty, which Kang Youwei summed up as "a rebirth of calligraphy." He thought that the models from the Tang Dynasty and onward were bad, and people should learn calligraphy directly from the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534). So in the 18th and 19th centuries it became a fashion to learn from rubbings of steles dating from Northern Wei.*


On September 2, 1905, the imperial examination system that had



*Inscription in the Guyang Grotto of the Longmen Grottoes (Northern Wei)*

lasted for more than 13 centuries was abolished. Consequently, the academy style lost its reason for existence. Chinese calligraphy, however, did not die with it, but gained new life and reached new heights, as it became purely a form of art.

The pencil, fountain pen, ballpoint pen, the computer and its keyboard have ushered in a new era, an era in which people aspire after new knowledge and all-round development. Penmanship is no longer a prerequisite for students. However, the long-standing respect for calligraphy will still continue in China today.




Until the invention of the computer, no other product had been more closely related to the written language than paper, the invention of which, to a certain extent, had changed the course of the development of human civilization.

Dr. Joseph Needham, a famous British scientist, once said that as far as the history of human culture was concerned, he could not imagine a subject more important than the development of paper-making and printing.

Their combination with the compass and gunpowder kindled flames in another civilization which was noted for active exploration, and thus Europeans were able to bid goodbye to the dark Middle Ages and embarked on the transition to modern society.

Then, how is it that of all peoples the Chinese invented paper-making and movable type printing? Was there any inevitable connection between their invention and Chinese characters?



PART SIX

The Most Precious  
Treasure under  
Heaven





“Yin” as in the phrase “Yin Jing Ju Dian”  
(meaning quoting from the classics)

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “yin” as “drawing a bow.”

We cannot speak of the Great Wall without mentioning Meng Tian, a senior general of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.). It was under his supervision that sections of walls built by various principalities during the Period of the Warring States preceding the Qin Dynasty were linked to form what is today’s magnificent and spectacular Great Wall. However, this military figure is held in esteem also as the “inventor of the writing brush” in China. Even today, this town of “writing brushes” is still permeated by a noble and beautiful legend about Meng Tian making writing brushes.

◆ **Wu Shuilin, director of the Cultural Station of Shanlian Town, Huzhou City**

*Legend has it that once upon a time there lived a peasant girl named Bu Xianglian in Xibao, Shanlian. One day she fell into the river where she was washing clothes. Meng Tian happened to be passing by, and rescued her. Later, they were married. In the local legend Meng Tian is regarded as a son-in-law of us Shanlianders. While he was in Shanlian, he tried to make writing brushes with rabbit hair. Eventually, the couple succeeded in making writing brushes and passed on their skills to the locals. The making of writing brushes has since become a local trade handed down from generation to generation. The writing brushes made here are known nationwide as “Hu(zhou) writing brushes.”*

The 16th day of the 9th lunar month is said to be Meng Tian’s birthday. For centuries, local brush makers have followed the tradition of gathering to mark this day each year. In the old days those who wished



to learn the trade first had to pay homage by kneeling down before his statue in the shrine dedicated to him. Was Meng Tian really the inventor of the writing brush? Didn't the Chinese have a better writing instrument than the brush before Meng Tian?

Such questions seemed unnecessary when Pit No. 6 of the terracotta warriors at the Mausoleum of Emperor Qin Shi Huang was excavated.

◆ *Jiang Wenxiao, associate research fellow of the Qin Terracotta Warriors Museum, Shaanxi Province*

*Pit No. 6 was excavated in 2000, and 12 terracotta figurines came to light. They look different from the ones unearthed earlier. Eight of them are standing figures with folded arms, with styluses and grindstones dangling at the right side of their waists. Moreover, they wear caps resembling a long board, which is an indication of fairly high rank. Judging by the caps and the styluses, we have concluded that they probably represent civilian officials, or rather, clerks.*



*The making of writing brushes*



*A terracotta figure from the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang has a stylus and grindstone dangling from his waist.*

Styluses in place of writing brushes. The ancient saying of “asking somebody to hold the stylus” is still used even today in China to refer to the practice of ghostwriting. Does this saying suggest that before Meng Tian invented writing brushes, the Chinese had been using small knives to cut those extremely complicated, yet beautifully shaped Chinese characters on hard materials?

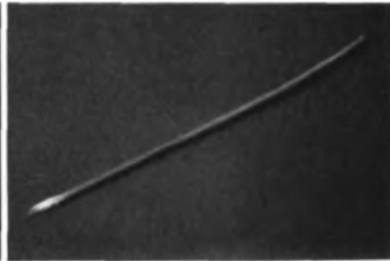
In June 1954 a writing brush was unearthed in a tomb of the State of Chu during the Warring States Period at Zuojiagong Hill, Changsha, capital of Hunan Province. It is the earliest writing brush unearthed in China so far, and several hundred years earlier than Meng Tian's time.

In the oracle bone inscriptions, the character for “book” is an

ideogram composed of a square (meaning mouth) and a hand holding a writing tool, which unmistakably looks like a writing brush. Later archeological finds show that the Chinese may have begun to use writing brushes in the Neolithic Age. A pottery jar, carbon-dated to more than 4000 B.C., was unearthed at a site of the Taosi Culture in Shanxi. It clearly bears the character “wen” (meaning script) written with a brush.



A pottery jar, unearthed at a site of the Taosi culture in Shanxi Province



A writing brush from the Warring States Period, unearthed on the outskirts of Changsha, Hunan Province

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

*The earliest brushes were not made for writing characters, but for painting colored designs on pottery. Many such designs were painted with brushes. So brushes may have been made before the script was invented. We are able to see this with our own eyes.*

◆ **Ouyang Zhongshi, professor of Capital Normal University**

*The head of a writing brush is made of animal hair wrapped into a cone shape. It is pointed, and so it is fit for writing small characters. But when a writer presses it in the course of moving it across a piece of paper, a bold stroke is created. So, very naturally, the making of Chinese writing brushes kept being improved and refined to meet the requirements of the users. A writing brush is capable of writing a stroke as bold or thin as the writer wishes.*

The cuneiform script written with a wooden stick and the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs written with reed pens have long disappeared. But the Chinese characters written with brushes played an ever more important role along with the establishment of a unified empire.

Then, how can we explain the use of the small styluses dangling from the waists of the terracotta figurines at the Qin Shi Huang Mausoleum?

On April 24, 1970, China launched its first manmade satellite. It played a recording of "The East Is Red" on a set of musical instruments—bronze bell chimes, dating to the middle period of the Warring States Period.

In addition to marvelous bronze vessels, the discovery of a small wooden box dating from the Warring States Period also aroused intense interest among archeologists. The box was found in a tomb from the State of Chu at Xinyang, Henan Province.

◆ *Cao Guicen, research fellow of the Institute for Cultural Relics and Archeology, Henan Province*

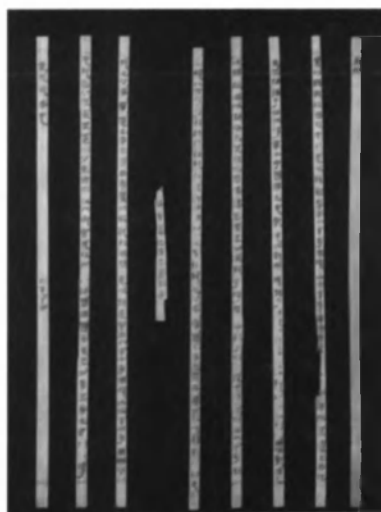
*Measuring 35 cm in length and 16 cm in width, the rectangular box contained bronze pens, bronze saws, bronze knives, and bronze styluses, gravers, awls and brushes. This was the earliest stationery box unearthed in China for cutting characters into bamboo slips.*

It appears that the use of brushes did not force knives out of stationery, only that their use was no longer one of cutting characters on bamboo slips, but of correcting errors. The bamboo slips unearthed at the same time provided some clues to this.

In fact, what Meng Tian did was probably to improve the procedures for brush making. However, the charming legend surrounding him will still support the development of the brush-making trade. With the passage of time, it has become an element of history that the truth hides behind thick veils, to be revealed only after a long period of time and by coincidence.

Even if history should provide a different answer to the puzzle, the idealized ancient stories, such as that of Huang Di (the legendary Yellow Emperor) making chariots, Yan Di as the father of agriculture, Cang Jie inventing Chinese characters and Da Yu harnessing the rivers, will always remain an important component part of Chinese culture.

As the troops of the State of Qin conquered the other warring states, the scripts of the other



*Bamboo slips with part of the text of the Art of War, unearthed from the No.1 Han Dynasty Tomb at Mount Yinque, Linyi County, Shandong Province*

six states were erased from the bamboo slips and wooden tablets bit by bit, and finally Qin's own "small seal" script prevailed in unified China.

"Deep in South Mountain bamboos and pines grow luxuriantly."— This line from the *Book of Songs* and archeological finds all testify to the fact that during the pre-Qin period northern China enjoyed a mild climate with bamboos and trees of various kinds growing everywhere. It seemed that people found it handy to write characters with brushes on bamboo slips and wooden tablets. However, as the Qin Dynasty expanded its territory, its ruler faced a tremendous difficulty in ruling the country using the characters of the Han nationality for communication.

◆ *Ge Jianxiang, professor of the History and Geography Institute, Fudan University*

*When the Qin Dynasty was at its zenith, its northern border started at the lower reaches of the Liao River, including the northwestern part of today's Korean peninsula. It then extended westward basically along the Yanshan Mountains to the Yinshan Mountains, and further to today's Great Bend of the Yellow River. Its western point was Lintao, the end point of the Qin Great Wall, which is today's Minxian County in Gansu Province. The empire covered the western part of Sichuan Province and the greater parts of Yunnan and Guizhou provinces, and extended all the way down to Guangdong and Guangxi. It included the southeastern landmass of China.*

How did the court of the Qin Dynasty administer a country as big as this? In December 1975, an ancient Qin tomb was excavated at Shuihudi, Yunmeng, Hubei Province, under the gaze of an expectant crowd. It was quite a sensation.

◆ *Chen Zhenyu, research fellow of the Institute for Cultural Relics and Archeology, Hubei Province*

*Oh, we saw what we had expected to. Save the head, the skeleton was completely surrounded by bamboo slips. Their quantity was astonishing. We had never discovered so many bamboo slips at any one time in Hubei.*

The occupant of the tomb was a county-level official serving the Qin Dynasty. Named Xi, he was born in year 262 B.C., two years before Qin Shi Huang himself, and participated in three expeditions waged by the Qin against the other six rival states.

As is known to all, the Qin Dynasty emphasized the rule of law. Like



Bamboo slips from a Qin Dynasty tomb, excavated at Shuihudi,  
Yunmeng, Hubei Province

thousands of dutiful colleagues, this official performed his duties in accordance with the state's complicated and voluminous rules throughout his life. These were written codes at which even today people marvel.

◆ *Chen Zhenyu, research fellow of the Institute for Cultural Relics and Archeology, Hubei Province*

*They record rules on a wide range of subjects, such as how to administer the handicrafts industry, agriculture, and the storage and processing of grain, including how to manage oxen and horses. This is very interesting. For instance, one law banned officials from running businesses, for fear that their power might be abused for profit.*

From words written with a rabbit-hair brush dipped in pine-oil ink we learn that the laws of the Qin Dynasty provided in detail for the duties of soldiers, peasants and officials, to the extent that even the rations of a soldier were carefully quantified.

Xi was only a cog in the colossal bureaucratic machine of the Qin Empire, and the 1,000-odd bamboo slips recorded the laws he was required to consult in his daily administration.

We cannot imagine how many slips Emperor Qin Shi Huang, as the supreme ruler of the country, must have had to consult daily.

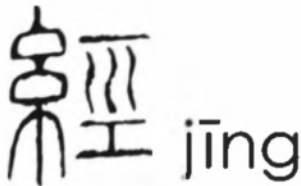
◆ *Wang Juhua, senior engineer of the Papermaking and Pulp Industry Research Academy of China*

*Emperor Qin Shi Huang set for himself a daily quota of reading 120 jin of memoranda on bamboo slips from his senior officials, and would not leave his office before finishing them. In his time 120 jin was equal to 60 jin in today's weight system, or 30 kilos. The slips would be carried to the office for him to read, which was a heavy load for the carriers and himself alike.*

Soon after Emperor Qin Shi Huang's death, the formidable Qin Empire was lost by his incompetent successor. In 206 B.C., the Han Dynasty, which expanded to cover an even bigger territory than that of the Qin Empire, was established.

The Han Dynasty followed the law system of the Qin. Government officials like Xi would still write official records on bamboo slips and wooden tablets with writing brushes day after day and year after year. They did not have to worry much about making errors, because all they had to do was to erase them with a small knife and rewrite them.

But what about the emperor? As the supreme ruler of the largest empire in the world, he was both an intellectual worker and a manual laborer handling these heavy bamboo slips, and who was able to share his heavy workload?



## “Jing” as in the phrase “Yin Jing Ju Dian”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “jing” as “weaving.”

Before paper was invented, the Chinese wrote characters on silk fabric.

Silk weaving in China has a history of several thousand years. As far back as the 4th century B.C., the Yellow River Valley was already a major silk producer. Fine and soft, silk was easy to carry. So, white silk was used by nobles not only as material for clothing but also for writing. Such writing was called “silk writing.”

However, during the Han Dynasty a piece of fine silk measuring half a meter in width and close to one meter in length, equaled more than 150 kilo of husked rice in value. In ancient times, gems and silk were mentioned in the same breath, hence the expression “gems and silk” to emphasize silk’s costliness.

### ◆ *Pan Jixing, research fellow of the Chinese Academy of Sciences*

*Before paper was invented, Europeans used to write on processed reeds or sheepskin. Paper reeds were very cheap but could not stand much wear. They were easily broken when folded. Moreover, they had a rough surface. On the other hand, sheepskin was very good writing material, but very expensive. The Bible would have consumed more than 300 sheepskins, and would have been too expensive for ordinary people.*

So, why was it the Chinese who finally solved this problem of so many cultures of the world? To answer this question, we need first to examine the radical of the Chinese character for paper, which suggests its meaning—silk.

For a long period of time, sericulture had remained an exclusive business of the Chinese. Even today, silks produced in Jiangsu, Zhejiang and other places enjoy worldwide fame.

◆ *Zhao Feng, research fellow of the Silk Museum of China*

*In ancient China, the first procedure for making silk material was the reeling of the silk from a silk worm's cocoon, in the course of which the silk was made soft in boiling water and was drawn out slowly. It was then washed to remove impurities. In this process some silk scraps fell off and settled on a bamboo mesh placed underneath. This thin layer of silk was at that time called "zhi" (meaning paper).*



*Part of the text of the Laozi written on silk during the early years of the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-25 A.D.), excavated from the No.3 Han Dynasty Tomb at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan Province*

At first people did not associate this kind of "silk paper" with the writing of Chinese characters, although silk paper has been unearthed in recent years. It was too thin and porous to stop the ink spreading, so in most cases it was used as a wrapping for expensive goods.

Today's paper carries a name associated with silk, but its technological process is much more complex than the making of silk paper. The evolution from silk paper to paper as such was not the result of simple growth,



but involved innovations or even a revolution.

In 75 A.D. (the 18th year of Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty) a 14-year-old boy named Cai Lun was conscripted into the court as a eunuch.

After 22 years Cai Lun was put in charge of the imperial workshops. All those years he had had to do the daily heavy manual work of carrying documents in the form of bamboo and wooden slips. And there was a mountain of such slips in the palace.

◆ *Fan Jialu, professor of the University of Science and Technology of China*

*As the bamboo and wooden slips were often moved, their binding cords easily broke. When that happened, the slips got mixed up and the lines were misplaced. That could cause a great deal of trouble and inconvenience, if not disaster. This left a deep impression on Cai Lun. People longed for the creation of a new writing material.*

◆ *Wang Juhua, senior engineer of the Papermaking and Pulp Industry Research Academy of China*

*On the question of Cai Lun inventing the papermaking process, people may ask whether he did it by official order or of his own accord. There is no clear reference to this point in the official records. But his appointment as head of the imperial workshops listed such a task in the job description. Moreover, the whole process lasted years, not days, so we can be certain of the court's backing.*



*Inscribed bamboo and wooden slips of the Han Dynasty from Juyan*



*Cai Lun*

When both the need and probability were present, a technical innovation appeared on the scene: one which was rare in Chinese history and promoted by the imperial court.

Cai Lun proved worthy of his responsibilities, and his name went down in history. No wonder Fan Ye wrote in his *History of Later Han* that Cai Lun was "devoted, honest and prudent."

◆ ***Fan Jialu, professor of the University of Science and Technology of China***

*Drawing on the practical experience of earlier people, Cai Lun invented the process of making paper out of plant fibers, with bark, fishing nets and rags as main materials. This represented a great invention and exerted a major influence on human history. Even today, the paper we use is actually made by applying the technical principles developed by Cai Lun.*

In the year 105 A.D. Cai Lun presented samples of plant fiber paper he had made after eight years of painstaking efforts to the emperor. This kind of paper is called "Cai Lun paper."

This kind of thin paper, which looks impeccably white and light, was a most precious gift China made to mankind. With the help of paper, Chinese characters, as if flying on wings, traveled freely in a wider space, crossing mountains and rivers.

◆ ***Li Jining, research librarian of the National Library of China***

*Written during the Warring States Period, the book Zhuang Zi commented on a scholar's wide range of knowledge: "Hui Shi needs five carts to load his books on." If we look back at these five carts today, how many characters would the books they carry run to?*

◆ ***Wu Jiulong, research fellow of the Historical Relics Research Institute of China***

*If we assume that there were 35 characters on a bamboo slip on average, a work like the Art of War by Sun Zi, which has 5,000 to 6,000 characters, would need 150 to 160 bamboo slips. This would have been a relatively thick rolled-up volume, weighing about one kilogram.*



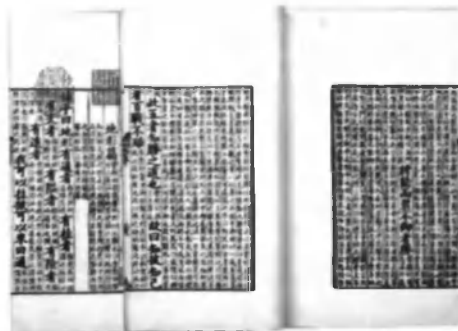
*An empress' jade seal of the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-25 A.D.), unearthed at Langjiagou Village, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province*

If this book were printed on the paper invented by Cai Lun, 184×130 mm in size, with 800 words on each page, it would take up no more than eight pages. By the same measure, the total characters on the bamboo slips filling five carts could be contained in a few books if printed on the same type of paper.

By this time, it would seem that block printing was ready to make its debut, since the three necessary elements of printing, i.e. paper, ink and seals were all ready. The Chinese seal, in particular, had been waiting 2,000 years for this day.



*Sun Zi*



*The Art of War, edition of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279)*

## “Ju” as in the phrase “Yin Jing Ju Dian”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “ju” as “holding a staff.”

In 260 B.C. Qin sent a mighty force to lay siege to Handan, the capital of the State of Zhao (now Handan in Hebei Province), aiming to bring the territory of Zhao under its own rule.

◆ *Bu Xianqun, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

*Zhao asked the State of Wei for help, and the latter sent 100,000 men under the command of Jin Bi to the rescue of Zhao.*

◆ *Wu Jiulong, research fellow of the Historical Relics Research Institute of China*

*But before the Wei army arrived, Qin warned Wei that if it helped Zhao it would be the next victim of Qin’s wrath. The ruler of Wei thereupon ordered Jin Bi to halt, and await further developments.*

Handan was in peril. Once Zhao was subdued, the neighboring State of Wei would be imperiled. The younger brother of the ruler of Wei, Prince of Xinling, was determined to save Zhao. But how could he obtain the authority to order the waiting troops into battle?

◆ *Wu Jiulong, research fellow of the Historical Relics Research Institute of China*

*A point to bear in mind is that in those days the means of communications were primitive. A commander in the field had to see an authenticating object from his lord before he believed that the order for deploying his troops was really from the ruler himself. That object was a tiger tally, a small figure in the shape of a tiger composing of two identical halves, one half kept by the commander and the other half by the king.*

◆ **Bu Xianqun, research fellow of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences**

*The Prince of Xinling realized that he had no way of making the king change his decision not to save Zhao, so he asked his brother's favorite concubine to steal the ruler's half of the tiger tally. With this token in hand, he was able to order Jin Bi into battle in the name of the ruler, and the invading Qin army was eventually defeated.*

This event has gone down in Chinese history as the famous story of the Prince of Xinling stealing the tiger tally to save Zhao. In this historical event that has legendary touches, what tipped the scales in a seemingly hopeless situation was a small object—a tiger tally.

In 1973 archeologists unearthed such a tiger tally belonging to the State of Qin on the outskirts of Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi Province. It is just 4.4 cm in height and 9.5 cm in length, with 40 beautifully shaped characters in nine lines inscribed on its back.

◆ **Zhang Mingqia, research fellow of the Shaanxi Museum of History**

*(The inscribed characters) are inlaid with golden threads and polished. They still shine with radiance today. This testifies to the fact that the tiger tally's workmanship is of high quality. There are irregular grooves inside, so a fake half would not match the other half. That is why the Prince of Xinling had no alternative but to steal the original one, so that the two halves would match.*

A tiger tally features the vivid figure of a docile tiger, yet it had the authority to send hundreds of thousands of Qin troops to the battlefield. It can be said that such an object decided the life or death of innumerable people.

The tiger tally was a seal of a ruler. Since seals played an irreplaceable role in the political life of the Chinese people, generation after generation of artisans spent their lives engraving such seals.

◆ **Fang Xiaoyang, professor of the Graduate School, Chinese Academy of Sciences**

*Actually, the engraving and reproducing techniques similar to those used to make seals had already appeared in the form of stamped pottery as early as the Neolithic Age. Of course, seal engraving is more closely related to our modern printing techniques. The character for "seal" can be found in the oracle bone script. In particular, the three bronze seals unearthed in the Yin Ruins bear characters in mirror-image relief. Such a reversed*



*Tiger tally from the State of Qin, unearthed on the outskirts of Xi'an, Shaanxi Province*

*relief cutting technique is very similar to that of Chinese block printing.*

Later, the hand engraving technique developed with the engraving of inscriptions on bronzes, stamping on bricks and tiles and especially the engraving of inscriptions on seals and stone slabs from the time of the Western Zhou Dynasty. This resulted in an improvement in the reverse cutting of characters, making the application of Chinese characters more flexible. It also led to a buildup of experience for the birth of block printing.

In fact, we can also find clay seals on some confidential religious letters from the Middle Ages in Europe. Then, how is it that it was Chinese, not Europeans, who invented the block printing technique?

◆ *Fan Jialu, professor of the University of Science and Technology of China*

*The invention of printing emerged to meet a social need, i.e., to reproduce a pictorial or written work in great quantities. This called for a very cheap and easy-to-print-on material. Such a material was absent in Europe but was present in China—paper. Thus, China alone met this need.*

When paper began to gain currency, engraving on stone slabs also came into fashion in China.

The Chinese believed that words engraved on a thick stone stele were more durable than those written on a thin piece of paper. But steles were not portable, so a rubbing technique was developed to solve this problem.

A rubbing was done this way: A slightly sticky solution was applied to the face of a stone tablet, a sheet of paper was spread on top and rubbed lightly with a soft bristle brush so as to make it adhere closely to the tablet and make the outlines of the incised characters show. Ink was then applied to the paper by rubbing it in. Rubbings were bound in the same fashion as bamboo slips, to become “books of rubbings.”

A book of rubbings was neither as heavy as one consisting of bamboo slips nor as expensive as one made of silk, in addition to the advantages of saving the trouble of proofreading and copying. This technique greatly facilitated the circulation of books. It can be said without exaggeration that it was a precursor of block printing.

Now, all the conditions were ripe for the birth of printing in this land in Eastern Asia.



*Making a rubbing of an ancient stone inscription*



𦉳 diǎn

### “Dian” as in the phrase “Yin Jing Ju Dian”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “dian” as “books of the Five Emperors (referring to the five legendary rulers).”

In the winter of 494 A.D., five giant Buddhist statues were erected by the strategic passage leading to the Mongolian grasslands, marking the beginning of a period in which Buddhism introduced from India became an important force in the political life of the Chinese.

For more than 200 years spanning the Wei, Jin and the Northern and Southern Dynasties, China underwent chaos, misery and frequent warfare. It was against this background that Buddhism began to spread in China, asking people to endure what they had to suffer in this life with the promise of a life of happiness in the next life.

◆ *Fang Xiaoyang, professor of the Graduate School, Chinese Academy of Sciences*

*The Dharani Sutra says that if you copy 99 Buddhist scriptures, your work amounts to building for yourself 99,000 sharira-stupas, or as many stupas in their eight principal forms or as many bodhi stupas. Such a belief circulated widely among Buddhist believers, and people began to copy Buddhist scriptures in huge numbers in the hope of getting divine assistance from the Buddha.*

In 581 A.D. Yang Jian, a senior general of the Later Zhou Dynasty, put an end to the conflict of the nation and established a unified regime, the Sui Dynasty. This created the social conditions for the birth of block printing.



*Yang Jian (541-604), Emperor Wen of the Sui Dynasty*

Yang Jian, now Emperor Wen, was brought up as a boy in a temple. He held Buddhism in great esteem, and declared himself to be a Buddhist. During his reign, there were 230,000 monks and nuns out of a total population of 46 million. During this period, over 5,000 temples and pagodas were built, and over 600,000 Buddhist statues erected.

◆ **Li Jining, research librarian of the National Library of China**

*When the government conducted a survey on ancient books, a scripture copied by someone in the Sui Dynasty was spotted in the China Bookstore. It looked very nice. The paper for scripture copying at that time was of very good quality. It was 140 cm in length, which is rare. It shows the high standard of papermaking and the importance attached to the copying of Buddhist literature at that time.*

This gave rise to a new profession—scripture copying. Poor scholars were able to make a decent living by copying. A manuscript which Paul Pelliot, a French Sinologist, found in a Dunhuang storage cave clearly recorded the pay made to such a copyist named Kang Xiuhua: For copying the *Mahaprajna-paramita-sutra* 35 taels of silver; 100 *shuo* (a unit of weight equal to 120 *jin*) of wheat; 50 *shuo* of millet; and 4 *jin* of flour. At a rough calculation, the total pay was worth at least 1,500 kilos of wheat at that time.



*Grain tax record carved on a brick, Sui Dynasty (581-618), said to be unearthed at Luoyang, Henan Province*

◆ **Kristofer Schipper, member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a sinologist**

*People believed that characters had a natural by-effect, i.e., to bring them a kind of happiness, a kind of auspiciousness. Later, a Buddhist scripture, if kept in the home, would, in the words of Sakyamuni, enable divinities and fairies to descend from Heaven to protect it.*

In 1927 the world's earliest block-printed work known so far was discovered in the ruins of the Dazhuangyan Temple at Dunhuang. It has since been brought out of China. The lower right-hand corner of the work, which was a picture of a statue of Buddha, showed clearly the year of its

creation—the 3rd year of the Daye reign period of the Sui Dynasty, that is, 607 A.D.

It can be seen from this exquisite Buddhist work that the block printing technique of the Sui Dynasty had reached maturity. The complicated nature of the strokes of Chinese characters had motivated people to innovate the printing technique. The zeal of Buddhists to reproduce scriptures in large numbers had inspired ingenious artisans, and, as a result, the Chinese seal, having waited for more than 2,000 years, was now perfectly combined with paper and ink.

From then on, Chinese characters were no longer copied stroke by stroke, but were able to be reproduced page by page. People finally found an easy, convenient and feasible way of accumulating “merit” in a Buddhist sense, while the means of spreading civilization developed by leaps and bounds.

◆ *Fang Xiaoyang, professor of the Graduate School, Chinese Academy of Sciences*

*Xuan Zang, a venerable monk of the Tang Dynasty, made 50,000 prints of Samantabhadra's image (Samantabhadra means Bodhisattva of Universal Benevolence) each year, which was a great number. By the later period of the Tang, with the continuous advances in block printing, the cost of printing was far lower than that of hand copying.*

◆ *Kristofer Schipper, member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a sinologist*

*The Five Dynasties during the 10th century and the ensuing Song Dynasty saw great advances in printing. With so many books available, more people had access to them and attended schools. Therefore, China's cultural level at that time was much higher than that of Europe.*

The painting “Qing Ming Shang He Tu” (meaning riverside scene on the day of the Qingming Festival) done by Zhang Zeduan of the Song Dynasty describes the prosperity of Bianjing, capital of the Northern Song Dynasty (now Kaifeng, Henan Province) in the early 12th century. From the picture we can see that various trades and professions, bookstores, pharmacies and libraries, flourished there. The whole street it depicts breathes with a worldly yet happy atmosphere. The city can be said to have reached the zenith of the prosperity of human society at that time.

Thriving urban commerce multiplied literacy among business-people, while widespread respect for culture and education also greatly boosted the ranks of scholars.



Part of the famous ancient painting "Riverside Scene on the Day of the Qingming Festival"

◆ **Zhang Rongming, professor of the College of History, Nankai University**

*The government of the Northern Song Dynasty promoted a program for running schools on a large scale three times, and the total student body exceeded 200,000. At the same time, there were many private schools and academies in different parts of the country, said to top 200 in number. The Yuelu Academy we can still see today in Changsha, capital of Hunan Province, was among the top private schools at that time. The state held general examinations every three years to select officials, and, on average, more than 400,000 people entered each time.*

In such circumstances, book publishing expanded on an unprecedented scale. Although block-printed books were of exquisite workmanship, block cutting was very time consuming. The publication of the *Tripitaka* would involve the cutting of 130,000 blocks, taking 12 years. Such a speed definitely could not keep pace with people's needs.

"In the Qingli reign period Bi Sheng invented movable type printing. His method was to engrave characters on thin clay, and fire-harden them." This quotation is part of a passage taken from the *Meng Xi Bi Tan (Sketchbook of Dream Brook)* by Shen Kuo, a scientist who lived in the Northern Song Dynasty, and it is the world's first reference to movable type printing. Although the passage runs to only 300-odd characters, it describes the whole technological process of movable type printing. Qingli is the title of Emperor Renzong's reign, which lasted from 1041 to 1048.

◆ **Wei Zhigang, deputy director of the China Printing Museum**

*The concluding part of the relevant piece in the Sketchbook of Dream Brook has two points of note: First, there should be two plates, one for setting type, and the other for printing. This description is very vivid, apparently an on-the-spot record; second, it is said that Bi Sheng's movable clay types were collected by his nephews.*

◆ **Shi Jinbo, professor of the Center for Western Xia Culture, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences**

*This account of the process is very clear, but in recent years some foreign specialists have raised doubts about whether Bi Sheng was the inventor of movable clay type. The reason is that there is no reference in the early literature to movable clay type, nor have books printed using this method been handed down from the Song and Yuan dynasties.*

On the question as to whether movable type printing was invented by Bi Sheng of the Northern Song Dynasty—at least from the Qing Dynasty onwards, many scholars have worked hard to find reliable evidence.

In 1987 some villagers from Xinhua Township, Wuwei City, Gansu Province, were working at the site of the Haimudong Temple, when they hit upon a large number of cultural relics dating to the Western Xia Kingdom, which was for a while contemporary with the Northern Song Dynasty. Upon hearing the news, Sun Shouling, then in charge of the city's museum, rushed to the scene to collect and study the finds.

◆ **Sun Shouling, expert on movable clay type of the Western Xia script**

*(What I saw) was different from other Buddhist scriptures. Let me explain why. It was because the characters used to print this Buddhist scripture showed that the cutting workmanship of each character was not particularly fine. You can see that the horizontal*



*Meng Xi Bi Tan (Sketchbook of Dream Brook) by Shen Kuo (1031-1095) of the Northern Song Dynasty*



*Model of movable clay types of the Northern Song Dynasty*

*strokes of each character are not strictly parallel and the vertical ones are not strictly vertical. Corners are not really corners, and neither are squares.*

After careful study, Sun Shouling concluded that this was an extraordinary book printed using early-stage movable clay-type printing.

In March 1989 the National Cultural Relics Appraisal Committee confirmed that the book, Part Two of the *Vimalakirti-nirdesha-sutra*, had been printed by the movable type method in the mid-12th century, and rated it as a first-class national cultural heritage.

◆ ***Sun Shouling, expert on movable clay type of the Western Xia script***

*Experts and scholars attending a symposium on this subject all said that they had never seen movable clay type or a book printed using it. They declared that they had no way of drawing a conclusion. Some Chinese experts and foreign scholars flatly denied that Bi Sheng was the inventor of movable clay type, saying that his invention was only an idea, a concept, which was not practical for printing.*

Sun Shouling experimented with firing movable clay type, and after a thousand days and nights, enduring ordeal by smoke and fire from the furnace and with repeated failures, he finally picked from the ashes more than 3,000 Western Xia characters, which were very difficult

to write and recognize. With these characters he printed Part One of the *Vimalakirti-nirdesha-sutra*, turning this dead script, which had born out of the Chinese characters, into a living book.

The two volumes, almost 1,000 years apart, combine to become a complete set of a scripture. What links them is the movable clay type printing invented by Bi Sheng. The scent of the ink from these characters seems a distant reminder of the once thriving kingdom of Western Xia.

◆ *Xu Jialu, a vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress of China and president of the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching*

*It has been over a thousand years since many Chinese inventions came to the world. There are many examples of Chinese inventions changing world history in many fields. This is reflected in Dr. Needham's works. But why have we since ancient times talked about the "four great inventions?" It is because these four great inventions were the most important in changing the destiny of mankind and advancing society into new stages.*

Francis Bacon, an English philosopher, stated that the invention of printing, gunpowder and the compass had radically changed the appearance and state of the whole world. He added that no religious order, no empire and no other planets could compare with these inventions of a mechanical nature in their influence on human affairs. Karl Marx went further when he commented that gunpowder, the compass and printing were the three great inventions that presaged the advent of bourgeois society.

However, these great scientific and technological inventions did not essentially push forward the transformation of Chinese society. In his *Science and Civilization in China*, Dr. Needham commented, not without regret, that if his Chinese friends were as intelligent as he was, why were great figures like Galileo, George Stephenson and Newton all Europeans, and not Chinese or Indians? And why did the modern scientific and technological revolutions occur only in Europe?

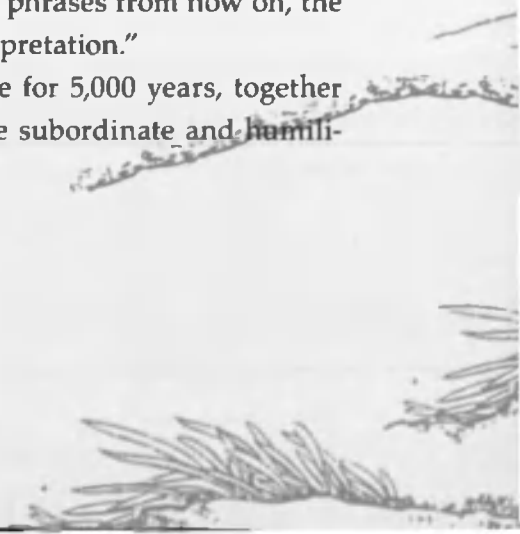
With the outbreak of the first Opium War in 1840, the Chinese script was facing an unprecedented challenge.



In the year 1860, the Second Opium War, lasting four years, ended with the allied British and French army occupying Beijing and burning down the royal garden known as Yuan Ming Yuan. In the ensuing unequal treaty signed between China and the two countries, the Qing court was forced to admit explicitly: "The independent nation of Great Britain stands equal to China," and pledged to stop calling the Westerners "barbarians" in any official document.

Also in the treaty, the Qing government made it quite clear that, "in case of any debatable words and phrases from now on, the English text will be held as the right interpretation."

Hence, the Chinese characters, in use for 5,000 years, together with their mother nationality, were made subordinate and humiliated in the modern era.





PART SEVEN

# Rejuvenation through Fire and Blood



The image shows the seal script character for 'shu' (死), which is a complex arrangement of lines forming a stylized figure. To its right is the pinyin 'shū'.
 

shū

“Shu” as in the phrase “Shu Tu Tong Gui” (meaning reaching the same goal in different ways)

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “shu” as “death.”



Prince Gong

In the spring and summer of 1867, the sixth year of the Tongzhi reign period of the Qing Dynasty, a series of natural disasters befell Beijing. First, there was a big drought followed by a rampant plague in the spring. Then, on the 10th day of the sixth lunar month, a sandstorm shrouded the entire city, and even the Forbidden City became as dim as midnight for four hours in the daytime.

Many people were alarmed at what they thought were ominous portents.

The governor of Zhili (today's Hebei Province), Yang Tingxi, wrote in a memorial to the emperor that “the change of the celestial situation must be a consequence of a serious error in our current policies. The capital city is vociferous with gossip angry about the establishment of the Tongwen Guan (School of Combined Learning). People regard the new school as an irrational thing as it modeled our enemy and forgets our enmity. It is a serious blunder in our resistance against our enemy.”

The Tongwen Guan was a state-run school for teaching foreign lan-

guages. It is ridiculous to relate the setting up of a school with some irregular climatic phenomena. But what made so many people cite the former as the cause of the latter?

Qi Rushan, the tutor and advisor to the great actor of Peking opera Mei Lanfang, was once a student at the Tongwen Guan. His *Memoirs* help reveal the social atmosphere surrounding the issue at the time. He wrote, "The school was founded, but it failed to enroll students. As the general mood of society was still very obdurate, people were unwilling to attend the new school fearing that to learn a foreign language meant surrendering to foreign countries..."

Over the years all the dynasties of China had regarded exchanges with foreign countries as dealing with "tributary states." They were not bothered to learn the languages or writing of other countries because that was the duty of the "tributaries." But with the arrival of Western civilization, Chinese characters, together with the sickly dynasty, were forced to deal with this unfamiliar human civilization.

On January 13, 1861, Prince Gong wrote a memorial to the emperor in which he proposed the founding of the Tongwen Guan. He pointed out in his memorial that to understand the situation in other countries, China should be familiar with the written languages of those countries so that they would "not be deceived by them," and "I was told that some merchants in Guangdong and Shanghai used the written and oral languages of at least three countries—Britain, France and the USA." He suggested that the Qing court order the imperial inspectors stationed in the coastal provinces to choose four honest and reliable candidates each and send them to "the capital with books from those countries." Besides, the court should select from the Manchu aristocracy a number of intelligent boys under 13 or 14 years of age to learn foreign languages.

◆ *Jiang Pei, professor of the College of History, Nankai University*

*The purpose of Prince Gong's proposal was to get the Qing government to train her own experts in foreign languages so they would not be hoodwinked when dealing with the West. It is to be noted that even though Prince Gong had dealt with Western*



*Former site of the Tongwen Guan (School of Combined Learning)*

countries such as Britain and the USA for a long time by then, he still described British and American English as two different languages in his memorial to the emperor. This shows how ignorant the high-ranking officials of the Qing court were in general in their knowledge about the world at that time.

In June 1862 the Tongwen Guan was officially founded. It could be called the first modern school in Chinese history.

Only ten students were enrolled in the first year, but in the next three years the school hired British missionaries to teach the English language on condition that they refrained from proselytizing.

◆ **Chi Yunfei, professor of the College of History, Capital Normal University**

In 1866 Prince Gong sent another memorial to the emperor, in which he requested the teaching of astronomy and mathematics at the Tongwen Guan. The pupils would be selected from people who scored highly in the imperial civil service examinations.

However, these seemingly reasonable proposals aroused an enormous uproar inside and outside the Qing court at the time. On the day following the proposal, someone posted a placard on the front gate of the Tongwen Guan, which read, "Disciples of Confucius, but devil teachers." The neat calligraphy revealed that its author was an educated person.



Calligraphy by Wo Ren

◆ **Wang Kaixi, professor of the College of History, Beijing Normal University**

A great number of educated people at the time held the belief that the Chinese intelligentsia should concentrate on the teachings of Confucius and Mencius. To ask them to learn foreign literature, science and technology (often called "bizarre tricks and obscene shows" at the time) was an insult to their sage Confucius, and humiliating to the Chinese intelligentsia.

On the 26th day of the second lunar month of 1867, Wo Ren, "leader of scholars," minister of public works, head of the Imperial Academy

and a tutor of Emperor Tongzhi, presented a memorial to the emperor attacking Prince Gong's suggestions.

◆ **Wang Kaixi, professor of the College of History, Beijing Normal University**

*Wo Ren argued that the crucial strategy for national development depended on efforts to uphold protocol rather than diplomatic policies. The emphasis had to be based on strengthening people's minds instead of learning actual techniques. He maintained that so long as the Chinese, the subjects of the Qing Empire, could be inspired to be loyal to the emperor and patriotic, that would be enough for China to resist foreign aggression. The Chinese didn't need to learn from other countries, especially their techniques of making guns and warships.*

Finally, Wo Ren argued in his memorial that even if the Chinese had to learn from foreigners, it should not be the scholars who were their pupils. His line of reasoning was that since the first Opium War the foreign religion, Christianity, had made great inroads among the ignorant masses of China. The intelligentsia was Chinese culture's last line of defense. If the pillars of the state—the educated Chinese—were sent to learn from the foreigners, it would be tantamount to “driving the Chinese toward the barbarians.”

Eighteen days after Wo Ren submitted his memorial, Prince Gong wrote another memorial to the emperor implicitly attacking Wo Ren and other conservatives, claiming that they were harming the country. Was his charge true?

◆ **Chi Yunfei, professor of the College of History, Capital Normal University**

*Wo Ren was an extremely influential figure at that time. A Mongol of one of the elite Eight Banners, he passed the highest imperial civil service exam with flying colors and was outstanding in his knowledge of the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties. He was known as the “Master of Neo-Confucianism.”*

Judged by traditional Chinese values, then, Wo Ren was an outstanding man. So why was he so blind to the changes in the real world around him?

◆ **Xu Jianxin, research fellow of the Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences**

*A Japanese scholar once pointed out that more publications appeared in China in*

1750 than in the whole of the Western world in the same year. But most of them were published by and for the Chinese intelligentsia and scholar-bureaucrats, who spent all their lives in the study of the Confucian classics, and works on history and philosophy, concentrating on exploring the essence of human life and answers to social issues.

About two millennia previously, it was exactly this set of studies that underlay the founding of the Han Dynasty, and helped maintain the glory of China until modern times. Also, it was the same set of methods that nurtured the prosperous "Kangxi and Qianlong Age," which lasted over a century during the Qing Dynasty, and saw Chinese territory expanded to the largest extent in the history of the nation...



*A screen bearing calligraphy by Qing Emperor Kangxi*

Based on such a long-standing experience, Wo Ren and the bureaucrat-scholars he represented had a well-founded argument. But obviously the traditional thinking and method could not cope with the reality of the world.

One day in 1867 Prince Gong summoned Wo Ren to his palace and they had a heated argument.

◆ *Guo Fang, research fellow of the Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

Prince Gong said, "I set up the Tongwen Guan to enrich and strengthen the nation. If you believe your protocol and moral principles could accomplish the same target, try to do it." He even sent a request to Empress Dowager Cixi for Wo Ren to run the Tongwen Guan. Challenged directly like that, Wo Ren had to admit defeat.

◆ *Jiang Pei, professor of the College of History, Nankai University*

*What made Prince Gong's counterattack effective? The truth is that the West at that*

time clearly represented the new modern power which had sprung from the industrial and political revolutions there. In their political structures, economic systems and military power, the Western countries were a brand-new, unprecedented phenomenon in human history. It was certainly impossible for *Wo Ren* to figure out a solution to their challenge from the ancient Chinese classics or the traditional political culture.

For the first time ever, the languages and scripts of the West were a mirror for the Chinese language and script, which were forced to view themselves from a different angle.

Chinese civilization and Chinese characters were thrust into a process of transformation they had never experienced over the past several thousand years.

途 tú

### “Tu” as in the phrase “Shu Tu Tong Gui”

*Broad Rimes · Tang* (an ancient dictionary of rimes compiled 1007-1011) defines the character “tu” as “path.”

In 1895, in a narrow alley named Big Lion Lane in Tianjin City, Yan Fu, the top administrator of the Beiyang Naval Academy, was busy translating an English work titled, *Evolution and Ethics* day and night.

It took great courage and rare insight for a Qing official heading a famous naval academy to choose to introduce a foreigner’s opinions into China. What was it that made Yan Fu such a forward-looking intellectual?

The British forces had smashed the gates of China with warships and cannons in 1840. China was awakened from its millennia-old dream. That humiliating defeat had shaken Lin Zexu, the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces profoundly. Having witnessed the



Yan Fu

power of the British naval forces at first hand, Lin suggested to the emperor that China should learn the special skills of the foreigners so as to be able to resist their encroachments. Lin was also the first to propose the building of a modern navy by China.

However, the comment Emperor Daoguang wrote on Lin's memorial was: "Total nonsense."

◆ *Ge Jianxiong, professor of the History and Geography Institute, Fudan University*

*But even Lin Zexu, the most forward-looking official of his time, accepted the suggestion by his assistant that the Chinese army combat the British forces with bamboo poles. The reasoning was that, as the British could not bend their joints, all the Chinese army had to do was flip them over with bamboo poles. Not being able to rise, the invaders would have no choice but to surrender. Lin even made the same suggestion to Emperor Daoguang. This story illustrates how fettered even progressive Chinese officials were by the power of Chinese traditions.*



*The Beiyang Naval Academy*

Fifteen years later, the British and French armies invaded China from the sea again and marched to China's capital. Their destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan alarmed the slumbering Qing government, and awakened it to the pressing need for a modernized navy. As a consequence, the former state policy of "playing foreign powers against each other" was replaced by one of "learning the skills of the foreign powers in order to resist them."

From the 1860s on, the Qing government began to try to build Western-type warships or buy warships from the West. But by then, a full 20 years had elapsed since Lin Zexu proposed that China build a modern navy. During those two decades, sail had been replaced by steam, and the Western navies had made another leap forward.

◆ *Wang Kaixi, professor of the College of History, Beijing Normal University*

*The Westernization movement launched in China aimed at building industry for defense as well as economic progress. It also included a program to send students abroad, the setting up of a telegraph system, the building*



*Lin Zexu*



*of railways to speed up transportation, and the establishment of a modern navy to resist foreign aggression. Most of all, the priority for the "Westernization Group" was to, in their own words, make China a rich and powerful nation.*

In 1876 Yan Fu was among the first group of students enrolled in China's first naval academy—the Fuzhou Ship Management School. The curriculum of the school included study of the English language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, geology, astronomy and navigation among other subjects. It was there that Yan Fu acquainted himself with modern scientific knowledge from the West and began to master the English language.

In the following year, the 23-year-old Yan Fu entered the British Royal

*The Fuzhou Ship-building Bureau (under which was the Fuzhou Ship Management School)*

Navy Academy, together with other Chinese students—the first group of naval students sent abroad. His classmates included Deng Shichang, Liu Buchan and others who became renowned naval officers later.

◆ ***Lin Kaiming, research fellow of the Tianjin Museum***

*Before going abroad, Yan Fu had received the traditional education based on the "four books and five classics" that aimed to prepare people for the imperial civil service exams. However, once he arrived in Europe, Yan Fu got access to Western books on democratic, social and political systems, as well as the philosophical thinking in capitalist societies. They all influenced the young man tremendously.*

In 1879 Yan Fu graduated from the British Royal Navy Academy with outstanding grades. In the same year, on his return to his homeland



Thomas Henry Huxley's book, *Evolution and Ethics*, with its theory of "survival of the fittest," was translated by Yan Fu and published in 1898. It was greeted with great interest by the educated sector of Chinese society. After reading the book, Liang Qichao sighed, "Competition is the mother of all civilizations. Once competition halts, the progress of a civilization halts too." It was the "unified feudal society" formed since the Qin Dynasty in China, he stated, that had paralyzed the mechanism of competition in the social structure of China, hindered the normal progress of that society and led to the poor and stagnant status of the nation.



Liang Qichao

After the defeat of China's Beiyang fleet, the Chinese began to lose faith in their traditional dynasty system. A more intense search started to find ways to save China from Western encroachments and build it into a strong country.

In the decade following 1900, at least 1,599 works on Western thought, politics and culture were translated into Chinese. Except for the Buddhist scriptures, such a large-scale effort to translate foreign languages into Chinese was unprecedented.



tóng

“Tong” as in the phrase “Shu Tu Tong Gui”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “tong” as “joining.”

On September 2, 1905 an imperial edict smashed the dream held by a hundred thousand students of passing the imperial examinations. On that day, Empress Dowager Cixi abolished the imperial civil service examination system that had lasted for 1,300 years. It was a watershed in Chinese history.

However, Cixi previously had twice—on October 9 and November 1, 1898—halted attempts by the Hundred Day Reformers to renovate the examination system.



Part of the imperial edict abolishing the imperial civil examination system

Why did Empress Dowager Cixi, who was the real power behind her son's throne, behave so capriciously?

◆ **Jiang Pei, professor of the College of History, Nankai University**

*The political structure of China resembled an unshakeable pyramid consisting of the emperor, aristocrats, officials and commoners, in a top-down order. If not disturbed by external invasions, the structure, answering the needs of an agricultural society, would maintain its relative harmony and stability. The civil service examination system was a crucial vehicle for upward mobility. But once this long-standing system, based on a thorough knowledge of the Confucian classics and ways of thought, was removed, the lack of this critical “bonding glue” of the traditional political structure in China would cause the pyramid to collapse.*

Empress Dowager Cixi is not the only one who vacillated over whether or not to abolish the imperial civil service examination system. In fact, in 1663 at the early period of the Qing Dynasty Emperor Kangxi removed the “eight-part essay”—a stereotyped writing style—from the imperial examination, believing the writing test “empty, useless and having nothing to do with actual political affairs.” But three years later he had to reinstate the test as a result of intense lobbying by his ministers.

However, by 1905, even the Qing court ministers, who had benefited greatly from the civil service examination system, realized that it was the main obstacle to China’s modernization, and joined the call for its abolition.

On September 2, 1905, Yuan Shikai, Zhang Zhidong and other top Qing officials submitted a document to Empress Dowager Cixi titled, “Please Abolish the Imperial Civil Service Examination System.” They pleaded that the lengthy course of studies needed to pass the examination distracted men of ability from learning and practicing real political skills.

The failure of the “Westernization Movement” and a series of humiliating treaties signed by the Qing government with foreign powers had pushed the Qing Dynasty to the brink of destruction. A mere six years after the abolition of the civil service examination system, the Qing Dynasty collapsed, and Confucianism began to lose its grip as the ideological glue of Chinese society. New thoughts and systems flooded China.

Hence, a new kind of crisis befell China. American scholar Gilbert Rozman pointed out in his book, *The Modernization of China*, that “the steersmen of the new deal threw away their old compass before they could obtain a new one, leading Chinese society to drift helplessly like a drifting ship.”



*A painting of Empress Dowager Cixi*

◆ **Ge Jianxiang, professor of the History and Geography Institute, Fudan University**

*The advantage of terminating the imperial civil service examination system was obvious. It helped remove the barriers in the way for China to foster all kinds of talented people. However, the problem was that after the long-standing examination system was abolished little was done to encourage the establishment of a modern educational system.*

◆ **Chi Yunfei, professor of the College of History, Capital Normal University**

*New education had its own problems. The graduates of the few modern schools and students studying abroad produced a great number of modern intellectuals, but China's backward economy was not prepared to offer them the necessary positions.*

"I worked hard to train a modern army and navy, but I realize that they were 'paper tigers' when I look back. When was I ever given a free hand? Before they were tested in battle, and collapsed, they looked fine, like a dilapidated room patched up by a paper-hanger." These were the words of the leader of the Westernization Movement, Li Hongzhang, a top official of the Qing Dynasty. They reveal the disillusion and the helplessness felt deeply by the intelligentsia of late Qing dynasty.

Where lay China's future? Generations of Chinese with lofty ideals and love for their nation began hard, painstaking explorations.

In February 1917 Hu Shi, a young Chinese studying at the graduate school of Columbia University in the US, published an article in *New Youth* magazine under the title "A Preliminary Discussion of Literary Renovation." His article advocated the use of colloquial language instead of the literary language which was used in all serious writing in Chinese in those days, and helped ignite the New Culture Movement.

Hu Shi argued that the West had experienced a "literary revolution" during its Renaissance era too, when various European countries gave up using Latin, and started writing in the various European vernaculars. This not only led to the formation and development of the modern languages of Italian, English, French and German, but also made the written language a real means for the people to express their thoughts.



Li Hongzhang

◆ *Chih-p'ing Chou, professor of Princeton University, United States*

Following this, Chen Duxiu published his article "On the Literary Revolution." More radical than Hu Shi, Chen called for the abolition of the "landscape ode" and aristocratic literature before a common people's literature could be set in motion. It is to be noted that Hu Shi never used the term "literary revolution." He modestly called his article a preliminary discussion only.

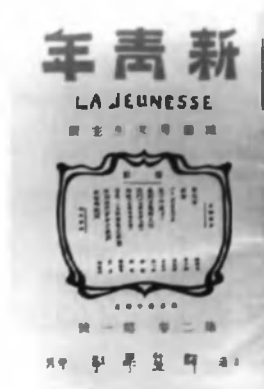
After the Opium Wars, China was under pressure from the world powers, and was seized with a desperate urge to "save the nation and survive the crises." National morale dropped to an unprecedented low, and the calls for a new culture resonated in the souls of progressive Chinese.

One comment from among the many written in response to his article particularly pleased Hu Shi. It came from the master of classical Chinese literature Qian Xuantong, who was a professor at Peking University at the time.

◆ *He Chengxuan, research fellow of the Institute of Philosophy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

Qian Xuantong belonged to the old faction favoring reverting to tradition in response to the challenge from the West, even after the 1911 Revolution. When he worked at the Education Department in Zhejiang Province he wore old-fashioned clothing, and was regarded as an eccentric figure, almost like a cultural relic.

Yuan Shikai declared himself emperor on December 12, 1915. Two years later, there was another farcical drama when Zhang Xun tried to restore Puyi, the last Qing emperor to the throne. These bizarre incidents, and others, made Qian Xuantong realize that China's poverty and weakness could not be eradicated simply by getting rid of one emperor:



*New Youth magazine*



*Hu Shi*



Qian Xuantong

The very cause of China's problem must be her cultural tradition itself!

Qian Xuantong wrote to Hu Shi: "If we want to save China and make the Chinese nation an up-to-date civilization for the modern century we must get rid of the Confucian doctrines, as well as Taoism. And this means abolishing the Chinese characters, which are the bearers of the evils of Confucianism and Taoism."

◆ **Liu Lening, professor of Columbia University, United States**

*In those days, especially after the "May 4 Movement" of 1919, a consensus arose in China that the old culture was to blame for all the country's deep-rooted social problems. And the Chinese characters themselves came to be regarded by many as the main stumbling block in the way of modernization.*

◆ **Torbjörn Loden, Swedish sinologist**

*The classical way of writing Chinese was extremely formalistic, and left no room for the imagination. This tended to stunt the intellectual growth of young people especially.*



Chen Duxiu

Almost all the leading figures in cultural circles at that time realized this. Chen Duxiu said, "As the carriers of poisonous thoughts, the Chinese characters deserve to be abandoned." Cai Yuanpei advocated the adoption of an alphabetic system for writing Chinese, and Lu Xun said, "The Chinese characters are like tuberculosis in the bodies of the poor, toiling Chinese. If this intellectual disease is not removed from the patient, the latter will die."



Cai Yuanpei

◆ **Xu Jialu, a vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress of China and president of the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching**

*It took eight decades for us to realize that the Chinese characters in fact suit our language ideally. We should not be too harsh on the early modernizers, as they called attention to this cultural problem, and enabled us to get a sound understanding of the role of Chinese characters, and their contribution to our language and culture.*



Lu Xun

The first Convention on New Chinese Writing was held in Vladivostok, Russia, on September 26, 1931.

The discussions at the convention centered on Qu Qiubai's essay "The Romanization of Chinese Writing." The attendees agreed with his



Qu Qiubai



conclusion that “as a product of the ancient, feudal Chinese society, the Chinese characters became one of the tools the exploiting class used to suppress the toiling poor of China.” The convention decided that the characters should be abolished, and replaced by an alphabetic language.

The government of the Republic of China (1912-1949) tried various ways to simplify Chinese writing. But the efforts did not create any significant results because of wars and social turmoil.



“Gui” as in the phrase “Shu Tu Tong Gui”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “gui” as “marrying off a girl.”

On October 1, 1949, the People’s Republic of China was founded.

A month previously, Wu Yuzhang, president of North China University, had written a letter to Chairman Mao Zedong specifically about the issue of reforming Chinese characters.

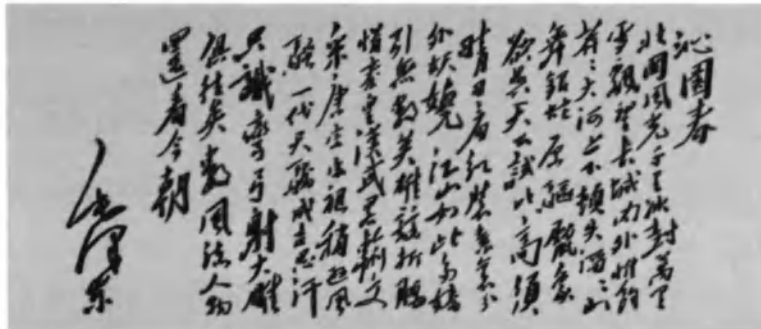
With Chairman Mao’s support, the National Association for Reforming the Chinese Writing System was founded in Beijing on October 10, 1949, only ten days after New China was founded. Wu Yuzhang was appointed president of the association.

◆ *Zhou Youguang, philologist*

*As many as 80% of Chinese people were illiterate when New China was founded. Such a high percentage of illiteracy made the modernization of the country impossible. But the work of eliminating illiteracy on such a large scale would take a long time and slow national progress. So a way was sought to make the characters easier to learn.*

Chairman Mao pointed out in 1951: “The Chinese characters must be reformed, and we should follow the worldwide direction of adopting

a phonetic alphabet." It is to be noted that experts at that time generally agreed that alphabetic systems were superior to pictographic ones like the Chinese characters. But it was the enormous influence of the revolutionary leader that enabled serious efforts to be made to simplify the characters as a social experiment.



Snow—to the tune of Qin Yuan Chun, by Mao Zedong

On January 10, 1958 Premier Zhou Enlai gave a special report on the work to reform Chinese characters at a session of the National Political Consultative Conference. Zhou said, "As for the future of Chinese characters, people holding different opinions are encouraged to discuss it. I won't go into detail here because they are not on the agenda of our reform of the Chinese characters."

The immediate tasks to be taken included the following: to simplify the Chinese characters, promote Putonghua, or standard spoken Chinese, and finally devise and spread the use of a phonetic system to replace the Chinese characters.

◆ *Zhu Dake, director of the Institute of Cultural Criticism, Tongji University*

Linguists at that time categorized the evolution of human writing into three stages. These are: the earliest, most primitive stage, characterized by pictorial symbols; the stage of the combination of meanings and sounds; and the stage of the emergence of phonetic spelling. The three stages show us the process of development of human languages, and reveal how an earlier stage was replaced by a later, more developed one. It was believed that the Western scripts had reached an advanced state, while traditional Chinese writing was still at a comparatively backward stage. If China hoped to catch up with the West and modernize, the linguists were convinced, a radical change must be made in the way Chinese was written.

The Chinese government ended up choosing a most reasonable path as well as a most practical reform plan in the historical conditions of the early years of New China. As the renowned writer Mao Dun said, "At least our grandchildren will be able to walk on two legs: writing with characters as well with an alphabet. Making notes in pinyin (phonetic alphabet) when listening to a report will be faster than writing characters. In fact, it may be possible to construct a typewriter for pinyin letters. What a wonderful thing that would be!"

The new system, called "Chinese Phonetic Pinyin" started to be taught in the classrooms of all elementary schools nationwide from the autumn of 1958. The new pinyin annotations offered a walking stick to learners of the ancient Chinese characters.

However, a real life-and-death challenge did not face the Chinese characters until after China started to implement her reform and opening-up policy decades later.

In 1979 Professor Qian Weichang, vice-president of Tsinghua University, was invited to attend an international conference in Hong Kong. There he heard a foreign expert say, "Only an alphabetic language is able to rescue China, because the Chinese characters can not be encoded into computers."

◆ *Zhang Pu, director of the Chinese Information Processing Society of China*

*When we Chinese describe something too hard to accomplish, we say "as hard as reaching the sky." But the French say "C'est Chinois!" The phrase means that Chinese writing is too difficult to learn.*

We were grouped with Japanese linguists because the Japanese also used Chinese characters in addition to *kana*. So they face the same challenge of codifying their characters. Once when we were exchanging ideas on the topic, the Japanese remarked that if the challenge of encoding Chinese characters into a computer language could ever be resolved, the goal of computerizing all scripts would be realized.

The first computer in the world was born in the United States in 1946. Soon computer technology was growing and spreading rapidly among the Western countries.

When China opened her doors fully to the outside world in 1979, those with insight realized at once that the future belonged to computer science. Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's reform and opening-up

policy, pointed out that the task of spreading the use of computers must start with children. However, as all the computer software at that time had been designed and compiled in alphabetic letters, they would not accept pictographic characters. Hence, the fate of the Chinese nation in the new age of global competition seemed to lie in the very direction of the Chinese writing system.

*Modernization of Chinese Language*, the authoritative publication in the field of Romanization of Chinese, announced in its first issue in 1980 that "the difficulties facing Chinese characters in computer encoding make the language look like a dying old man. History will show that computers will dig the grave of the Chinese characters, but be the mid-wife for the Chinese alphabetic pinyin system."

Were the Chinese characters an insuperable obstacle to the country's modernization in the information age? To mobilize scientists and technicians to solve the problem of inputting Chinese characters into computer codes, Professor Qian Weichang initiated the founding of the Chinese Information Processing Society of China on June 27, 1981. He also designed "Qian's Input Method for Chinese Words."

◆ *Zhang Pu, director of the Chinese Information Processing Society of China*

*Zhi Bingyi, the deputy director of the newly founded Society, worked out his ideas on encoding characters in prison during the "cultural revolution (1966-1976)." The only book he was allowed to read was the New China Dictionary, and without pen and paper he traced the characters using his finger dipped in water in the cover of his teacup.*

More than 20 years have elapsed since the founding of the Society, and now there are over 1,600 computer input methods for Chinese characters. Even small children can do it easily. We have finally located the modern gene hidden in our traditional characters through a great deal of hard work, as well as the confidence in its certainty.



*Brick of the Western Han Dynasty bearing a text about prolonging life, unearthed at Liucunbao, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province*

At present, the official languages used by the United Nations are English, French, Russian, Spanish, Arabic and Chinese. All the UN's important documents are printed and distributed in these six languages, and the copy in Chinese is the thinnest of them all.

What future awaits the Chinese characters? People hold their varied views. However, when we discuss the fate of the Chinese writing system, we must not forget one simple fact: Chinese characters are the solid bricks that compose Chinese civilization.





## PART EIGHT

# Everlasting Beauty



The Pantheon, Paris, France. Here lie the greatest personages in French history.

Among them, Francois Voltaire is in the most conspicuous position. This master of the Enlightenment not only changed French history, in a sense he also changed the world.

"All men are born equal!" This statement was not just written in the classic French Revolutionary document *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, but it found its way into the US Constitution. But few people know that behind this famous statement there stands another thinker—one from the ancient Orient: Confucius.

Voltaire used to explain the idea of equality with a quotation from this Oriental philosopher: "Don't do unto others what you don't want others to do unto you."



“Li” as in the phrase “Li Yi Zhi Xin” (meaning propriety, righteousness, wisdom, trust)

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “li” as “worshiping of gods for blessings.”

In the largest department store in Paris, Chinese brochures have become popular, and fluency in Chinese has become an advantage in employment.

A French news agency has thus explained the phenomenon of the “Chinese craze”: “Since the implementation of the reform and open-door policy in 1978, China has turned from a backward agricultural nation into a striking economic power. For the past 20 years, its economy has witnessed a yearly growth rate of 9%. Meanwhile, skyscrapers springing up in the coastal cities show the amazing vitality of the nation.”

◆ *Joel Bellassen, inspector-general of Chinese teaching of the French Ministry of Education*

*Now, in the eyes of average citizens, Chinese is no longer a mysterious language as it was in the past, but a valuable trump card in the 21st century.*



*The Pantheon in France*

◆ *Sherie Willis, executive director of the Confucius Institute, University of Kansas*

*The relationship between China and the USA will become closer and more important. Whatever your trade, or profession, you need to communicate with foreigners, and among them a fair part speak Chinese, which is a world language.*



◆ **Ruth, a student from Kenya**

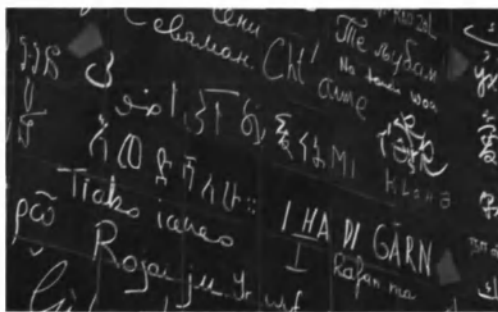
*Many Chinese are doing business in Kenya. I want to learn Chinese, so that I can communicate with them. It will be easier to learn a language in this way.*

◆ **Zhou Weisheng, dean of Ritsumeikan Confucius Institute**

*Ritsumeikan University enrolls 8,000 new students every year, among whom 2,000 or a quarter learn Chinese. The second major foreign language used to be German or French. But it now certainly is Chinese.*

Some Western historians and economists think that the rise of the Chinese economy is one of the most important events in human history at the turn of the century. That is why the Chinese language is spreading at an unprecedented speed throughout the world.

On November 22, 2008, someone wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*: “The incoming Obama Administration will face grave challenges. In the new system, America is still the largest economy, but it is no longer the sole decisive force in sound global economic operations. The new winners will be capital and China. With the developed economies flattening out, China is becoming more important in the global system.”



*The Love Wall in Paris*

◆ **Chen Yulu, vice-president of Renmin University of China**

*In the past 30 years of reform and development, we created a “Chinese Model” by creatively expanding traditional Chinese culture and innovatively absorbing the market economy from Western civilization. This model has been generally cheered, so China is expected to take up its position as a major international economy in the face of the global financial tsunami.*

At the 2008 APEC Summit, Chinese President Hu Jintao said, "China will continue to help the international financial market stabilize, together with the international community. At the same time, we soberly realize that China is still the largest developing country in the world, and the contradictions and problems we encounter in our development are rare in the world, both in their scale and complexity."

Obviously, this is an attitude both positive and prudent. In today's globalized world China will make a great contribution as a major nation with a quarter of the world's population, by concentrating on its own stability and development.

◆ **Torbjörn Lodén, Swedish sinologist**

*I think China's economic development since the introduction of its reform and opening-up policies is historically a kind of normalization rather than a wonder or a miracle. China has rehabilitated itself. Such a large nation, such a populous nation should play a major role in the world.*

◆ **Mark Leighton, Plan International representative in China**

*China is the biggest economy in the world. China has been a huge success story. The economic development of China since Deng Xiaoping has been, in some respects, a model of development for the rest of the world. Now if you look at the reduction of poverty in the last 25 years, global poverty has been reduced by approximately 500 million people.*

What position does the Chinese language occupy in the ever-expanding international exchanges?

Chinese language teaching is expanding rapidly in many countries and regions. According to statistics, 2,300 universities in over 100 countries offer courses in Chinese, and there is a new trend to open Chinese classes in elementary and secondary schools. A "Chinese Craze" throughout the world has arrived, not just in line with the development of the future world market, but also consistent with good wishes for a harmonious homestead for humanity.

According to *Time* magazine, "While English may be the only truly international language, millions of tongues are wagging over what is rapidly becoming the world's other lingua franca—Mandarin. Seen as a key skill for people hitching their futures to China's economic rise, Man-

darin is becoming common currency.”

The title of the article is “Get ahead! Learn Mandarin!”

義  
我 yì

“Yi” as in the phrase “Li Yi Zhi Xin”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “yi” as “one’s dignified manner.”

When Lester R. Brown, Worldwatch Institute, was interviewed by the Chinese media in March 2008, he said, “China has basically maintained its balance of grain import and export in the past decade. China can be totally self-sufficient in grain.” Only 14 years ago, he wrote *Who Will Feed China? Wake-up Call for a Small Planet* and raised for the first time the problem of a “China Grain Threat,” which exerted a worldwide impact.



◆ **Lester R. Brown, Worldwatch Institute**

*Who Will Feed China?*

*For China to import even 10% of its grain would be huge for the world, because it would put a lot of pressure on the exporters. The reason China gets so much attention in the world press, whether for its oil consumption, grain consumption, soybeans or minerals, steel or energy, is because China is so big.*

Who will feed China? That remark is still ringing in our ears after 14 years. But the 1.3 billion Chinese not only feed themselves, but the

supply of grains in the world has not been burdened by the huge Chinese consumption. In this sense, we should appreciate Mr. Brown for his warning about the sustained development of China's economy.



*Le Phénix Bookstore, Paris*

◆ **Claire Julien, Le Phénix Bookstore, Paris**

*Because China is huge and has a large population, its impact is felt in other countries. So they feel a bit afraid. China is too large, too populous, too powerful.*

◆ **Federico Masini, professor of Rome University, Italy**

*Every time the Italian media interview me, asking me about China, about Italy, about the exchanges between the two countries. I always tell them that the Chinese know much more about us than we know about them.*

◆ **Torbjörn Loden, Swedish sinologist**

*More Westerners need to learn Chinese, to go to China, to see with their own eyes what China is like. Of course, it is difficult in the beginning for Sino-Western exchanges.*

All the rules now running in the world, including legal, military and economic, were formulated according to the conceptions of their creators. So when China rises, it is inevitable to rationally modify these rules. Some nations even fear that as China has suffered tremendously in modern times, when it becomes strong will it retaliate?

On January 4, 2007, a *Christian Science Monitor* article began with, "What do New York, Hawaii, Kansas, California, Mexico, France, Serbia, South Korea, Egypt, Australia, Russia and Rwanda have in common? Almost nothing, except that they now play host to the language-and-culture centers being mass-produced by the Chinese government with

trademark Chinese speed and efficiency: 130 Confucius Institutes (CI) have been established in 50 countries over the past few years. The United States already has a dozen, with several more in the works."

◆ *Xu Jialu, a vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress of China and president of the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching*

*In such a short period, many foreign friends have eagerly asked for the creation of Confucius Institutes through their education ministries and their embassies. We have tried to contain the rate, but we had to establish 250 Confucius Institutes. This reflects the desire and trend of the world to know about China, and this of course follows China's trend to go out to the world beyond China. In this respect, there is no difference between the Chinese and foreign sides.*

On February 18, 2005 the first Confucius Institute in Europe was established at Stockholm University in Sweden. Professor Cecilia Lindqvist, a leading Swedish sinologist, attended the ceremony as a guest of honor.

Forty-five years ago, the then 27-year-old high-school teacher decided to leave Stockholm for China. The major attraction for her was Chinese characters. In that artificially segregated era, Sweden was at the edge of both the capitalist and socialist camps. She knew nothing about the natural disasters the Chinese people were experiencing.

◆ *Cecilia Lindqvist, Swedish sinologist*

*We could not eat at the same cafeteria as the Chinese students, but at a special place, where the Chinese government provided us with the best food to be had at that period. One day, I suddenly looked outside our classroom, and saw all the Chinese students were in the trees. They were breaking the branches to eat the new buds.*

For Cecilia who had grown up in an affluent society, it was shocking to see people destroying the natural environment. Though she could not stop this uncivilized action, she complained to her teacher.

◆ *Cecilia Lindqvist, Swedish sinologist*

*I was very angry, and said to the teacher, "Is there nobody to stop them? They are destroying the trees!" But the teacher said, "You must understand, they have not eaten any*

*green food since last fall. They need fresh green vegetables and fresh food. Now new leaves have grown, and to them these are very good food. So I can't tell them to stop." Her words made me very sad.*

The Chinese would rather go hungry than put their guests to inconvenience.

Later, Lindqvist often told others, "Knowing a Chinese character is like knowing a person." Through these characters, she got to know Chinese. She wrote about this memorable experience in her book *China: Empire of Living Symbols*.

*Empire of Living Symbols.*

In this book, she not only wanted to tell her compatriots what Chinese characters were like, she also wanted to let people know what kind of people created them; what they ate and wore; how they farmed and labored; how they lived and thought; how they looked at the world and how they treated others...



*China: Empire of Living Symbols (Chinese version)*

知 zhì

“Zhi” as in the phrase “Li Yi Zhi Xin”

*The Roots of Characters* defines the character “zhi” as “omniscient.”

In November 2004, at the University of Maryland, USA, and at the Korea-China Cultural Cooperation Research Institute, Confucius Institutes, which are non-profit Chinese teaching agencies, were set up almost simultaneously.

New China News Agency released a short report: “The main purpose of establishing Confucius Institutes is to promote Chinese teaching and provide good teaching materials for foreign Chinese learners.”

Actually, direct exchanges between east and west began in the 15th century.

In 1415, the Portuguese army occupied Port Ceuta in Morocco, starting their history of worldwide empire. Before that, from 1371 to 1433, the Ming Dynasty had sent Zheng He with a huge fleet to the western oceans seven times, making the first ever ocean navigations in human history.

Zheng He’s fleet far excelled all others in technical equipment and knowledge. But why in the end was civilization in the West disseminated to the east instead?

◆ *Zhu Dake, director of the Institute of Cultural Criticism, Tongji University*

*The main reason was that the tribute trade system was not sustainable. Of course, some people attributed it to the Chinese idea of a so-called Central Empire. It was concerned with safeguarding its basic position as a central agricultural empire, a*



*Confucius Institute in Seoul, Republic of Korea*

*continental power. It was essentially not interested in the oceans. Ming Emperor Zhu Di wanted the minor powers to pay tribute to China, to bolster its position as a central empire. When it finally fulfilled its presumed self-orientation, the oceans became redundant.*

On the contrary, it was Europeans' nature to explore and discover.

On August 3, 1492, Christopher Columbus began his long voyage with a dream of finding Christians and spices, carrying with him a letter from the Queen of Spain to the Chinese Emperor.

He never reached the East, but succeeding voyagers soon realized his goal. By the end of the 16th century, more and more European merchants and missionaries were appearing on the coast of Guangdong.

A notebook in the collection of the Lisbon National Library clearly records the enthusiasm of the Portuguese for learning Chinese.

"Do you learn Chinese? I learn, but without progress. It's good to do so, because nowadays it is customary for people to learn the language of this country."

At the Spring Festival in 1601, the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci finally entered the Forbidden City.

For this day, he had waited in China for 19 years. And for this trip to the capital, the Jesuit had made ample preparations in Macao.

◆ *Federico Masini, professor of Rome University, Italy*

*First, they prepared several machines, such as chime clocks. Since you could see time, a time measuring machine, and automatic, would surely impress the emperor. He had also prepared some scientific materials.*

Scientific knowledge failed to impress the emperor, but the chime clock soon became Emperor Wanli's favorite. The imposing and solemn Forbidden City resounded with its mechanical ticking.

Ricci was allowed to live in Beijing and build a Catholic cathedral. He even got 12 taels of silver as a monthly salary. In a letter to his family, he wrote, "I can hardly write in Italian any more, so it seems that I'm becoming a Chinese."

Since he arrived in 1582, Ricci never left China. In May 1610, the emperor designated a cemetery in west-



Matteo Ricci



ern Beijing where Ricci and other foreign missionaries were to be buried. Today, the tombstones of 63 European missionaries can still be seen there.

In the mid-17th century there were 300,000 Christians in China. But things always revert after reaching the extreme, and an inevitable “dispute over rituals” arose.

On January 18, 1721, Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty terrorized the Christians in Beijing with a decree: “No more Westerners shall do missionary work in China. It is prohibited.” Why did the emperor, who had respected Christianity, suddenly change his mind? What made the “Philosopher King” in the eyes of Westerners do such a seemingly irrational thing?

It started with the death of Matteo Ricci.



*Graveyard of European missionaries in Beijing*

◆ **Zhang Rongming, professor of the College of History, Nankai University**

*The Catholicism that Ricci spread was applicable to the situation in China at that time. He thought the Christian God was the equivalent of the Chinese “God” or “Lord of Heaven.” The Chinese traditions of “worshiping Confucius” and “sacrificing to the ancestors” were regarded as rites, and not religious activities. But after he died, his successors condemned the Chinese ideas of “God” and “Lord of Heaven,” while “worshiping Confucius” and “sacrificing to the ancestors” were regarded as “idol worship.” This caused great problems and confusion within the Jesuit missionaries.*

◆ **Wilhelm K. Mueller, Italian sinologist**

*Anything that could be interpreted as superstition could not be allowed. For*

*example, using the character “fu” (福, good luck), which you use now for New Years, or the good luck upside down, fu dao, that is superstition and not allowed. So that was the big consequence when Rome decided not to allow it. But we must not judge too easily. It was a difficult question, but after this decision was made, China’s emperor and scholars changed their attitude toward Christianity.*

Emperor Kangxi was outraged: “This is like judging the internal affairs of people in front of their doors,” he said. “Who can believe this?”

Behind this was an ideological confrontation between China and the West. Thus, the difference in civilization became a dispute over rights and beliefs. Emperor Kangxi was in a position to protect China’s traditional culture, and he decided to completely ban Christianity.

In 1723 all Christian missionaries were expelled. The guardians of China’s spirit and traditions closed themselves off.



*“Qing Emperor Kangxi in his library,” a painting*



## “Xin” as in the phrase “Li Yi Zhi Xin”

The *Roots of Characters* defines the character “xin” as “good faith.”

Communication leads to mutual trust.

In August 1905 the first Universal Esperanto Congress was held in Boulogne, France. A total of 688 Esperantists from a score of countries participated, and launched a bold initiative in human history.

◆ *Yu Tao, vice-chairman of the All-China Esperanto League*

*The inventor of Esperanto was a man called Zamenhof, who was born in 1859 in the town of Bialystok in Poland (then part of the Russian Empire). He came from a Jewish family, whose neighbors included Germans, Poles and Russians. These people were different in religion, language and culture, and so they often quarreled.*



Zamenhof

◆ *Bogdan Zemanek, Krakow Confucius Institute, Poland*

*Naturally, it was not easy to communicate in such a community. So Zamenhof hoped to create a new language to overcome these barriers.*

“If people learn an international language besides their national language, they can communicate with each other and understand each other.” With this ideal, Zamenhof began to study languages as a boy, and at high school he mastered Polish, German, Russian, Greek, Latin, French and English. Then, at the age of 16, he began to create an interna-

tional language. However, he ran into much opposition, even from his own father, who actually burnt his Esperanto manuscripts.

◆ **Yu Tao, vice-chairman of the All-China Esperanto League**

*At college, Zamenhof chose medicine, and after graduation he became a doctor. But he did not give up his ideal. He perfected his plan for Esperanto while practicing medicine. In 1887 Zamenhof published his textbook of Esperanto at his own expense under the name of "Doktoro Esperanto" (Doctor Hopeful).*

Though globalization brought about a mixture of disasters and benefits, human rationality showed a natural vigilance against all hegemony, including linguistic hegemony.

Since Columbus discovered America, Portuguese, Spanish, French and English have spread to all corners of the world, wave by wave, following the colonialists. But there were corresponding upheavals of national liberation movements, with each nationality striving to maintain the independence of its own language.

The Esperanto Movement tries to transcend national chauvinism. It hopes to realize the equality of all the world's peoples by promoting global communication and cooperation. Though confronted with misunderstanding and reproach, Esperanto is a great movement for promoting language equality, pursuing mutual understanding and realizing world peace.

◆ **Yoshiro Kitamoto, chairman of Hokuriku University, Japan**

*A universal language is functionally different from the historical, cultural and spiritual originality of individual languages. One's personality, thoughts, philosophy, culture, etc., are based on one's nationality and history. It is undeniable that a language is identified with a nation's history and culture.*

Different languages and the histories and cultures behind them will continue to coexist for the foreseeable future. There is no exact figure for how many languages exist in the world. Research shows that there are currently 400-odd written languages, and about 100 languages are used by over 90% of the world's people, and Chinese characters are among them.

The creation of Esperanto no doubt provided a useful experiment

and possibility for realizing the ideal of human equality and convenient communication. But, due to various factors, the progress of Esperanto is far from ideal, and the problem of language in international relations is still a challenge for human beings.

The scientific nature of an artificial international language helps raise the efficiency of human communication, but it will be a long process of exploration to unify the international community to accept an auxiliary language in international communication.



*World Conference on Sinology held in Beijing*

In the spring of 2007 a World Conference on Sinology with the theme "Dialogue of Civilizations and a Harmonious World" was held in Beijing. A total of 140 Chinese scholars and 70 foreign sinologists gathered for extensive dialogues about the problems of "the image of China" and "international publicity for the Chinese language."

Meanwhile, a Missing Person notice from Columbia University in the US attracted public attention: Dean Lung was lost 101 years ago.

The year 1901 might have been the most humiliating one in modern Chinese history. On September 7 that year, an international protocol was signed between the Qing government and 11 invading powers.

But in the same year, on the other side of the earth, a man named Horace Carpentier donated US\$100,000 to the president of Columbia University, writing, "I sincerely donate to you a sum of money to set up a department of Chinese language, literature, religion and law, and wish it to be named the 'chair of Chinese in honor of Dean Lung!'"



Dean Lung

This is the first time the name Dean Lung appears in historical records. Why did an American industrialist donate money to set up a Chinese department in the name of a Chinese man?

◆ *Paul Anderer, professor of Columbia University, United States*

*Carpentier's early life was distinguished in terms of amassing a fortune, being director of banks, and founding director of the Bank of California, founding mayor of the city of Oakland. But we also hear about a great deal of swashbuckling, daring and reckless, and maybe unscrupulous in the way he went about gaining his fortune.*



Horace Carpentier

In 1870 he hired a laborer from China named Dean Lung as his valet. Dean was a quiet person, friendly to his neighbors and children. He used to pick up the guests at the railroad station, and went to the village shop to buy oysters and clams.

Once Carpentier got drunk, and dismissed his servants in a rage. The next morning, he awoke, mortified, to what he thought was an empty house.

◆ *Mia Anderer, American cultural scholar*

*But Dean Lung had stayed, and served his master breakfast as usual, which greatly impressed Carpentier. He asked Dean, "Why didn't you leave after I treated you so badly?" Dean replied, "It is not in my training. My Confucian training teaches me to be loyal, and I can't leave you suddenly like this."*

Generosity and benevolence are ingrained in Chinese steeped in our traditional culture. What Dean Lung took for granted captivated his tyrannical American boss.

From then on, Carpentier no longer took Dean as a valet to be ordered about, but as a friend to be trusted for life. In old age, Carpentier asked Dean, what he wanted as a reward for so many years of loyalty. Dean said that he hoped Americans would come to know more about China and its civilization.

◆ *Paul Anderer, professor of Columbia University, United States*

*As far as we can tell from the archives, Carpentier provided the first-ever fund for Chinese studies at Columbia University, with a professorship in the name of Dean Lung.*

Dean Lung also donated money to the fund, writing, "Sir, I send

you herewith a check for US\$12,000 as a contribution to the fund for Chinese studies at your university—Respectfully, Dean Lung, a Chinese person.”

For Dean Lung, this was a large portion of his assets, if not all his savings. According to the current official price for gold, one dollar was worth 1.37 gram of gold. Today, the gold would be worth 3.2 million yuan RMB.

In his letter to the president of Columbia University in July 1901, Carpentier wrote, “I am not a Chinese, nor a descendant of a Chinese, nor a defender of cruel and backward China. Its rulers’ evil has made it stagger in its progress. But for us, it’s time to understand more about the 700 million people living in that East Asian country and its surrounding islands.”

◆ *Mia Anderer, American cultural scholar*

*The very last record in the Columbia University archives concerning Dean is a letter by University President Nicholas Murray Butler to Carpentier, in which he implied that Dean Lung had returned to China. He did not know whether he was just visiting or had returned for good.*

No one told this kind-looking Chinese to do what he did. Though we cannot make out his exact Chinese name from the English materials, we believe he was a child nurtured by a great culture and a voluntary envoy of an ancient nation.

One hundred years has passed. China, which suffered a lot, is finally able to offer service to Chinese learners worldwide. This is historic progress, an impressive leap forward.

The words of the Missing Person notice may also accurately express the intention of the Confucius Institutes: “What Dean Lung donated was money. But, more importantly, he contributed his vision and ideal. The purpose of our institute is to establish a means of understanding and dialogue in this world often marked by conflict and confrontation.”

Some 2,500 years ago Confucius considered going to sea on a bamboo raft. But in fact he never left China. After 2,500 years, this ancient philosopher’s wish has become a reality!

In March 2004, when China decided to set up teaching institutes to promote the Chinese language overseas, it made a point of using a



*Statue of Confucius in New York's Chinatown*

simple but significant name: Confucius Institute.

On December 18, 2008, the 30th anniversary of the introduction of China's opening-up and reform policies, the *People's Daily* included the setting up of the Confucius Institutes among top 10 events in science, education, culture, sports and health care during the previous 30 years.

◆ ***Chen Yulu, vice-president of Renmin University of China***

*We consider the essence of Chinese culture as a culture of magnanimity, oriented toward human beings. It is a culture of harmony, upholding pluralism and coexistence between civilizations. With the continued rise of China's economic power, the whole*



*world's attention is turned toward China. Will China be a peaceful force, a constructive force after its rise? So the spread of our Confucius Institutes and the Chinese language worldwide is aimed at a more extensive understanding of the spirit and ideal of harmony in traditional Chinese culture, and a smoother road to the construction of a harmonious world.*

This is a dialogue between Confucius, the creator of Confucianism, and one of his disciples 2,500 years ago: "Zigong asked, 'Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?' The Master said, 'Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.'"

Why do we want to impose on others what we do not want to be imposed on ourselves? Perhaps the "others" Confucius mentioned could be expanded to cover everything in the universe. This is the essence of benevolence in China's Confucian culture.

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