

汉字的起源

1

qǐyuán,
origin



象形字的产生

导读问题 Lead-in Questions

1. 你知道上图是哪个汉字吗?
2. 古时候人们用什么方法记数?
3. 什么是“象形字”(xiàngxíngzì, pictograph) 和“会意字”(huìyìzì, associative compound)?
4. 举例说明仓颉(Cāng Jié, the inventor of Chinese characters in legend) 的伟大之处。
5. 汉字是怎么产生的?



传说 chuánshuō
legend has it; legend
黄帝 Huángdì
Yellow Emperor, a legendary
ruler in ancient China
记录 jìlù to record
粮食 liángshí food, grain
数量 shùliàng quantity
计数 jìshù to count
绳子 shéngzi rope
打结 dǎjié to tie a knot
代表 dàibiǎo to stand for
品种 pǐnzhǒng
variety, kind
动脑筋 dòngnǎojīn
to use one's head/mind/wits
猎人 lièrén hunter
争论 zhēnglùn
to argue, to debate
羚羊 língyáng antelope
鹿 lù deer
老虎 lǎohǔ tiger
脚印 jiǎoyìn footprint
原来 yuánlái
it turns out that...
恍然大悟 huǎngrán dà wù
to suddenly be enlightened

汉字是世界上最古老的四大文字^①之一，而且是唯一用到现在的文字。那么汉字是怎么产生的呢？关于汉字的起源，有各种各样的说法，其中最有名的是“仓颉造字”。

传说古时候有个人叫仓颉，他在黄帝手下当官，负责记录动物和粮食的数量。那个时候还没有计数的好方法，为了能记住这些数量，仓颉就用在绳子上打结的方法来计数，用各种不同颜色的绳子代表不同的动物和粮食。后来动物和粮食的品种、数量越来越多，这种方法就不好用了。仓颉很着急，但他是一个喜欢动脑筋的聪明人。他把自己关在家里，想了几天几夜，可是怎么也想不出一个好办法来，于是他就想出门走走。

走到一个路口的时候，仓颉看见三个猎人正在为往哪个方向走而争论。一个说往东走有羚羊，一个说往北走有鹿，另一个说往西走有两只老虎。仓颉觉得很奇怪，就问其中一个猎人：“你怎么知道往西走有老虎啊？”猎人指着地上说：“你看，这里有老虎的脚印啊！”原来这三个猎人都发现了不同动物的脚印。仓颉恍然大悟：既然一种脚印代表一种动物，那我也可以用一种

Chinese characters are one of the four oldest scripts of the world and the only one that is still being used today. How were Chinese characters produced? As for the origins of Chinese characters, there are numerous explanations, the most famous is probably “Cang Jie invents characters”.

Legend has it that in ancient times there was a man named Cang Jie. He was an official of the Yellow Emperor, in charge of recording the quantities of food and animals. At that time there were not yet any good methods of counting, so Cang Jie tied knots in ropes to remember the amounts. He used ropes in different colors to indicate different animals and foodstuffs. Eventually the amounts and varieties of animals and foodstuffs increased and this method didn't work anymore and he was very anxious. Cang Jie was an intelligent person who liked using his head. He shut himself away in his house for several days and several nights but he simply couldn't think of any good method, so he went out of the door to take a walk.

He came to a road intersection and saw three hunters who were arguing over which direction to take. One said if they went east, there would be an antelope; one said if going north, there would be a deer; and the other one said if they went west, there would be two tigers. Cang Jie thought it strange and asked one of the hunters: “How do you know there will be tigers if you go west?” The hunter pointed to the ground and said: “Look, here are the tiger tracks!” It turned out the hunters had all discovered the footprints of different animals. Cang Jie had a sudden revelation: since a type of footprint represents a type of animal, one can also use a type of symbol to indicate a type of thing!

Cang Jie happily ran home and began to draw all sorts of symbols to



符号 fúhào symbol
事物 shìwù thing
形状 xíngzhuàng shape
推广 tuīguǎng
to spread, to promote

月牙儿 yuèyár
crescent moon

创造 chuàngzào
to create

田 tián field

木 mù wood

牛 niú cow, ox, bull

犯愁 fàn chóu
to worry, to be anxious

符号来表示一种事物啊!

仓颉高兴地跑回家，开始按照事物的形状画出各种符号，来表示不同的事物。他把这种方法用在工作中，得到了黄帝的表扬。黄帝让他到其他地方去推广这种方法，慢慢地，这些符号被越来越多的人使用，“字”也就形成了。

开始的字都是和事物的形状有关的，比如，太阳的符号就是一个圆圈中间加上一点；月亮的符号就是一个月牙儿的形状。这些就是后来我们说的象形字。仓颉根据事物的形状创造了很多字，用来记录事物，比如“日、月、田、山、水、木、人、牛、羊、手、马”，等等。

可是到了后来，他发现这些“符号字”还是不够用，因为人们要表达的很多东西是画不出来的。怎么办呢？仓颉又犯愁了。

有一天，仓颉一出家门就发现外面特



象形字“日”



象形字“月”

represent different things according to the shapes of the things. By using this method, he was able to do his own work extremely well and received praise from the Yellow Emperor. The Yellow Emperor had him go to other places to spread this method. Gradually, the symbols were used by more and more people, and "characters" were formed.

The original characters were all related to the forms of things. For example, the symbol for the sun was a circle with a dot in the middle; the symbol for the moon was the form of a crescent moon. These are what people later called pictographs. Cang Jie created many characters according to the forms of things to record things, for example, "日 (sun)", "月 (moon)", "田 (field)", "山 (mountain)", "水 (water)", "木 (tree)", "人 (person)", "牛 (cow)", "羊 (sheep)", "手 (hand)", "马 (horse)", etc. But he eventually found these "symbolic characters" weren't sufficient because there were a lot of things that you couldn't express by drawing. What could be done? Cang Jie became worried again.

One day, Cang Jie came out of his house and found that it was particularly bright outside. He thought: if the sun and the moon were together, it would be the brightest. So he put "日 (sun)" and "月 (moon)" together and called it "明 (bright)". He saw a thin blade of grass



仓颉雕塑



明亮 míngliàng bright

合在一起 hé zài yìqǐ
to combine

尖 jiān sharp, pointed

林 lín woods, grove

森 sēn forest

众 zhòng crowd, masses

龟 guī turtle

仔细 zǐxì
careful, attentive

腹 fù belly

排列 páiliè
to arrange, to put in order

整齐 zhěngqí
neat, tidy

方格 fānggé grid

刻 kè to carve, to engrave

趁 chèn
to take advantage of

注意 zhùyì
to pay attention to, to notice

壳 ké shell

冲掉 chōngdiào
to wash away

串 chuàn
to string together

收藏 shōucáng
to collect, to store up

别明亮，他想：如果太阳和月亮在一起，那一定是最明亮的，就把“日”和“月”合在一起叫“明”吧。他看见一片尖尖的草叶，就想：上面小，下面大，就叫“尖”吧。用这样的方法，他又创造出了许多汉字，就是我们今天说的会意字，如“林、森、笔、从、众”，等等。

仓颉创造出来的字越来越多，写在哪儿呢？写在石头上吧，拿不动；写在木板上吧，也太重。怎么办呢？一天，有个人在河边抓住了一只大龟，来请仓颉给它造字。仓颉仔细看了看，发现龟腹上有排列整齐的方格，于是他照着龟的形状，造了一个“龟（龟）”字，然后又把这个“龟”字刻在龟腹上的方格里。由于在腹上刻字，龟感到很疼，于是趁人不注意，就爬到河里去了。三年以后，这只壳上有字的龟，在另一个地方又被人捉住了。人们告诉仓颉，龟壳上的字不但没有被水冲掉，反而还变大了，也更清楚了。

从此以后，仓颉就让人去找死去的龟，把龟壳取下来，然后把造出来的字刻在龟壳上的方格里。仓颉用绳子把这些龟壳串起来，送给黄帝。黄帝看了很高兴，让手下人收藏起来，并让仓颉

and thought: it is small (小) on the top and big (大) on the bottom, which could be called “sharp (尖)”. Using this method he invented many more Chinese characters, which are called associative compounds today, for example “林 (woods)”, “森 (forest)”, “笔 (brush)”, “从 (follow)”, “众 (crowd)”, etc.

Cang Jie created more and more characters, but where to write them became a problem. Stones are too heavy to carry, so are boards of wood. What could be done? One day, someone caught a big turtle on the bank of a river and came to ask Cang Jie to create a character for it. Cang Jie looked it over carefully and found on the belly of the turtle were some very tidy grid patterns, so he created the character “龟 (龟)” in accordance with the shape of the turtle and then carved this character within the grid on the belly of the turtle. The turtle felt the pain, so it crawled back into the river when nobody noticed it. Three years later, this turtle with the character carved on its shell, was captured in another place. People told Cang Jie that the character hadn't been washed away by the water, instead it had grown even bigger and clearer.

From this time on, Cang Jie had people go look for dead turtles and strip off the shells; he then carved the characters he had invented onto the grid



甲骨文



流传 liúchuán
to spread, to circulate

成熟 chéngshú
mature, fully formed

商代 Shāngdài
Shang Dynasty (1600 BC-
1046 BC)

甲骨文 jiǎgǔwén
oracle bone script

龟甲 guījiǎ tortoise shell

兽骨 shòugǔ animal bone

构成 gòuchéng
to form, to constitute

对联 duìlián couplet

泉 quán spring, fountain

少女 shǎonǚ
maiden, young girl

妙 miào wonderful

岩 yán rock, cliff, crag

古木 gǔmù ancient tree

枯 kū withered

此 cǐ this, these

柴 chái firewood

到各个地方去教人们写字、认字。从此以后，汉字就流传开了。传说从那时候起，中国就有了最早的文字。现在中国发现的最早的成熟汉字是三千多年前商代的甲骨文，就是刻在龟甲和兽骨上的文字。

人们都说仓颉太伟大了，他创造的宇，现在人们都看得懂。比如，“好”字是一个女人抱着一个孩子，表示有新的生命诞生，是一件很好的事情；两个“人”构成“从”，是一个人跟着另一个人的意思；三个“人”构成“众”，是很多人的意思；两个“木”构成“林”，三个木构成“森”，等等。有一副对联体现了汉字构成的特点：白水“泉”边女子“好”，少女更“妙”；山石“岩”下古木“枯”，此木为“柴”。你知道是什么意思吗？

仓颉造字只是关于汉字起源的一个传说，你觉得真的有仓颉这个人吗？汉字真的是他一个人创造的吗？



会意字“好”

patterns of the turtle shells. Cang Jie used ropes to string the turtle shells together and presented them to the Yellow Emperor. The Yellow Emperor was happy to see them and had his subordinates store them up. He also had Cang Jie go all over and teach people how to write characters and recognize characters. From this time on, Chinese characters began to spread. Legend states that the earliest written script in China appeared at that time. Presently the earliest fully formed Chinese script is the over three-thousand-year-old oracle bone script of the Shang Dynasty, that is the script carved on the shells of tortoises and the bones of animals.

Everyone says that Cang Jie was so amazing because all modern people can understand the characters he created. For example, the character for “good” is a woman holding a child, indicating the birth of a new life, something that is good. Two “人 (persons)” form “从 (to follow)”, with the meaning that one person follows the other, and three “人 (persons)” form “众 (crowd)”, meaning a lot of people. Two “木 (trees)” form “林 (woods)”, and three “木 (trees)” form “森 (forest)”, etc. There is a couplet that gives an expression to the characteristics of the formation of Chinese characters: “beside the white (白) water (水) is ‘spring’ (泉), a woman (好) is ‘good’ (好) and a young (少) girl (女) is ‘wonderful’ (妙); beneath ‘cliffs’ (岩) of mountain (山) stone (石), the ancient (古) trees (木) are ‘withered’ (枯) and these (此) trees (木) will be ‘firewood’ (柴)”. Do you know what those mean?

“Cang Jie invents characters” is simply a legend about the origins of Chinese characters. Do you think Cang Jie really existed and those Chinese characters were actually created by him alone?