

## CHINESE CHARACTERS

### Simple and Unvarnished Rock Paintings for Recording Events

Rock paintings are the oldest paintings in our history. The earliest rock paintings emerged about 20,000 to 30,000 years ago. These drawings, engraved or painted on cliff rocks by early human beings, represented the day-to-day life of their primitive society. The famous cave paintings in Altamira in Spain and in Lascaux in France, as well as the rock paintings in Inner Mongolia, Qinghai, Yunnan, and Jiangsu in China, all vividly represent the old and mysterious primitive world. These old drawings, made before the invention of characters, played the role of recording events. Rock paintings expressed a narrow range of meaning in artistic form. They had no relation to language and had no spoken equivalent, so they were not characters. But rock paintings illustrated

Yangshao Culture: The areas drained by the Yellow River have a culture dating back to the Neolithic Age, with a history of 5,500 to 7,000 years. At that time people had settled down and millet was the major agricultural product. There were also fishing and hunting, and painted pottery was particularly famous. The Yangshao Culture is so-named for it was first discovered at Yangshao Village, Mianchi County, Henan Province. There are many beautiful drawings on the pottery of the Yangshao Culture, and these ideogram drawings must have been responsible for enlightening the creation of pictographic characters. Some earthenware was carved and painted with geometric symbols, and these symbols have a connection with the creation of Han characters.



Ancient Rock-Painting Drawings in China

Many rock-painting drawings developed into specific patterns and were similar to pictographic characters. The drawings in the painting seem like the original forms of such pictographic characters as “牛Niu(cattle), 犬Quan (dog), 牧Mu (herding), 鸟Niao (bird), 人Ren (people), 射She (shooting), 亦Yi (armpit), 舞Wu (dancing), 美Mei (beauty), 女Nu (female), 面Mian (face), 日Ri (sun), 木Mu (wood), and 车Che (vehicle)”.



natural things and human activities and expressed meaning visually, and this was actually a way of recording events. That is to say, the rock paintings assumed the role of characters. It is worth mentioning that some ancient rock paintings in China had developed patterns and symbols, and others were similar to the pictographic characters of later times, so rock paintings most definitely played a role in the subsequent formation of pictographic characters. Therefore, although we cannot exactly say that these rock paintings are themselves characters, we can say that they were the abundant source of Han characters.

### **Exquisite Pattern Decorations on Painted Pottery**

Pottery is a symbol of the Neolithic Age. China was one of the first ancient civilizations to understand how to fire pottery. During the age of the Yangshao Culture, many drawings and decorative patterns painted on earthenware were produced in the areas drained by the Yellow River. These drawings and patterns are simple,

unvarnished, artless, vivid and interesting, with a very strong sense of decoration, and showed the painting skills of our ancient ancestors. As the patterns on the earthenware were colored, these pottery items became known as "painted pottery". They are most numerous and most characteristic in the period of the Yangshao Culture, and we thus often refer to the Yangshao Culture as the "culture of painted pottery". But the drawings and patterns on painted pottery were simply intended to beautify by means of real artistic images, and did not form symbols, had no relation with language, or pronunciation, or the role of spreading information, so they were only drawings instead of characters, notwithstanding the fact that they were excellent works of ancient art. Nevertheless, some drawings and patterns assumed the role of ideogram and thus paved the way for the creation of pictographic characters.



Colored Pottery Urn of the Majiayao Culture

The Majiayao Culture is also known as "Gansu Yangshao Culture." The surfaces of its colored pottery urns are painted with Moire and patterns of curly grain, vividly representing the daily life of those people laboring and raising families in the area drained by the Yellow River some 5,000 years ago.



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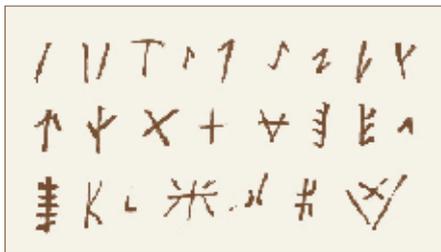
Pattern Decoration of Dancing Persons Painted on a Painted Pottery Basin in Majiaoyao Kiln, Gansu Province (Yangshao Culture Period)

## Two Kinds of Pottery Carving and Painting Symbols

In ancient times the Chinese people carved and painted many symbols on pottery. These carved and painted symbols had a significant relationship with Han characters and became the most important materials from which we are able to research the origin of Han characters. They principally consist of two kinds: the geometric and imagistic symbols.

**Geometric Symbols.** Archaeologists have discovered many earthenware items with geometric symbols in the ruins of the Yangshao Culture in the middle reaches of the Yellow River, in such specific places as Banpo Village and Jiangzhai Village in Xi'an,

**Dawenkou Culture:** This is a culture that dates back to the Neolithic Age and has a history of 4,500 to 6,000 years. It is mainly distributed in Shandong at the lower reaches of the Yellow River and the northern parts of Jiangsu and Anhui. In ancient times it was a maternal clan commune system, which later developed into a paternal clan commune society. At that time, farming had become the major production activity and the production of pottery had also reached a high level. The earthenware was both white and black, and some were carved and painted with image symbols. These symbols that were carved and painted on the pottery of the Dawenkou Culture might very well be the earliest characters in China.



Symbols Carved and Painted on Pottery Unearthed in Banpo, Xi'an



Symbols Carved and Painted on Pottery Unearthed in Erlitou



Shaanxi Province. These symbols, consisting of lines carved and painted on pottery about 5,000 to 6,000 years ago, are too simple and abstract, so it is hard to figure out their meaning or definitely say that, yes, they must be Han characters. But many of these symbols were repeated, which implies that they were carved and painted with serious intent, and must have had some function with regard to recording events. It should be mentioned that these symbols had an influence on the creation of the Han characters in later times, and some of these symbols might well be the origin of some Han characters.

The ruins of the capital of the first dynasty in China, i.e. the Xia Dynasty (21st–17th cent. BC), were discovered in Erlitou, Henan Province, and is one of the great archaeological discoveries of recent years. They unearthed more than 20 kinds of carved and painted symbols made on items of pottery, dating back at least 4,000 years. The forms of the symbols were very similar to those on the earthenware excavated from Banpo and Jiangzhai villages, and some of them bore a close similarity to the Jiaguwen of the Shang (17th–11th cent. BC) and Zhou (11th cent.–256 BC) Dynasties. Now, we cannot say for certain that these geometric symbols are actually characters, but it is important that this kind of line structure was consistent with the Han characters that were developed later. What we can say, however, is that the geometric carved and painted symbols on the pottery of the Yangshao Culture are probably the origin of the Han characters.



Sun-rising on the Taishan Mountain  
Dawenkou people in ancient times often saw this charming sun-rising scene.

### Image Symbols.

These image symbols, which describe things by lines, were obviously different from geometric symbols, and seem like the Jiaguwen inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of a later time. We find the same symbol in many places, which implies that this symbol not only had the function of spreading information but was also



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in frequent usage and might have some sort of pronunciation. Therefore, it is believed by many expert scholars that these image symbols carved and painted during the Dawenkou Culture, which had form, meaning and pronunciation, should be recognized as the earliest characters in China: the original image characters.

In the picture on the left you will find a symbol carved on earthenware. This symbol can be found in several different places and looks like a drawing representing the morning: the sun rises over lofty mountains, pierces through the clouds, and slowly illuminates the world below. Many philologists say that this is the character of "旦dan" (meaning dawn) (and others believe it is "昊hao", "盟meng", "昊jiong", and "昊山Jiongshan Mountain"). "旦dan" means dawn.

The upper part "日" is the sun and the lower part "一" is the simplification of mountains and clouds. Does this symbol of "旦" carved on earthenware represent the sun-rise that local people would often see over the Taishan Mountain? We cannot precisely say, although the thought is by no means ridiculous. In addition, many philologists also say that this symbol of "旦" was a clan totem, which is also perfectly reasonable, because according to studies of the Han characters, many image clan totems or clan emblems were incorporated into the characters of a later time.



Pottery of the Dawenkou Culture and Symbol of "旦 Dan" Carved on It

## Supposition of the Time of the Origination of Han Characters

On ancient pottery the geometric carving symbols had the structure of lines and the image carving symbols had the ideogram, which were the important features of the form of Jiaguwen inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells, the mature Han characters that would be developed later. Therefore, the symbols carved and painted on ancient earthenware should be the origin of the Han

