

Chapter 1 About the Chinese Characters

As one of the most ancient of languages, the Chinese language remains vigorous; it is spoken by the largest population in the world and attracts increasing attention from people outside the mysterious Eastern land of its origin. Let us begin by looking into the Chinese characters, the visual messengers of this ancient language.

About 5,000 years ago, the earliest Chinese characters appeared as simple strokes carved on animal bones. These carvings are the original forms of the modern characters in use today. The ancient Chinese authors of these extraordinary characters also created the highly practical and flexible grammar system. Chinese philosophy and aesthetics have contributed to a vast, unique and marvelous culture and the ancient characters are symbols of that wisdom.



One important method in creating new characters is to imitate objects with simple strokes, like making naturalistic drawings. These original pictographic characters underwent a long evolution that led to their eventual simplification into the modern characters we see today. The following examples show how this happened.



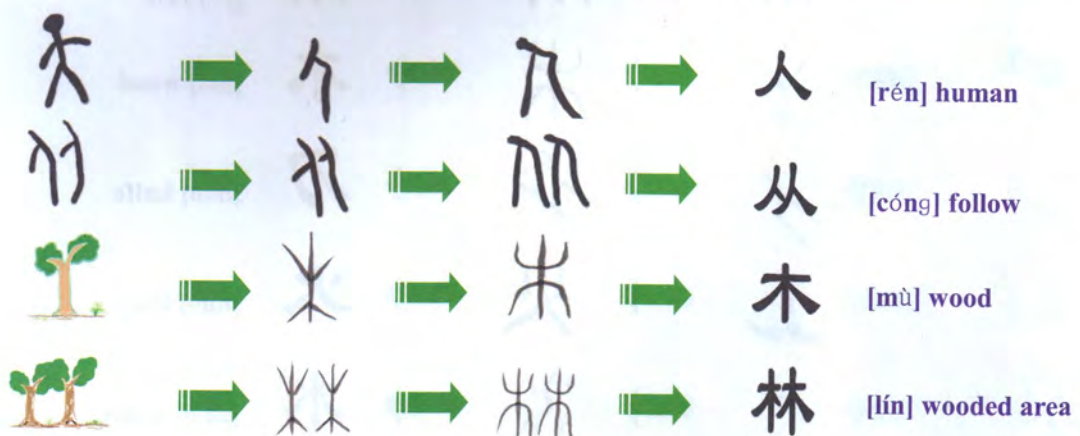
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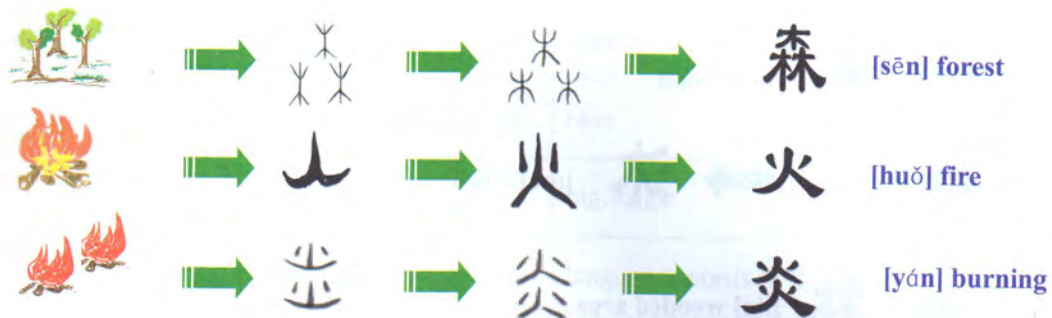
Note: there are only a few original characters left today, and one can scarcely find any trace of the original pictographs in their present appearance.

Based on the above pictographic characters, people developed a method of creating new characters. By adding more strokes to an existing character, people created a new character referring to the specific part of a subject. In most cases, the new character has a different pronunciation from the original one. The following examples show the basic mechanism:



Another method of creating a new character for a new subject or concept is to integrate two or more existing characters. As every original character in the newly created character retain their own meaning, the meaning of the new character usually comes from a natural deduction of the combined original meanings. That is to say, in most cases, we can deduce the meaning of these kinds of "created" characters from their internal structures. The following examples show this mechanism:





With the expansion of civilization, people had to cope with rapidly expanding social lives that required a larger number of characters for the objects and ideas that continually emerged. The above three methods of creating new characters based on the pictographic characters however, are not capable of such dynamism. Many objects (both physical objects as well as abstract concepts) are too complex for pictographs. Thus, a more complicated method of creating characters developed, one that progressed through two steps.

Step 1: Select one existing character to indicate the pronunciation, and then integrate it with another existing character (or two, or even more) to create a new character.

Step 2: Stipulate the meaning of the newly made character.

The following chart shows the basic mechanism involved.

