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A Long-Standing and Well-Established History

The Origin and Development of China's Ancient Publishing Industry



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The Xia Dynasty, established in 2070 B.C., was the first dynasty in China and marked the beginning of a new era in Chinese civilization. There is evidence to show that Chinese writing had developed and was on its way to being systemized at this time. Chinese ancestors also developed a degree of aesthetic and cultural accomplishment. The appearance of primary writing tools and books paved the way for early publishing activities.

The Origin of Chinese Characters

The Chinese character is an important marker of humanity's shift from pre-literate to literate times. Written language is the basis of human civilization because it can be passed down through time and space. Chinese characters played a decisive role in the development of Chinese culture and the publishing industry.

The development of Chinese characters was a long process that can be divided into two periods before their final appearance. One is the time when the spoken language existed without a written language. The other is that of a written language without complete articles. On the basis of language and objectives, the real emergence of Chinese characters underwent three stages during which events were recorded by knotted cords, carvings and graphs.

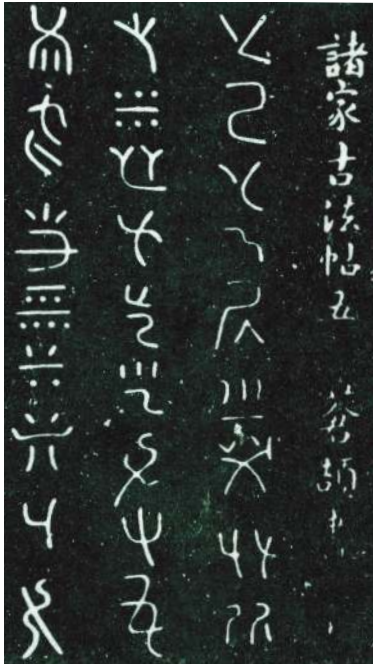
Cangjie, a legendary figure in ancient China (2600 B.C.), claimed to be an official historian



Portrait of Cangjie.



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Chinese characters created by Cangjie according to legend.

of the Yellow Emperor and the inventor of the Chinese character. According to legend he had four eyes to observe all things on earth. Historical records show that Chinese characters had already been invented by Cangjie’s time. By then, a certain number of characters were in use. Therefore, some scholars hold the view that Chinese characters had already been created but did not have any fixed style, and that Cangjie’s contribution was to unify and standardize them.

Knotting cords to record events, carved inscriptions, graphs and graphic symbols were the four important steps that led to the invention of the written language, according to historical documents and archaeological finds. Among these, graphic symbols or pictographic writing were most influential. Pictographic writing appeared in the later period of primitive society, namely the high days of the New Stone Age. Pictographic features can be found in many ethnic minority languages in China. A typical one is the *Dongba Classics* of the Naxi people in Yunnan Province. Graphic symbols from the *Classics* were gradually developed into pictographic language.

Similar graphic symbols and writings are found among the Yangshao culture of 4000 B.C. and the Longshan Cultural Relics, which came later. Some eighteen graphic symbols were found



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Dongba Classics.

on the potteries of Ling Yanghe and Dazhu villages in Shandong Province. Four of them are pictured here:



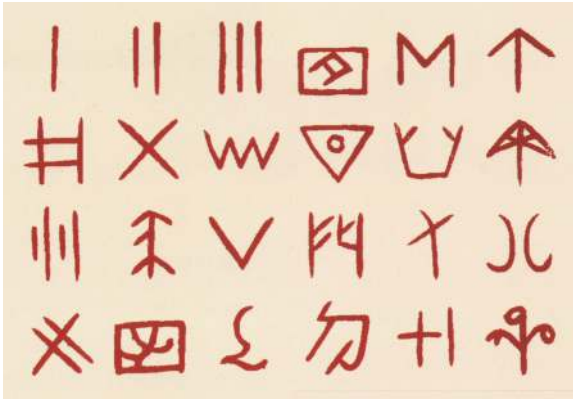
Graphic symbols carved on the pottery found in Dawenkou.

Many scholars consider these graphic symbols to be written language from the later period of the Dawenkou culture (about 2800–2500B.C.). Nevertheless, more and more archaeological discoveries suggest that the Longshan Culture existed 4,500 years ago. The period is also that of the Huangdi legend. It was around this time that Chinese characters essentially changed from rudimentary and began to take shape.

Archaeological finds show that writing tools existed before the invention of the written language. The Banpo pottery inscriptions have several designs similar to a human face, swimming fish and the 米 pattern. They were drawn with writing brushes or other



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Pottery inscription of the Xia dynasty found in Erlitou, Henan Province.

similar tools. The writings are clear and distinguishable. The pottery inscriptions found in Dawenkou, Shandong Province in 1959 include both carving and writing, which means that simple carving and writing tools were available at the time. The writing brush began to take on the features of the pen no later than during the Shang Dynasty.

With more expressive features, the carapace-bone-script emerged during the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 B.C.) after a long period of evolution from the earliest characters. It is the earliest mature and systematic group of Chinese characters that



A writing brush unearthed in Wuwei, Gansu Province. The writing brush was a basic writing tool in ancient China. It is still used by many people today.



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The evolution of Chinese characters.

can be seen today. After the oracle bone inscriptions, a variety of fonts, comprising bronze script, large seal script, small seal script, clerical script and regular script, appear throughout Chinese history. When it came to regular script, the grapheme - or smallest significant unit in a writing system - of Chinese characters, still in use today, was basically finalized.

Based on the premise of definite and clear meaning, the general evolution of Chinese characters has been from complexity to simplicity. As a result, the pictographic characters originally used have been maintained ever since.

The Appearance of Books and Compilations

Many scholars believe that classics and bibliographies emerged during the Xia Dynasty (2100–1600B.C.). This conclusion stems from multiple historical materials. *Shangshu*, the earliest history book found to date, says that records existed at the turn of the Xia and Shang. According to *Lüshi Chunqiu*,



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Shangshu from the Tang dynasty (618–907), the earliest Chinese history book that shows books were in existence during the Xia Dynasty.

another history book, during the Xia Dynasty there was not only a book ordinance but also an official Imperial Astronomer in charge of collecting and preserving books. *Lüshi Chunqiu* was once publicly displayed at the gate of Xianyang city for readers to edit. Gold rewards were promised to readers that could make improvements.

Certainly, the documents and records of the Xia Dynasty are simply written records, or documentary archive material, rather than formal books in the modern sense of the word. Nevertheless, they are carefully constructed records of people’s activities. They have some merit as books.

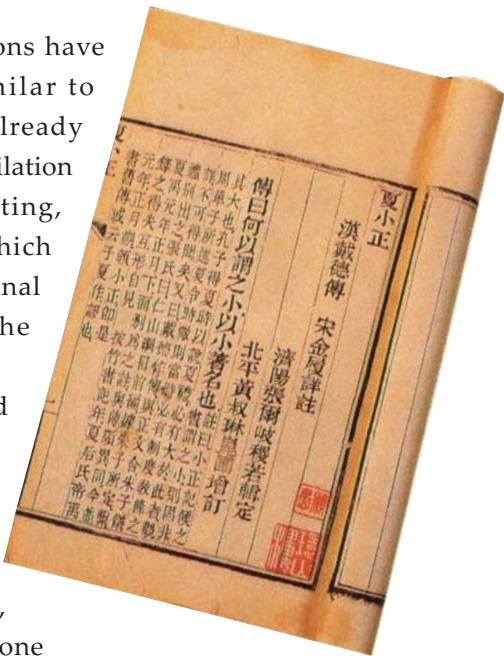
During the Shang Dynasty, the ancient Chinese started writing on oracle bones, bronzes, jade, bamboo and wood to record information, which resulted in various types of document - oracle bone inscriptions, bronze epigraphs, jade, bamboo and wooden slips. In terms of content, form and



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distribution, these inscriptions have qualities and features similar to books. These inscriptions already show some elements of compilation through the process of writing, collecting and verifying, which can be regarded as the original editing activities before the emergence of formal books.

Governments started to establish special book collecting organizations during the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 B.C.) when books truly emerged. After 770 B.C., feudal lords fought against one another while scholars gradually started writing more books.



Xia Xiao Zheng, the calendar devised during the Xia Dynasty (2070–1600B.C.), still in use today, was recorded in this book.



Surviving pages of the *Analects of Confucius* (Tang Dynasty version), which recorded Confucius' thoughts.



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Confucius (551–479B.C.), the creator of Confucianism, edited and compiled many ancient classics and used them as textbooks in his teachings. Confucius might, therefore, be considered China's first well-known book editor.

From Oracle Bone to Paper: Media of Ancient Books

Pottery, bones, bronze, jade, bamboo and wood as well as silk were respectively used as materials on which to record Chinese characters in ancient times. After centuries of trial and error, papermaking was invented, which combined the merits of bamboo and wood slips with those of silk and overcame their deficiencies. Papermaking contributed tremendously to the history of publishing and indeed to the history of the world.

Oracle bones

The most common written records used by the ancient Chinese were oracle bones made of tortoise shell and animal bones, especially ox scapula. Characters carved on these became known as oracle bone inscriptions. As an important medium for Chinese characters throughout the Xia and Shang dynasties, oracle bone inscriptions were also very popular through the Yin, Shang and Western Zhou dynasties (1046–711 B.C.).

Most of the oracle bones that have been unearthed, mainly from the Yin ruins (Anyang city in Henan Province), are remnants from the mid- and late Shang Dynasty (1300–1046 B.C.). The Shang people were superstitious and sought the advice of deities and ancestors on any decision that needed to be made, whether about hunting, farming, astronomical phenomena, harvest, war, disease or sacrifices. As a result, most of oracle bones included



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Oracle bone inscriptions on tortoise shell.

divination records from the time. In addition, there were a number of inscriptions recording important data such as numbers of prisoners of war, numbers of hunted animals, rewards and sacrifices. The records found on oracle bones touch upon various aspects of social life from ancient times.

Bronze wares

Inscriptions carved on bronze wares are called epigraphs or bronze inscriptions. During the Xia and Shang dynasties, a great number of bronze works were produced. The Western Zhou Dynasty (1600–771 B.C.) was the golden age of bronze.



Oracle bones with inscriptions made up of relatively mature Chinese characters.

