

CHINESE COMMUNICATION AND THOUGHT: NAVIGATING THE CHINESE SCRIPT

The Chinese civilisation, considered to be one of the most significant civilizations of the 'Orient', developed simultaneously with the Egyptian, Mesopotamian and the Indus Valley civilizations. But what made this ancient and mysterious land of the East different from the others? Many basic elements of this ancient civilisation are said to have appeared much before in West Asia as well as the Indus Valley. Most historians are of the view that knowledge, culture and the way of life travelled miles spreading across the mountainous regions of Central Asia into the North China Plain. Although, recent studies, under the pretext of prehistory have shown that pottery in East Asia began almost 10,000 years ago (which matches with the evidence of other sister civilisations as well). JK Fairbank in his book *East Asia: Traditions and Transformations* also states that the bronze age might have been introduced in the East, much before the Mesopotamian civilisation. The Prehistoric Chinese are known to have produced silk, and reared animals of a different variation, which later spread to the West. All these arguments, thus counter the fact that East Asia, as an early civilisation developed quite independently from West Asia. The progress of the Chinese civilisation marked a significant development in the realm of traditions, culture and most importantly, writing and literature.

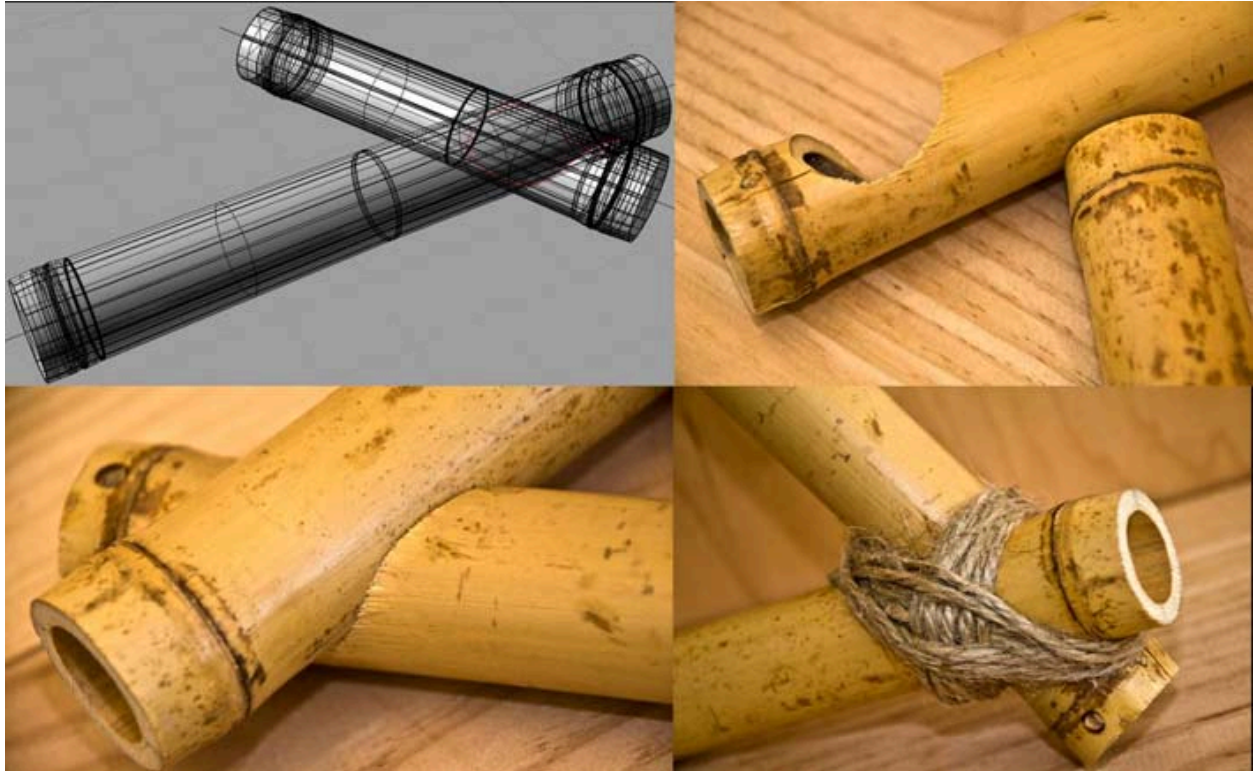
An interesting fact about studying Chinese history, is that, unlike histories of other regions, Chinese writers and scholars have enough and more to talk about earlier and earlier periods of Chinese history! Their works delve on the ideas of beliefs, customs, rituals, philosophies which are endorsed by mythology and from these works do we get the idea of clan structures, society and family units of ancient times. Religion entered the Chinese clan systems through forms of ancestor and animal worship. Agriculture and the way of life was dictated by the 'heavenly kingdom' above the land which controlled aspects of fertility, grain production and pretty much the entire cosmos. Since China was largely distant as well as distinct from the west, they considered everyone outside their civilisation as 'barbarians' and from this ideology comes the word Chung-kuo or Zhongguo (中国), translated as the middle kingdom, the centre of the all good. Through this article I would like to highlight the importance of Chinese writing and how it resembled writings of other civilizations.



A Painting from Ancient China

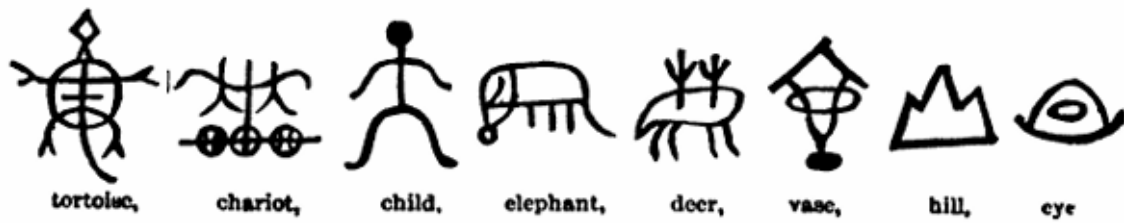
Paul Carus, deliberating on the ideas of Chinese communication and thought talks about one of the earliest methods of recording thoughts in ancient China and this was the system of *chieh sheng* (結繩) or 'knotted cords' which is also referred in texts of the early 6th century BCE such as *Tao Teh King*. This system of recording was widely accepted and is known to have functioned as a mnemonic device for remembering thoughts and ideas over a long period of time. Such similarities were also noticed in the South American primitive lands of modern Peru, where these 'knotted cords' were known as *quipu*. Such instances have also been observed in the records of Herodotus who states that King Darius, ruler of Persia, in his campaign against the Scythians used 60 knots symbolising the 60 days within which he would return post his campaign.

As years moved forward, this rudimentary form of recording and communicating was gradually replaced by bamboo sticks which introduced a permanent way of recording and organising data. These notched bamboo sticks consisted of carvings and markings of a variety of things, marking an important development of communication system in China.



An image of how these notched bamboo sticks might have looked like.

Chinese writing and the birth of characters is credited to *Ts'ang Hieh* also called as *Shih 'Huang* (使皇) and is considered to be the protector and patron saint of history and archival documents. Paul Carus states that he is said to have lived in the twenty-eighth century BCE , and having ascended a mountain overlooking the river Loh, he saw a divine tortoise rising from the water. It exhibited on its back mysterious tracings of letters which "lay bare the permutations of nature to devise a system of written records". But here is an even interesting argument as well as supposition. A statement that the Chinese writing has been introduced from ancient Mesopotamia (a theory given by Terrien de Lacouperie). This theory, although rejected by many gives us some food for thought and consideration because early Chinese pictographs and characters seems to share some remarkable similarities with the Egyptian script, and remembering the fact that Chinese bottles have been discovered in Egyptian tombs and also in Asia minor, we cannot help but assume that in prehistoric days there must have been more trade, and more travel, and a greater exchange of thought which refutes the arguments of China being an independent civilization!



PICTORIAL WRITING CONVENTIONALISED.*

A representation of how early pictorial writings were transformed into characters. (notice those similarities!)

<i>Pictorial</i>	<i>Hieratic</i>	<i>Cursive.</i>	<i>Chinese.</i>	<i>Egyptian</i>	
					<i>Sun.</i>
					<i>Hand.</i>
					<i>Fish.</i>
					<i>Corpse.</i>
					<i>Wood.</i>
					<i>Cave.</i>
					<i>Home.</i>
					<i>Place.</i>
					<i>Bound-ary</i>
					<i>God</i>
					<i>Ear.</i>
					<i>Water.</i>
					<i>Horn.</i>
					<i>Half.</i>
					<i>Door or Gate.</i>

MALLERY'S TABLE.

A Comparison of the Cuneiform, Chinese, and Egyptian Systems of Writing.

The Mallery table is a table created by Garrick Mallery who tries to show us the comparison between Cuneiform, Chinese and the Egyptian systems of writing.