

# CHINA

Vol 1 No 2

# CHARACTER

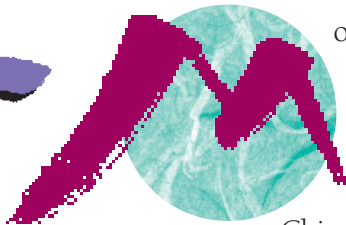
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Most of us have some familiarity with Chinese Characters—at the least those characters outside a Chinese restaurant. And there seems to me some general feeling that these characters are *really* different than our phonetic alphabet. They seem to be images which carry within them a visual record of human feelings from pre-historic time, when visual communication was experienced directly and commonly.

The basic idea of the characters is credited to the pre-historic emperor Fu-Hsi, who tried to bring all things in heaven and earth into a simple system of notation. The first actual picture writing is credited to T'sang-Chieh, the official scribe to the famous Yellow Emperor, about

the 27th century BC. These early forms were probably used for such important government functions as “counting wealth” and “recording tax payments”. By the 17th century BC there were many different, yet unorganized, characters, usually engraved on tortoise shell and animal bones. These are known today as *Shell and Bone Script*. Around 800 BC the official scribe Chou drew up a system of all the characters and fixed their general shape. These are known as the *Great Seal* characters. Around 200 BC Prime Minister Li Szu drew up an official index of 3000 characters called the *Lessor Seal* characters. He also developed a method for character formation by phonetic combination, and by 200 AD there were over 10,000 recorded different standardized characters in use.

A Sample of Shell and Bone Style

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Through history the characters have increased and evolved within six basic categories:

- 一 **Pictographs** Characters representative of objects.
- 二 **Conceptual** Characters representative of concepts.
- 三 **Compound** Characters made from combining categories 1 and 2.
- 四 **Instructional** Characters made by combining one character for meaning and one character for phonetics.
- 五 **Derivative** Characters which in their early formation had a specific meaning but later evolved to a related but more general meaning.

六 **Human Imperfection** For many reasons the process of transcription has not been perfect and over time characters have been changed, deleted, lost, mis-read, etc. Confucius noted: *“When I was young, I still knew some scribes who left blank the characters which they could not write: now there are no such men.”*

The Japanese word for the characters is *Kanji*, which means *characters from the Han (Kan)*

*Dynasty*. When the Japanese borrowed the characters (about the 4th Century AD), they had no writing system of their own and they developed two systems of writing them.

In one, Japanese was written entirely in Chinese characters with Japanese pronunciation and Chinese meaning. In the other, some Chinese characters were used only for phonetic meaning representing specific Japanese sounds or

grammatical factors. Both methods were used in writing the famous *Manyoshu*, an 8th Century collection of Japanese poetry in which

words representing concepts were written in Chinese characters but given Japanese pronunciation. All other words were represented phonetically by characters which were read with Japanese approximation to the Chinese pronunciation. These latter characters, through transformation and simplification evolved to the symbols now called *hiragana* and *katakana*. The *kana* (both) are phonetic representations of all the Japanese sounds. Simply put, *Hiragana* are used for native words and *Katakana* are used for foreign words.

**Seal Characters are of every shape and the lines are uniform thickness.**



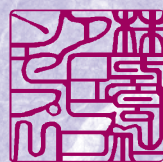
**Official Script, said to be the creation of a man who offended the emperor and spent 10 years in prison developing this style.**



**Running Script, from the later Han period, has freedom and strength and is popular for everyday use.**



**Seals, called hankos (Jpn.) or chops (Chn.), are stamped in red ink and are often used for legal identification and ownership.**



In a Chinese dictionary there might be over 50,000 characters listed. However, Japan has legally restricted the number of publicly used characters to about 1900, and most educated Japanese can use 3000-plus of them.

It is interesting to note that if you receive a Japanese name, it will be a phonetic representation (*katakana*) of your real name. But if you receive a Chinese name, it may be a phonetic representation in characters — or it may be characters which represent someone's impression about your own character.

輝くあなたの

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