

This excerpt from *Vital Breath of the Dao: Chinese Shamanic Tiger Qigong* (2006) by Master Zhongxian Wu is reprinted with permission from Dragon Door Publications.

The Way of the Universe

Let us continue to enjoy our tea and discuss the function of the Chinese characters. We call this way of learning *Pin Ming Lun Dao* 品茗論道. It means to discuss and understand the Dao through the taste of the tea. This is the lifestyle of the classical Chinese sages and scholars. We can adopt this style and continue to discover the way to connect with the Dao.

1. The Chinese Character and Its Origin

Chinese characters make up the last ancient ideographic or pictographic writing system that survives in modern usage. This unbroken system has been continued for thousands of years. It is possible to learn the ancient Chinese wisdom through the symbolic meanings of the characters. The original function of the Chinese characters was not merely to serve as a means of communication; rather, the characters were intended to serve as a vehicle for channeling universal wisdom and for connecting with nature. Below are two creation stories about Chinese characters connected with *Wu* 巫 (Chinese shamanism) that demonstrate this function.

The *Han* Dynasty (140 BCE–220 CE) Chinese dictionary *Shouwen Jiezi* states that *Cangjie* 倉頡, who was a minister of the *Huangdi* 黃帝 (Yellow Emperor) about 4,500 years ago, formed the Chinese characters after observing patterns of animal tracks and combining them with trigrams.¹ This legend also tells us that at the moment *Cangjie* created these characters, it was storming heavily and the spirits were weeping²—reminiscent of the *Wu* (shaman) calling in the rains. The spirits' weeping in the story reminds us that these characters affected those spirits. In my *Wu* practice, I use some

¹ Zhongxian Wu. "Dancing and Drumming – Feeling the 'Rhythm' of *Qigong*, Calligraphy, and *Wu* (Shamanism)." *Empty Vessel* Fall 2003: 36.

² Liu An. *Huananzi*. Chapter 8.

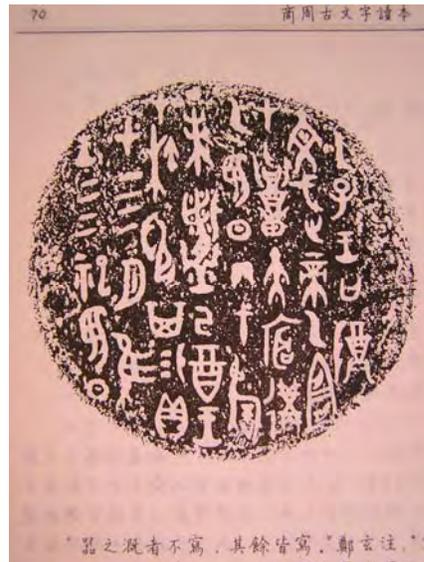
Chinese characters as special symbols to channel the universal energy to empower my body and align my spiritual energy or to help patients release disease.

Archeological research indicates that possible precursors to Chinese characters appeared



Chinese character inscribed on a turtle shell discovered in Henon Province; from about 8,000 years ago.

as early as 8,000 years ago. However, unearthed inscriptions on bone and tortoise shell show that a complete system of Chinese character writing had been in use during the *Shang* 商 Dynasty (1700–1027 BCE). Since these inscriptions were related to the divination practices of the *Shang* emperors, this style of character is called *Jiaguwen* 甲骨文—Oracle Script. For this reason, we can see that the Chinese characters were invented by ancient shamans and that *Cangjie* was one of them.



A copy of calligraphy from a Zhou Dynasty (1027 —221 BCE) stone carving.

2. *Wen* 文 (Pattern) and *Wu* 巫 (Shaman)

We can find more stories about the relationship between the Chinese characters and *Wu*. The Chinese character *Wen* 文, meaning Chinese character, may give us more information. Let's have another cup of tea and talk about the Chinese character *Wen* 文.

The original meaning of *Wen* is natural pattern. This pattern could be made up of cracks, tracks, animal footprints, or clouds. It was said that *Wen* came from *Wu* ritual. During a divination process, the *Wu* would burn a scapula bone or tortoise shell. The bone or shell would break during burning and a pattern of cracks would appear. The shaman could get an answer to the question posed in the divination through the pattern of cracks. It was thought that the pattern was a symbol or character from Heaven or from a high-level spirit, and the ancient shamans applied these crack patterns to the ancient Chinese characters. For instance, the Chinese character for divination or to divine is *Bu* 卜. *Bu* looks like a pattern of cracks. The pronunciation of *Bu* is related to divination as well. The moment that the *Wu* was burning the bone or shell and the fire made the crack in the bone or shell, it made a noise—*Bu*. Therefore, the moment the shaman heard the sound of *Bu* the pattern was revealed and the answer for the divination became known.

This Oracle Script is still relevant today, especially the Seal Script or *Zhuan Shu* 篆書. The symbolic meaning of “*Zhuan* 篆” is “to communicate with the universe through writing.” It is related to the *Wu* book, the *Yijing* 易經 (*Book of Changes* or *I Ching*). The bottom radical of the character *Zhuan* is *Tuan* 豕, meaning boar, and it stands for the Big Dipper. In the *Yijing*, one of the rhetorical structures for explaining the meaning of each hexagram is to begin each line within the hexagram with “*Tuan Yue* 豕曰”—Boar says or Big Dipper indicates. The radical on top of *Zhuan* is *Zhu* 竹, meaning bamboo. It is a hint that the Heavenly knowledge was originally recorded on bamboo. (Paper had not yet been invented.)

Ancient books written in Oracle or Seal Script are titled “*Tian Shu* 天書” (Heavenly Book) because people in ancient China trusted that the knowledge was channeled from Heaven through the shaman/sage. Even though the Chinese characters later changed to the Earthly way—square—the ancient Chinese always believed that the knowledge was from Heaven. Confucius said, “I record only the ancient knowledge without adding my own ideas [when I edit the old classics]. I always trust, respect, and love the ancient knowledge.”³ The Han Dynasty’s *Sima Qian* 司馬遷, author of the *Shij* 史記 (*Book of History*) referred to this way of thinking as “the Sage’s attitude.”⁴ Its importance has not diminished over time, and this reverence for the ancient knowledge continues to be passed down. I remember my masters always told me as they taught me the ancient knowledge, “Do not make any changes in your practice; the right way is to follow the classical forms. This is what I learned from my master.” This is how the ancient wisdom has been passed down. Through studying ancient Chinese characters, I understood my masters better and I have been following in their footsteps in teaching my students.

3. The Chinese Character and its Function

The tea is still strong. Let us continue drinking tea and talking about the Chinese characters. They carry so much information.

This Oracle Script is still relevant today, especially the Seal Script or *Zhuan Shu* 篆書. *Zhuan Shu* includes *Xiao Zhuan* 小篆 (lesser seal character) and *Da Zhuan* 大篆 (greater seal character). *Xiao Zhuan* is the result of the power of the first emperor of the *Qin* 秦 Dynasty (221–206 BCE), *Qinshihuang* 秦始皇. He asked his prime minister, *Lisi* 李斯, to standardize the Chinese characters. By the way, did you watch the movie *Hero*? Yes, as you may have noticed in the movie, there were different writing styles for the same Chinese characters in different states before the *Qin* Dynasty. Through the principles of Oracle Script and ancient Chinese characters that had been cast in vessels or carved in rock, *Lisi* created the standardized Chinese character system for the whole nation. Later,

³ Confucius. *LunYu* (*The Analects*). Chapter 7.

⁴ Shi Maqian. *Shiji: Zhuan* (*Biography*) *Siku Quanshu* (*Four Reservoirs of Ancient Texts*) 1773.

people named this standardized system *Xiao Zhuan* and called all the older scripts *Da Zhuan*.

Seal Script is now used only in artistic seals or artwork. Although the practice of carving and calligraphy in seal script remains an art in China today, most people are not able to



A copy of calligraphy; from a Han Dynasty stone carving.

read it. Yet it is common to use a signature seal instead of a written personal signature in modern China. However, people may use modern Chinese characters in their signature seals rather than the traditional Oracle Script. The verification function of the seal still remains. It originates from Chinese shamanism. Seal is *Yin* in Chinese and *Yin* means connect, verify, or response. It is a name for mudra (hand position) in *Wu* (shamanic) practice. *Yin* is also a way to verify that a person is practicing the *Wu* tradition for communicating with spirits.

This type of writing hints at knowledge of the *Wu* cosmos. Most strokes in the Seal Script are rounded and the shape of the characters is circular. It is said that the Han Dynasty's *Chenmiao* 程邈 developed the Clerk Script (*Lishu* 隸書) for convenience.

The strokes of Clerk Script are straight, and the pattern of the characters is square. This was the original model for the modern-day Chinese characters. Clerk Script is still easy to read. According to ancient Chinese cosmology, “*Tian Dao Yue Yuan Di Dao Yue Fang* 天道曰圆, 地道曰方—Heaven is

circular and Earth is square.⁵ This cosmology became the basic Chinese philosophy. Therefore, in Chinese tradition, the circle is a symbol for Heaven and the square is a symbol for Earth. This philosophy is the fundamental principle of *Qigong*, *Taiji*, and other martial arts.

By now, it must be obvious to you that the Chinese character is a portal into deeper layers. So, what exactly is the function of the Chinese character? In Chinese, it is *WenYiZaiDao* 文以載道. This means the function of a character is to carry the Dao, or to express and convey the Dao to people. *Qigong* is also a way to access the Dao. The difference is that *Qigong* is the practical way and the Chinese character is the symbolic way. We are able to merge into the Dao through correct *Qigong* practice and can better understand the symbolic meaning. Turning this around, we can find a better way to practice *Qigong* through the symbolic meaning.

⁵ Wu, Zhongxian. "The Cauldron and the Horse: Internal Cultivation and Yijing." Taijiquan Journal Summer 2003: 14.