

# *The Mystery of “Square Characters”: Ruminations on the Cultural Roots and Aesthetic Value of Chinese Characters*

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**Abstract:** This paper delves into the cultural roots of Chinese characters as square characters and their aesthetic value. It analyses the reasons for the formation of the square character form by sorting out the evolution of Chinese characters from oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscription, seal script to official script, regular script and running script. The paper further elaborates on the cultural genetic codes contained in the characters, such as heaven and earth, the five elements and the time of the year, as well as the influence of writing materials and tools on the formation of the characters. In addition, the paper explores the unique aesthetics of square characters, including its directness of image and its role in shaping the spirit of the nation. The formation of square characters is closely related to traditional cultural concepts such as “heaven and earth”, the five elements and the time of the year, as well as being profoundly influenced by the evolutionary characteristics of Chinese characters and writing tools. The contribution of this paper is to provide a new perspective for understanding the cultural connotation and aesthetic value of Chinese characters, to emphasise their importance in modern society, and to provide a theoretical basis and inspiration for future research on Chinese characters.

**Keywords:** Chinese characters, square characters, glyph evolution, writing aesthetics.

## **1. Introduction**

Characters are the visual form of language, and as a precious code for exploring the changes and flows of Chinese civilisation, Chinese characters have survived to the present day with their independent life as autographs.

“It is a consensus today that Chinese are square characters, which not only reflect the balanced and smooth structural characteristics of Chinese characters, but also contain rich cultural connotations and the pursuit of harmony and balance in aesthetic pursuits. But when exactly did Chinese characters become “square characters”? Following the evolution of Chinese characters, from the days of slash-and-burn agriculture, the ancestors have been devoutly inscribing characters on oracle bones, calling out to their ancestors and deities. Starting from the evolution of oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscription, seal script to official script, regular script and running script. The study will explore the origins of the “Square Character” form that Chinese characters have evolved into.

The oracle bone inscriptions, which are the early forms of Chinese characters, reveal the overall intuitive knowledge of the ancients about the humanities and the natural society with their

hieroglyphic, referential and synoptic features. Subsequently, the appearance of bronze inscription marked the beginning of the standardisation and systematisation of Chinese characters. Seal Script, as the standard script after the unification of the Qin Dynasty, had a more regular shape and smooth lines, laying the foundation for the evolution of subsequent scripts. The Official Script further simplified the glyphs of the Seal Script, making the Chinese characters easier to write and recognise. By the Regular Script and Running Script stages, the glyphs of the Chinese characters had basically been finalised, resulting in the square character form that still exists today.

This paper demonstrates the unique charm and far-reaching influence of Chinese characters through an in-depth study of the historical background, social motivation and cultural influence of the formation of Chinese characters.

## **2. The Cultural Genetic Code of “Square Characters”**

### **2.1. The Circle of Heaven and Earth: Concepts of the “Four Directions” and the “Centre”**

From the ancients to explore and observe the universe, the human being based on the existence of heaven and earth in the thinking reveals its mystery. “The four directions up and down said Yu, ancient and modern notes Zeus.” “Heaven and earth” are the original understanding of the universe of the ancients, “Zhou Bi Suan Jing” records: “square belongs to the earth, round belongs to the sky, the sky is round and earth” [1].

In the centre of the four directions is “centre” [1]. Shang dynasty has been “five” and “China” concept, “in” is to be in the central position of the Shangdu; four is the east, west, south, north and south. The Shuowen Jiezi reads, “The people of China are also”. Duan Yucai notes: “derived from the meaning of large” [2]. Chinese people are “people living in the centre of the sky”. This “centre” as the honour, to “square” for the construction of the four sides of the way of thinking, embedded, engraved in the lifeblood of the Chinese characters and continue to survive to this day.

### **2.2. The Five Elements and the Season of a Year: The Combination of Time and Space**

The “five elements”, i.e., gold, wood, water, fire and earth, are an abstract generalisation of the nature and interrelationships of all things in nature by the ancients, based on the geographic location, topographical qualities and climatic festivities of China. They not only represent the five basic forms of matter, but also imply the flow of time and space of the theory of change. In the conception of the ancients, the five elements are closely connected with space and time, and together they constitute the basic framework of the universe.

Sima Qian recorded in Shiji: Tianguan Shu (the Book of Heaven Officials), “In heaven there is the sun and the moon, on earth there is yin and yang, in heaven there are the five stars, and on earth there are the five elements. The sky has the constellation, and the earth has the states. Three lights, the essence of yin and yang, the gas is in the ground, and the saint in charge of it [3].” The heavenly “five stars” and the earthly “five elements” at the same time in the same direction. It can be seen that at least from the Han Dynasty period, the people of China have been heaven and earth in their own way, the concept of space-time combination.

#### **2.2.1. Temporal Representation: Spring Birth, Summer Growth, Autumn Harvest, and Winter Storage**

The relationship between the five elements and time is reflected in the change of seasons throughout the year. Spring is “wood”, everything is revived, the grass grows, the warblers fly, vibrant; summer is “fire”, the weather is hot, for the growth of most of the plants to provide the right temperature and humidity, passionate; autumn is “gold”, fruitful, harvest and kill; winter is “water”, after the first three

seasons, harvest and kill simultaneously; winter is “water”, after the first three seasons, the five elements and time is reflected in the cycle of the year. “, fruitful, harvest and killing co-exist; winter is “water”, after the first three seasons of biological activities, everything tends to calm and rest, return to hide. This seasonal change is not only reflected in the physical changes in nature, but also in the ancient way of life and way of thinking, which is profoundly dependent on this natural seasonal law.

### 2.2.2. Spatial Representation

The relationship between the five elements and space is also reflected in the division of geographical orientation. The ancients placed the four directions of east, south, west and north against the five elements of wood, fire, gold and water, with the centre being earth. The east is wood, symbolizing growth and vigour; the south is fire, representing warmth and light; the west is gold, signifying astringency and solidity; the north is water, symbolizing fluidity and depth; and the earth in the centre is the foundation for the growth of all things, stable and inclusive. This combination of orientation and the five elements not only provided the ancients with a basis for spatial orientation, but also gave space a specific attribute and meaning.

This one-to-one relationship also affects the Chinese characters, which are the vehicle for recording people’s daily lives and productive activities, and whose form and connotations are strongly influenced by the Five Elements. The stability and symmetry inherent in the “Square Character” form chosen for Chinese characters is closely related to the traditional “Five Elements” concept of “earth”. The definition of “earth” in *Shuowen Jiezi* reads: “Earth, the spitting creature of the earth. Two images of the ground, the ground in the middle, things out of the form also” [4]. Earth is the basis for the growth of all things, it is stable and inclusive, living in the four directions, for the four fundamentals. The four azimuthal corners surround the remaining four attributes, echoing the form of the square character, reflecting the harmony between the Chinese characters in form and the idea of the five elements.

The *Shangshu Wucheng* said: “Tell the Emperor that the earth is the source of the heavens and the earth after them” [5]. This is one of the symbols of the gods of heaven and earth, highlighting the importance of earth in the minds of the ancients. As a vehicle for recording and disseminating culture, the attribute of Chinese characters as “square characters” is not only a visual representation of this ancient philosophical idea, but also an important cornerstone for the inheritance and development of Chinese culture.

## 3. Origins for the Genesis of Square Characters

### 3.1. Characteristics of the Evolution of Chinese Characters

The oracle bone inscriptions were basically square; by the end of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the characteristic of Chinese characters being one character, and one square was fully formed. Thereafter, from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods to the Qin Dynasty, from Seal Script to Official Script, the Chinese characters made a leap forward, which was manifested in the shape of the characters, which changed from rounded and elongated to regular and well-defined square characters. Scribe’s Script is a dignified script commonly found in Chinese characters. It is written in a slightly broad and flat shape, with long horizontal strokes and short straight strokes, in the shape of a rectangle, with “silkworm head, wild goose tail” and “one wave, three twists and turns”. Scribe’s Script was developed from Seal Script, which is a simplification of Seal Script by turning complexity into simplicity, roundness into squareness, and arcs into straightness.

In the history of Chinese characters, people usually refer to the seal script and hieroglyphic script as “ancient script”, while the official script and the subsequent scripts are called “modern script”. Therefore, the “Clerical Transformation” has become the dividing line between the evolution of

Chinese characters from ancient scripts to modern scripts. Zong Baihua once suggested that “the Small Seal Script is a summary of the stages in the development of Chinese characters.” Clerical script is beautifully written with “three twists and turns, a crane’s head and a swallow’s tail, and left and right backs”, but the strokes are “choppy” and slow to write. In order to adapt to the needs of the record, writing scribe constantly “straight to straight”, change the original rounded writing beauty requirements, until the Eastern Han Dynasty, produced a new scribe. As a result, the new clerical script was created and evolved into the Cursive, Regular and Running Scripts. This change enabled the Chinese character form to come out of the dilemma of inefficient writing and become faster. The Regular Script was the ultimate in the development of Chinese character forms, and the square character form of Chinese characters was finally established by the Regular Script.

Xi’an Beilin Museum houses one of the treasures of the museum - the Yan family temple stele. The stone carving, *Jizhu*, has been picking out the wonders of a single stroke over the years, and the persistence of a single horizontal and vertical stroke. Between the brush and the ink, the true colours of Chinese characters and Chinese civilization are written, square and sure, horizontal and vertical.

### 3.2. Writing Materials and Instruments

Chinese scholar Qian Cunxun points out that the writing of Chinese characters was influenced by the writing materials of bamboo slips, from which their straight-line writing and right-to-left ordering originated, because “the surface of the slips was narrow and usually accommodated only one line of characters, which was limited by the area of the slips after they had been dissected into a flat surface” [6].

It is written in the *Shangshu*: “But the ancestors of Yin had a code and a book” [7]. In *Shuowen Jiezi*, *shu* (book) is a hieroglyphic character, like a long and a short, in the shape of two compilations. A symbol cannot accommodate many words; long articles must be woven with many symbols into a strategy. Weave a string into a rope is called woven, usually with hemp rope, but also with leather or silk rope to weave a single root of the Jane. A wooden board called “plate”; written text called “documents”. If it is a foot square of documents, it is called “square”.

Because of this longitudinal narrow writing carrier in the pre-Qin period dominated for a long time, in order to write on the letter, the ancient people to do the record is generally kneeling on the ground, the left hand is responsible for holding the simple, the right hand is responsible for holding the pen to write. Resulting in the writer in the control of the brush cannot develop a large movement, but only confined to a narrow space. The limited size of the letter, the need to record the amount of information written in writing and the amount of information written in writing formed a contradiction, forcing people to write as much as possible with concise language expression, and strive to write more words in a small space.

Thus, it is necessary to flatten the character shape to save vertical space. In order to ensure that the characters are clearly visible, it is necessary to make full use of the limited width of the simple surface. In this style, the characters are stretched to the left and right sides as much as possible, and under the combined effect of vertical compression and horizontal stretching, a unique form of chapter style emerges in which a single character is flattened and the distance between the upper and lower characters is widened, breaking the circle and turning it into a square”, that is, the curved lines of the Small Seal Script are changed into straight strokes, and the rounded strokes of the Small Seal Script are changed into square folds, which is also known as “Seal Script”.

The Small Seal Script is usually written on stone with a knife, and all the strokes are written with a round brush, almost without the lifting and pressing movements of the brush, striving for straight and thick strokes; while the Clerical Script is written with a bristle brush on a simple document, which allows the brush to show its versatile strokes, with both square and round brushes, and is rich in thick and thin variations.

## 4. The Aesthetics of Square Characters: Extracting Diagrams into Words and Saving Civilisation

### 4.1. Figurative Immediacy of the Square Characters System

The uniqueness of Chinese characters, as the only widely used square character system in the world, is not only reflected in the beauty of their square structure, but also in their deep cultural and historical heritage. This uniqueness is not only a treasure of Chinese culture, but also a concentrated expression of the wisdom and creativity of the Chinese people.

As square characters, Chinese characters are based on ideograms created through the impact of images. Each Chinese character is carefully designed as an almost square structure, a form that not only facilitates writing and typesetting, but also gives the characters a sense of stability and balance. Chinese characters have many strokes, but each stroke carries a specific meaning, and by combining them in different ways, they form a myriad of different glyphs. The uniqueness of this morphological structure makes Chinese characters visually highly recognizable and expressive.

Chinese characters are in fact a hybrid script, a combination of shape symbols, meaning symbols, and pictorial riddles, an extremely complex combination, rich in cultural meaning and poetic beauty. It is a morpheme-syllable script, with each Chinese character recording one monosyllabic shift in the language; a few morphemes have more than one syllable, and can only be represented by a few characters, but each character records one syllable. Forms such as Chinese ideographic characters are able to fix meaning and perception. In other words, Chinese characters are pictorial, combining the functions of epigraphy (phonetics), ideology (morphology and ideogram), and social structure, with a single character itself having a rich ideographic structure. Compared with Pinyin characters, Chinese characters do not need to express meaning indirectly through the combination of letters, but directly through the combination of different strokes. This directness of expression not only improves the efficiency of information transmission, but also enriches the level and depth of language expression.

The unique shape of Chinese characters has a certain aesthetic value. In China, where calligraphy and painting are of the same origin, Chinese characters have influenced plastic arts, giving rise to unique artistic concepts and the expression of feelings and aspirations. The neatness, richness, simplicity and musicality of the Chinese characters have given rise to the unique classical Chinese literature, especially classical poetry, which has formed a special literary intent in China. Some children who cannot write already know how to recite “The light of the moon in front of the bed is suspected to be the frost on the ground” and “The sun in the sky is the only thing that can make us happy”. and “Sweat drips down from the sun at noon”. These poems are written in Chinese characters. When these poems are written in Chinese characters, they have more charm and meaning. It would not have the same artistic effect when writing a poem in pinyin than in characters.

The charm of the Chinese character as a square character is also reflected in its rich relationship between sound, meaning and form. Take circular poems as an example, due to the fact that Chinese characters are characterized by the predominance of monosyllabic morphemes and the sequence of words as an important grammatical device, circular poems can be read in a cyclic and endless manner, giving people a sense of breathlessness and excitement. For example, the sentence “The fragrance of lotus stirs the clean waters; the cool breeze makes the days, and nights feel long” can be split into a seven-verse iambic pentameter poem, which demonstrates the subtle variations of the Chinese characters in terms of sound and meaning. Su Ruolan, a woman in the pre-Qin period, weaved the Xuan Ji Tu, which is a cyclic poem with more than 800 characters, which can be made into a poem no matter whether it is read inversely, horizontally, obliquely, interactively, retreating from one character or iterating over one character. This marvellous talent, which transcends the ancient and the



modern, fully demonstrates the unique charm of Chinese characters in expressing emotions and thoughts.

## **4.2. Uniqueness of Cultural and Historical Roots: Shaping the Nation**

The character “ren” (people) has become a symbol of the spirit of the Chinese nation with its simple and profound form. A single stroke, seemingly simple, contains infinite strength and wisdom, symbolizing the resilience and unyielding nature of human beings standing between heaven and earth. This character is not only an abstract depiction of the human form, but also a profound interpretation of the spirituality of the Chinese nation - to stand up to the heavens and the earth, to be courageous, which is exactly the portrayal of the backbone of China.

In short, language and writing, as carriers of culture, have a profound impact on the people who use them, shaping a nation’s unique cultural philosophy, way of thinking and way of knowing. As Ge Zhaoguang states, “Language and writing is a set of discourse system that presents the world in front of us, and each language and writing describe and divides the universe in an established way, so that people living in this set of discourse naturally accept the world it presents when they learn the language and writing [8].” So, the Chinese language is no exception. China’s unique language and writing system has created a unique cultural philosophy and thinking structure that is completely different from the West.

## **5. The Modern Significance of Square Characters and Future Research Prospects**

### **5.1. Comparison of Traditional and Simplified Characters**

As a record-keeping tool, writing convenience and efficiency are the basic requirements. The fundamental reason and driving force behind the shift from traditional to simplified Chinese character lies in the objective requirement of ease of writing. Simplified Chinese character, because of their reduced number of strokes and ease of writing, have a huge advantage over traditional characters in daily record-keeping and typing. It has also played an important role in the promotion of education and the eradication of illiteracy. In addition, the tools and materials used to produce the characters have also influenced the evolution of the Chinese characters to a certain extent. Simplified Chinese characters were simplified by reducing the number of strokes, combining parts, or adopting simpler symbols, making them easier to write.

In contrast, traditional Chinese characters retain more strokes and complex structures, and because of their complexity, they often provide a more intuitive demonstration of the principles of Chinese character formation, such as pictograms, references, and ideograms, and contain a wealth of historical and cultural information.

### **5.2. Challenges and Opportunities of Square Characters in the Digital Age**

Under the background of digitization and informatisation, square characters face challenges in input method efficiency, font design, information storage and transmission. How to develop more intelligent and efficient input methods to meet the diversified needs of users, how to design beautiful and practical fonts to adapt to different scenarios, and how to efficiently store and transmit a large amount of information about Braille within the limited storage space need to be solved urgently.

Digital technology has also brought unprecedented opportunities for the development of square characters. Digital means enable more easily dissemination and share of square character culture; the cultural connotation and value behind square characters can be deeply explored by using big data analysis technology; and a more immersive learning experience of square characters can be created through new technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR).

## 6. Conclusion

Square characters are not only a form of Chinese characters, but also an important part of Chinese culture. The evolution of Chinese characters from oracle bone and bronze inscription to seal script to official script, regular script and running script has witnessed the flow and change of Chinese civilization. This paper examines the balanced and smooth structural characteristics of the square character, as well as the cultural genetic codes such as heaven and earth, the five elements and the time of the year contained behind it, which have become the unique spiritual mark of the Chinese nation.

Square characters not only carry rich cultural connotations and aesthetic pursuits but are also closely connected with topics such as national identity, traditional cultural inheritance and the security of Chinese characters, which are facing unprecedented challenges with the advent of the digital and information era. How to protect the traditional Chinese character culture while adapting to the needs and development of the modern society has become an issue we need to think deeply about. Therefore, it is particularly important to strengthen the education on the safety of Chinese characters and raise the awareness and respect of all people for the culture of Chinese characters. Only in this way that the unique charm and value of the square characters can be passed on and carried forward.

To sum up, square characters is not only a form of expression of Chinese characters, but also an important part of Chinese culture. In the future development, scholars should pay more attention to the protection and inheritance of square characters, so that this valuable cultural heritage can shine more brilliantly in the new era.

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