

Anchoring Pictograph

The “Positive” and “Negative” Anchoring of Pictograph in the History of Chinese Writing

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In this paper, I will discuss two examples of anchoring innovation. The first case is positive anchoring. In the Shang (c. 1600-c. 1046 BCE) and Western Zhou (c. 1046-771 BCE) periods, in oracle bone and bronze inscriptions, pictographs played an important role. The early Chinese writing system is a logographic system in which a large number of base characters are pictographs (i.e., logographs). Based on these pictographs (the basic Chinese characters), linguistic symbols are added or subtracted to record sounds and express meanings. Moreover, literacy education could only be achieved on the basis of the memorization of these many (around or over thousands in different stages of its evolution) basic Chinese characters, and the idea of pictograph facilitates the learning and memorization of the basic Chinese characters. Therefore, the theory that individual characters are pictographs greatly supports and assists the learning, application, and spread of the writing system. The crystallization of this theory is the so-called *liushu* ("six [forms of] script") classification of early Chinese writing: *xiangxing* ("representing the form"; i.e., pictographs), *zhishi* ("indicating the matter"; ideographs), *huiyi* ("conjoining the sense"; compound ideographs), *xingsheng* ("formulating the sound"; or *xiesheng*, "sharing the sound"; i.e., phonetic compounds), *zhuanzhu* ("revolved and re-directed graphs"; i.e., derivative cognates), and *jiajie* ("loaned and borrowed graphs"; phonetically loan characters). The first four categories describe the internal structure of individual characters, while the latter two explain the uses of a given character (William Boltz).

This "six [forms of] script" theory was originally never intended to be an explanation of the evolutionary processes that generated the Chinese writing system, but because of the predominant role pictographs played in the Chinese writing system as well as in the literacy education, and especially after the evolutionary theory was introduced into China from the west in the late 19th and early 20th century, almost all Chinese scholars believe that not only Chinese writing system but also writing in general went through the evolutionary stages from pictographic, to ideographic, and to phonetic. When Chinese scholars encountered ancient Egypt, they firmly believed that ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs resembled the old Chinese scripts and questioned and denied Jean-François Champollion's (1790-1831) innovation that the Egyptian hieroglyphic signs were predominately phonetic. This is my case of negative anchoring.