

前言

西方有一個成語，當一件事情像天書一樣難以理解的時候，就說“這對我來說就是中文”(It's Chinese to me)。但當我花五分鐘向他們解釋中國文字的奧秘之後，他們都可以看着方塊字猜出，哪些是與口有關的，哪些是與水有關的，哪些又是人的行為動作。

于是我就有了一個想法——讓更多的普通人了解中文的美。有了這個念頭就開始閱讀有關中國文字的書，越了解越入迷。世界上很少有其他文字像中文這樣形神兼備，這樣只可意會，不可言傳，這樣令人拍案叫絕。中文比其他任何抽象藝術都要更前衛、更創意、更抽象。于是我明白了李清照為什麼要研究金文，郭沫若為什麼是甲骨文大師；我甚至希望有機會也去考古，破解那些神秘的甲骨文符號。這不僅需要對歷史、人文、地理等各學科有全面的了解，更需要藝術家與詩人天馬行空的想象力與創造力。

我希望這本書，通過一種更加形象、感性的方式，向將漢語視為天書的人，展示漢語的魅力。同時，我希望中國人把對中文的熱愛擴展到對文物、建築、民俗與傳統的珍視。

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Preface

I often hear people saying “It's Chinese to me”, referring to something beyond comprehension. But after five minutes of explaining how Chinese characters work, they are able to look at the Chinese words and guess. This word is about mouth, that is about water, the other is about people. The unique pictography of Chinese characters makes it possible to grasp its essence.

Nobody knows exactly when Chinese characters were created. The Chinese legend says that Cangjie, with four eyes and four pupils, observed nature closely. Inspired by the animal tracks on the ground, he created Chinese characters. The discovery of oracle bone inscriptions puts Chinese writing back to 3300 years ago. But earlier writing must have existed long before that. In 221 BC, Emperor Chin unified China and standardized the Chinese writing system. This decision profoundly influenced not only the reunification of China, but also the development of Chinese culture.

Chinese characters are the foundation of all art forms in China, such as painting, calligraphy, architecture, and the art of gardening. The work of Wang Wei, one of the greatest Chinese poets and artists, was praised thus: “There is painting

in his poetry and poetry in his painting.” This is the highest state of art, for Chinese people believe painting and writing come from the same source.

It was only when I began research for this book that I realized how creative and avant-garde the Chinese characters are. Chinese writing is more abstract and artistic than any other abstract art. No wonder American artist Jackson Pollock was inspired by Chinese writing.

I hope this book will enable people to appreciate the beauty of Chinese characters, the *crème de la crème* of world heritage. I also hope this book will build a bridge to this ancient culture. Moreover, I hope that my nieces Megan, Maya and Emily, whose native tongue is English, will master Chinese and never say “It’s Chinese to me”.

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Sources of Images

Comparison of Traditional and Simplified Chinese Characters