

# Interpretation of Traditional Chinese Medicine Culture in the Glyph of Chinese Characters

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## ABSTRACT

Chinese characters are ideographic characters. In the process of creation and development of Chinese characters, they are influenced by the culture of that time. Therefore, Chinese characters contain rich cultural information. The culture of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) also has a certain influence on the creation and development of Chinese characters. Therefore, Chinese characters related to TCM contain certain cultural information of TCM. Through the analysis of individual Chinese character's glyphs, the glyphs of Chinese character groups and the historical development of Chinese character's glyphs, we can interpret the cultural information of TCM. However, we should pay attention to the following four aspects when analyzing culture through Chinese character: strictly distinguishing the concept of Chinese characters and Chinese language, scientifically analyzing Chinese character's glyphs, attaching importance to multiple evidences to prove each other, and avoiding over interpretation.

**Keywords:** Chinese characters, Chinese character culture, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a tool to record language, thought and culture, and an important carrier of human civilization. Chinese characters are the writing symbol system of recording Chinese language. The creation of Chinese characters has broken the space-time limitation of language information transmission, and greatly expanded the communication scope of the Chinese nation. So the Chinese language can be transmitted to other places and remained in later generations. As ideographic characters, Chinese characters contain rich cultural information.

## II. THE NATURE OF CHINESE CHARACTERS AND TCM CULTURE IN CHINESE CHARACTERS

### A. The nature of Chinese characters

Chinese characters, as one of the oldest characters in the world, have been used by the Han nationality. Although they have been developing for thousands of years, they still keep the characteristics of ideographic characters. "The biggest feature of the formation of Chinese characters is that they are constructed according to

the meaning of a corresponding word in Chinese. Therefore, the glyph of Chinese characters always carries the meaning information that can be analyzed." [1] According to the meaning construction is the essential attribute of Chinese characters, and the 'meaning' (意义) on which the formation of Chinese characters is based is often the reflection of social, historical and cultural conditions in the era of character making. It can be said that the form of Chinese characters often carries the brand of the culture of the times and is rich in important cultural information.

### B. TCM culture in Chinese characters

TCM is based on the overall concept of 'heaven-and-man combination' (tiānrénhéyī 天人合一) as its philosophical basis, yin-yang (阴阳) and the five phases theory (wǔ xíng 五行), the theory of zang-fu (zàngfǔxuéshuō 脏腑学说) and theory of meridians and collaterals (jīngluòxuéshuō 经络学说) as the core theory, four diagnosis and eight principles (sìzhēnbāgāng 四诊八纲) as diagnostic methods, herbal prescriptions, acupuncture and massage (zhēnjiūtūnā 针灸推拿) as treatment methods and means, forming a unique TCM culture.

Because Chinese characters are constructed according to meaning of Chinese language and

meaning is the reflection of cognition. Therefore, when the Chinese nation made characters' glyphs for ancient Chinese medicine characters, they inevitably brought the ancient Chinese medicine concept into the glyph of Chinese characters. For example, TCM scholars have such concepts as 'doctor and witch are of the same origin' (yīwūtóngyuán 医巫同源) and 'doctor originates from witch' (yīyuányúwū 医源于巫), which is directly reflected in the glyph of 醫, which is a variant character of 醫(doctor). In ancient Chinese books, many witch doctors are recorded, For example, in the book of Shānhǎijīng (《山海经》) recorded that, "in the east of Kaiming- Monster, there are wizard Peng, wizard Di, wizard Yang, and wizard Lu, wizard Fan, wizard Xiang, they surround the Gods Yàiyǔwith elixirs in their hands to bring death back to life." [2] Sh běn (《世本》) recorded that, "wizard Xian was the doctor of Emperor Yao (帝尧), became Emperor Yao's doctor by virtue of his superb witchcraft. They extend people's blessings, cure people's diseases, make trees wither and birds fall by praying." Therefore, Shuōwén Jiězì (《说文解字》) recorded that, "Doctor, the ancient wizard Peng who has been a doctor at the beginning." [3] Guǎngyǎ (《广雅》) recorded that, "Doctor is also wizard." At least in the Qin and Han Dynasties, people had realized the correlation between doctors and witches. Therefore, the ancestors changed the semantic radicals of 醫 from 酉 to 巫 to highlight this concept.

Chinese characters are the symbol system of recording Chinese language. Therefore, before the creation of Chinese characters, Chinese language has gone through a long process of development, and the Chinese characters reflect the development level of TCM in that era. For example, in oracle-bone inscriptions (jiǎgǔwén 甲骨文), the character for 心 (heart) is written as , and in inscriptions on bronze (jīnwén 金文) is written as . Its original meaning is heart, pictograph, and the characters describe the external shape of the heart, the outer edge, valve and internal structure of the heart can be clearly reflected through the glyph, which shows that as early as the Shang dynasties or earlier, the ancestors of the Chinese nation had accumulated rich anatomical knowledge and certain knowledge of human body structure.

### III. TCM CULTURE INFORMATION CARRIED BY CHINESE CHARACTERS

It is precisely because Chinese characters are ideographic characters, and Chinese medicine culture has a certain impact on Chinese characters from the emergence to the development. Therefore, Chinese characters carry certain cultural genes of

TCM. We can interpret the cultural information of TCM through Chinese characters.

#### A. Cultural information of TCM carried by individual characters of Chinese characters

Because Chinese characters are constructed according to their meanings, the cultural information of TCM carried in Chinese characters is first expressed in the glyphs of Chinese characters.

Ideographic character 龋 (龋) contains the understanding of the cause of dental caries. The Chinese character 龋 in oracle bone is written as , is an ideographic character, which is composed of two pictographs 𠂔 (齿) and 𠂔 (它). The pictographic character 𠂔 is for teeth and the pictographic character 𠂔 is for parasite. There are parasites in the teeth, the original meaning is caries.

This character is also written as  in oracle bone, on the basis of the original glyph, three small dots are added to indicate the debris that is dropped after the tooth is bitten and damaged by parasites. According to modern medicine, dental caries is caused by the food residue in the crevice of teeth, which is fermented gradually under the action of bacteria, which erodes the hard tissue of teeth, makes the hard enamel and dentin loose, soften and defect, and finally forms cavities gradually. However, from the glyph of oracle bone inscriptions, it can be seen vividly that the ancient people believed that the cause of dental caries was that there were parasites biting the teeth, so the folk called the caries 'decayed teeth' (zhùyá 蛀牙) or 'teeth bitten by parasites' (chóngyá 虫牙), which is also the reason. The ancient people's understanding of the cause of dental caries is directly reflected in the form of this character.

#### B. Chinese character groups can show the cultural connotation of TCM

If we put the same kind of Chinese characters together, we can display more abundant cultural information than single Chinese characters. Characters with the same semantic radical can be summed up as a group of Chinese characters with the same semantic radical. For example, the character 思 (thinking), its semantic radical is 心 (heart), can only show that the ancients thought that thinking is related to the heart. Only by summing up the numerous characters the heart and expressing the thinking, consciousness, spirit, emotion and so on, such as 思 (thinking), 志 (ambition), 忘 (forgetting), 念 (missing), 忧 (worrying), 虑 (worrying), 忍 (tolerate), 忠 (loyalty), 愤 (indignation), 怒 (anger), 怨 (resentment), 恨 (hate), 怯 (timidity), 怵 (fear), 惕 (fear), 恐 (frightened), etc. their semantic radical are "心" (heart). If we put

these characters together, we can see the medical concept that the heart is the 'spiritual domination' (shénmíngzhǐzhǔ 神明之主) in TCM.

There are few absolute synonyms in Chinese, most of them are relative synonyms, and that is, there are subtle differences between synonyms. For example, 齿/chǐ/ and 牙/yá/ are a group of synonyms in modern Chinese, but at first they are different. 齿 refers to the front teeth and canine teeth; 牙 refers to the big teeth on both sides. This difference can be seen at a glance from the glyphs of the two characters. The ancient Chinese character for 齿 is written as 𪗇, is the teeth that can be exposed by opening the mouth to the lips, so the ancients said, 'lips disappear, teeth cold' (chúnwǎngchǐhán 唇亡齿寒) and 'Smile without showing the front teeth' (xiàobùlùchǐ 笑不露齿). However the ancient Chinese character for 牙 is written as 𪗈, it is the teeth facing the gills, in the shape of interlacing each other, so there is the idiom 'dog teeth interaction' (quǎnyájiāohù 犬牙交互). Through the comparative analysis of this group of characters recording synonyms, we can see that the ancient people's distinction between 齿 and 牙 is quite accurate.

### *C. Cultural information of TCM embodied in the diachronic evolution of Chinese characters*

The Chinese characters that record the same word will change with the change of history. For example, the characters recording the meaning of 'the Zang-Fu organs' (脏腑) were originally used as 藏 and 府, and later as 脏(臟) and 腑. Different characters reflect different cultural information of TCM. The original meaning of the Chinese character 藏 is to store and store the viscera. The character for 'Zang and Fu' was originally selected as 藏 because TCM thought that the main function of the five Zang-organs of the human body was to store essence and Qi. Sù Wèn (《素问》) recorded that, "The so-called five zang store essence but not release it, so full but not real."

The Chinese character 藏 not only records the meaning of collection and storage, but also records the meaning of Zang-Fu organs. The character 藏 is polysemy, which can cause confusion in reading and understanding. Therefore, the character 脏(臟) is used to record the meaning of Zang-Fu organs by adding the semantic radical of the 月(肉). The character 脏(臟) is a pictophonetic character derived from the semantic symbol 月(肉) and the phonetic symbol 藏. Its semantic symbol is the 月(肉), which indicates that the character is related to body parts, while 藏 becomes the phonetic symbol of the pictophonetic character. At the same time, it can indicate the origin of the character, that is, 脏 is a differentiated character of 藏.

The original meaning of the Chinese character 府 is the place where documents or property are stored. It is characterized by a certain space for holding things. The human body has gallbladder, stomach, small intestine, large intestine, bladder, triple energizer and six Fu-organs. Its common feature is the hollow cystic or tubular organs in the internal tissues of the chest and abdominal cavity. Its main function is to hold water and grain. Because the form and function of the six Fu-organs are similar to the place where documents or property are stored, the character of the six Fu-organs was originally written as 府 too.

The Chinese character 府 records not only the meaning of the place where documents or property are stored, but also the meaning of six Fu-organs. In order to make a distinction, the original character 府 is added with the semantic radicals of 月(肉). Its semantic symbol is the 月(肉), which indicates that the character is related to body parts, 府 becomes its phonetic symbol, and at the same time, it can prompt the origin of the word, that is, 腑 is a differentiated character of 府.

Although the differentiation of Chinese characters is to coordinate the relationship between Chinese characters and the words it records, the later differentiation of Chinese characters 藏 and 腑 as medical special characters, the selection of semantic symbols is influenced by the culture of TCM, and the information of TCM culture is more abundant after the differentiation.

## **IV. FOUR PRINCIPLES TO ANALYZE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHINESE CHARACTER CONFIGURATION AND TCM CULTURE**

"The culture of Chinese characters must be established on the basis of science, and cannot violate the law of development of Chinese characters and culture. The study of Chinese character culture is a science, not a fantasy, nor an individual's groundless Association and conjecture." [4] It is a special knowledge to use Chinese characters to interpret TCM culture, which requires rigorous, scientific, sufficient evidence and certain limits.

### *A. Strictly distinguishing the concepts of Chinese characters and Chinese language*

When we discuss Chinese characters and TCM culture, we must strictly distinguish between 'Chinese character' and 'Chinese language', 'Chinese character culture' and 'Chinese language culture'. (我们在探讨汉字与中医文化时,必须要严格区分'汉字'与'汉语', '汉字文化'与'汉语文化'的两组概念)[5] Chinese language is a symbol system of combination of sound and meaning. There are only two elements of

sound and meaning. Chinese character is the writing symbol system of recording Chinese language. It carries sound and meaning from language, and materializes them with glyphs. Therefore, only glyph belongs to Chinese characters themselves. From the perspective of genetics, TCM culture will affect the configuration of medical Chinese characters. Therefore, the medical culture information in Chinese character formation is the research object of Chinese characters and TCM culture, and only these Chinese characters which incorporate TCM culture into the formation can be used to analyze Chinese characters and TCM culture. It can be seen that not all Chinese characters can be used to explore the culture of TCM, and not all medical characters can be used to explore the culture of TCM.

Some cultural phenomena seem to belong to Chinese characters, but in fact they belong to Chinese. It's just that the culture carried by Chinese is expressed through Chinese characters. We think that only the cultural information expressed through Chinese characters' glyphs belongs to the category of Chinese culture. For example, water (水), metal (金), wood (木), fire (火) and earth (土), are the five basic substances in the theory of five phases (wǔxíng 五行). In TCM, five phases and five Zang-organs are matched. Wood (木) is match with liver; wood (木) has the characteristics of growth, rising and accessible, so as to analogize the physiological characteristics of liver like to be accessible but hate depression. In this process of interpretation, we use the words recorded by 木 in Chinese language, which has nothing to do with the glyph of 木. Its essence is Chinese language culture, not Chinese characters culture. The theory of five phases does not come from TCM. The five characters water (水), metal (金), wood (木), fire (火) and earth (土) are not specially made for TCM. Therefore, their glyphs cannot reflect medical concepts and medical development.

*B. Scientifically analyzing the glyph of Chinese characters to interpret the culture of TCM*

The reason why Chinese characters can carry the culture of TCM is that in the stage of making Chinese characters, the ancestors brought the culture of TCM into the process of Chinese character formation. Therefore, in the process of discussing Chinese characters and TCM culture, we should scientifically explain the formation process of Chinese characters involved in medicine, and explain TCM culture through the scientific analysis of the motivation of Chinese characters. For example, the character 育 (毓) / yù is written as 𠄎 and 𠄎 in oracle-bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions. These ancient characters depict people's observation of childbirth in the Shang Dynasty. They have grasped the important medical

information such as the baby's head first coming out and bleeding when giving birth. But in the official script and regular script 育 and 毓 have not seen these elements of TCM culture.

*C. Attaching importance to multiple evidences to prove TCM culture*

It is necessary to have sufficient evidence to interpret TCM culture through glyph. In addition to the analysis of the characters' glyphs, medical history, archaeology, culture and other evidences are also needed. For example, the concept of 'doctor and witch of the same origin' mentioned above, in addition to the evidence of glyph, there are also ancient documents such as *Shānhǎijīng* (《山海经》) and *Shìběn* (《世本》). Heart is the organ of thinking, in addition to a large number of characters expressing thinking activities; there are also documentary evidences such as *Mèngzǐ* (《孟子》), *Xúnzǐ* (《荀子》), *Huángdì Nèijīng* (《黄帝内经》) and so on. Ignoring the evidence of medical history, archaeology, culture and so on, it is easy to lead to subjective conjecture to explain culture only by glyph. For example, the explanation of the Chinese character 脾 in the *Grand View of Chinese character culture* (《中国汉字文化大观》) is:

- The position of the spleen (脾) may be explained by its phonetic symbols 卑. The ancients stressed the importance of superiority and inferiority in everything. In Xiaozhuan (小篆) font, the character 卑 is written as 𠄎. Xǔ Shèn (许慎) interpreted it as 'cheap' (Shuōwén Jiězì 《说文解字》). Dū àn Yù ài (段玉裁) explained: "The ancient people respected 又 (right) and humbled 𠄎 (left). Therefore, the glyph is 𠄎 (left) under 甲. 甲 is like a head. (Notes to Shuowen Jiezi 《说文解字注》) The spleen bears the task handed down from the liver and stomach, and it is on the left side of the human body. Therefore, it is appropriate to write the Chinese character into 脾. [6]

We don't think this explanation is scientific. First of all, from the perspective of ancient Chinese characters, the character 卑 also can be written as 𠄎, and the semantic radical is (right) rather than 𠄎 (left). Secondly, in terms of cult urology, in ancient China, sometimes the right was respected; sometimes the left was respected, it's not fixed.

- From prehistory to the Yin Dynasty, China maintained the tradition of 'respect for the right side', but in the Zhou Dynasty, there was a 'reversal', and there was a phenomenon of 'respecting the left' in many occasions. 'Respect for the left' and 'respect for the right' coexisted in Chinese culture

from the Zhou Dynasty. (中国从史前到殷代一直保持着'尚右'的传统,到了周代却出现了'逆转',在很多场合中有了'尊左'的现象.'尊左'与'尚右'从周代开始并存于中国文化之中)[7]

Thirdly, from the point of view of TCM, spleen is the 'source of acquired constitution' (hòutiānzhībēn 后天之本), and its status is not inferior.

#### *D. Avoiding over interpretation of TCM due to unlimited expansion*

The cultural information of TCM carried by the glyph is very limited, which cannot be exaggerated. "The original purpose of the creation of Chinese characters is to record language, not to describe culture in detail. Besides the meaning of words, the cultural information of Chinese characters is only a by-product of its creation. If this by-product is raised to its main function, it will lead to a misunderstanding of the nature of Chinese characters." (汉字创造的最初目的是为了记录语言,而不是为了细致描写文化。汉字字形所体现出的除词义之外的其他文化信息,只是其创造过程中的副产品。如果将这种副产品上升为其主要功能,就会导致对汉字本质的误解) [8] In other words, the information of Chinese medicine culture carried by Chinese characters is very limited. It can only reflect some fragments in the history of TCM culture, and can be used as a supplement and citation of macro culture. It does not have the function of describing culture in detail, nor can it be used to construct the cultural history of TCM.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

We can interpret TCM culture through the glyph of Chinese characters, and expand the field and vision of TCM culture research. But we should pay attention to strictly abide by the principles of Chinese character culture, avoid subjective fabrication; avoid unlimited expansion.

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