

Civilization 152

Chapter 152 - The 7th Day, Explaining Characters and Words

Time is always playing hide and seek with people, passing through the day like the wind, and blooming in the deep night like a flower. In the search, it slips away in the blink of an eye.

The next seven days went by, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.

Whenever Xiulote was alone, it was a long and difficult night. He pondered over and over the murals in the Serpent House by the dim candlelight. On all four walls were accounts of the Feathered Serpent Divine, depicted sometimes with a human body and other times with a snake's. It roamed between villages and towns, receiving the mortal's reverent worship.

Above, on the roof, was the farewell of the Feathered Serpent Divine, entrapped by the primeval sun Tezcatlipoca, self-exiled. But in the myth, the place of the primeval sun was replaced by a newly depicted Guardian God. Not far above, the prayer room of the Guardian God where Aweit resided had once been that of the primeval sun. The transformation of the Guardian God was obvious at a glance.

Thinking of the murals in the palace corridor, thinking of the oral message passed down from his grandfather, Xiulote understood the elder's unfinished intent. He began the long and difficult contemplation of how exactly to formulate the Code of Law.

At that time, the little green snake would emerge damp from the underground water channels and then wring its body dry on the straw. It would then frivolously slither over the youth's body, seeking a comfortable spot to sleep. Usually, it was the warm chest; sometimes, the smooth back; and occasionally, it would wrap around the sturdy arms or thighs, depending on its mood.

The young man's nature was peaceful and kind, like when the moon enters the fourth quarter, so he let the little green snake roam freely. He only refused the gifts the little green snake brought back, a beautiful Mexican butterflyfish, bitten to death, non-poisonous.

Whenever the elder arrived, it signified the beginning of the day, and the guard captain in his company would also leave behind a new candle. The little green snake would hide in advance, going into the underground water channels to hunt. Xiulote then took the wooden tablets with hieroglyphics and Han characters and explained the words to the elder, one by one. The principle behind this was the Six Principles of Chinese writing, which include pictograms, indicatives, ideograms, and phonetics.

"Proper characters as separate entities represent objects, combined, though, they form words." The writing at the front was all pictographic characters, used to represent the myriad things in this world, usually observable by the naked eye. These symbols should technically be referred to as "cash." Oracle Bone Script and Mexica pictographs are at this stage.

For example, "mountains, rocks, fields, earth, flowers, birds, fish, insects, sun, moon, fire, rivers, people, eyes, hands, feet..." and so on. These are all represented in the primitive pictographs of the Mexica people, and simplifying them into more concise pictographic characters is not too difficult a task.

The elder quickly grasped the concept of pictographic characters since these notions were already deeply rooted in his mind; now, they were simply being transformed into a more concise form.

Of course, the understanding of some characters can vary due to culture. For instance, the pictograph for "husband" is an adult man with a hairpin, but in the Mexica understanding, it is an adult warrior with feathers. The pictograph for "woman" is a woman kneeling with bent legs, representing the subordinate status of women. In Mexica culture, where women commonly held inheritance rights and could even be tribal leaders, the subordinate aspect was abandoned, altering the representation to denote the concept of homemaking.

For some pictographs of things not encountered, like "cattle, horses, sheep, carts," there was temporarily no way to explain. Xiulote could only vaguely describe them as large four-footed animals that could be domesticated and the transportation means pulled by such animals. However, the elder was quite interested in Xiulote's description of the fast-running chariots and horses.

In the eyes of the Empire's rulers, the efficiency of communication was the greatest limitation of the Empire's territory. The time created by distance was the main factor restraining the expansion of classical military empires, not simply spatial distance. The efficiency of communication from the ruling center to the frontier determined the loyalty of the local residents and the stability of the frontier governance.

The Mexica often conquered hostile city-states. In the far south, they even marched nearly a thousand kilometers to reach the edge of the Yucatan Rainforest. These subjugated city-states, due to the lengthy communication times and extremely low transport capacity, were forced to give up direct administration by the Mexica and instead became repeatedly rebellious and disloyal vassals.

Each time they waged war from afar, the number of troops they could deploy was very limited because human carriers' food transport capacity was critically low. This is why the Otomi's wars failed.

Before the invention of railway technology, the most efficient means of exchange were water and sea transport. Hence, the Roman Empire controlled the fast-communicating Mediterranean, while the Celestial Empire was keen on digging canals for efficient transportation.

"My child, in the boundless grasslands of the far north, there exists a great four-legged beast that gallops swiftly. This is its horn. Do you think we can domesticate it?"

The elder calmly looked at Xiulote as a statue-like samurai handed him a curved horn. Xiulote carefully examined it and blew a low "woo" sound; this should be the horn of a North American bison.

"It's worth a try, but it might take several generations, perhaps decades," Xiulote murmured hesitantly.

To tame the North American bison, one merely needed to capture enough juveniles, and success would eventually come. But taming was only about getting the bison accustomed to living alongside humans. Domestication, however, meant making the wild animals accustomed to working for humans, such as pulling carts or plowing fields, which required a tremendous investment of time and labor.

Thirty years later, Spanish colonists would bring European cattle to Cuba for the first time. Xiulote felt unsure about domesticating the North American bison within thirty years.

The elder nodded slightly. Shortly after, an envoy was summoned and quickly dispatched with a few brief instructions. Starting from this year, the contributions from the northern Vastec people would include "giant horned four-legged beast juveniles," totaling forty, in exchange for fewer quetzal feather outfits.

"To see is to recognize, to observe is to comprehend." Following the pictograms, there were self-explanatory characters. Self-explanatory characters were the first step from pictograms to ideograms, representing specific partial or relative concepts. The method involved adding abstract symbols to corresponding parts of the pictograms, indicating the scope they represented.

The evolution from pictograms to ideograms typically spanned thousands of years, and the original Mexica script was just on the cusp of this development.

Self-explanatory characters can be simply understood as abstract symbols, with "up," "middle," and "down" being the most representative. "Up," one horizontal stroke with an extension upwards, signifies

not only high places and vertical motion but also nobility. "Down," a horizontal stroke extending downwards. And "middle," a vertical stroke that's absolutely centered.

Other self-explanatory characters include "root," "vermillion," and "tip," which are additional symbols placed at the root, trunk, and treetop of the character for "tree." "Say" marks a short dash above the character for "mouth," representing the sound of spoken words. Notably, the symbol for the Mexica King means "great speaker," similar to the symbols, depicted as a gust of wind or cloud beside a person's mouth.

Upon hearing this, the elder nodded slightly. "Say" could serve as a symbolic emblem on the King's garb, becoming a symbol of authority.

Next came the most important ideograms, formed by combining two or more independent characters to express a comprehensive meaning. Ideograms are capable of conveying many abstract meanings and have a strong function in character creation. Ideograms have merged with Huaxia culture's concepts, representing a unique understanding of the essence of things.

Xiulote first explained the character "divine." On the left is "demonstrate," which indicates an altar, and on the right is "extend," which implies guidance. Divine spirits descend with the original qi and resonate with all things, then guide everything into existence. "Extend" can also signify thunder and lightning, and connecting an altar with the forces of nature symbolizes the divine spirits that communicate between heaven and earth.

This is the meaning of the Heavenly Divine in Huaxia culture, where the divine spirits merely guide all things into being, existing as a certain presence of natural power. All things coexist with the divine, without precedence over one another. In contrast, in Europe, divine spirits created all things, even the world itself was created by the divine.

The elder silently pondered, absorbing the culture within the Chinese characters, while also considering the future direction.

Testing the waters, Xiulote asked the elder's opinion, "What exactly does 'divine' mean?"

The elder glanced at the youth briefly and replied simply and definitely, "All things obey the divine, and the divine grants all things to the Mexica people."

Xiulote nodded silently, convinced without doubt.

Next, Xiulote moved on to "warrior," formed from the characters for halberd and stop. Stop represents feet, and halberd represents a weapon, meaning a person walking with a weapon, conquering and showing off. The elder nodded slightly; "warrior" is the foundation of Mexica society. The warrior holding a weapon is the symbol of the Mexica people.

"My child, what kind of weapon is this?" the elder inquired, pointing at the "halberd" character.

After pondering for a moment, Xiulote replied, "This represents a simplified war club. When we have enough copper mines, we can produce standardized copper weapons. They do not wear out easily, and thus only need a sharp copper blade as the point of attack, unlike war clubs that require many easily-worn obsidian shards."

The elder thought quietly. The replacement of stone weapons with copper ones was an inevitable trend, and the Tarasco people were also on the eve of a military transformation.

There were also characters like "shoot," which depicts an arrow fired by a bow with "inch" as a variant of arrow. "Cut," depicting a person chopping a tree with an axe. "Border," picturing a person carrying weapons and guarding the frontier.

The elder looked at "Border" for a moment. In the future, Jaguar and Eagle Warriors' war clothes could be engraved with the "Border" character, as these nobility warriors were responsible for collecting tributes from various vassal city-states.

Then there were characters like "double trees grow side by side to form a forest, three people gather to form a crowd, a fallen bird by the river becomes a swan. Two people following each other is 'to comply,' two hands dividing objects is 'to split,' sunlight shining is 'to dazzle.' The shape of a smaller upper portion and a larger bottom is 'point,' eight cuts converging is 'to divide,' a mountain valley is 'gorge.' The sun and moon shining together is 'bright,' rich colors is 'gorgeous,' beneficial insects under heaven are silkworms..."

"My child, what is a silkworm?" the elder asked thoughtfully, not recalling ever hearing of such a thing with his level of learning.

"The silkworm is an insect from the distant west that eats tree leaves and spins silk cocoons. Silk can be woven into fine, thin silk cloth, valued more than gold, no, valued even higher than the rarest Quetzal feathers."

Xiulote explained. In a Mexica abundant with gold and silver, exquisite feathers were far more precious, regarded as the gifts of divine spirits, while cheap gold was merely the excretion of divine spirits.

The distant west. The elder gave Xiulote a deep look, and said nothing.

These ideographic Chinese characters were the most difficult for Xiulote's accompanying warriors to master and understand, because their concepts were simple, and their thinking had not yet reached this level. The elder, however, was the fastest Chinese character learner Xiulote had ever seen, and ideograms posed no difficulty for him.

Finally, there were the most numerous of all: the phono-semantic characters. Phono-semantic characters emerged from the foundation of pictographic, indicative and ideographic characters. This is where Chinese characters started, moving from expressing ideas to expressing sounds. Over eighty percent of Chinese characters are phono-semantic, which actually have endless possibilities for expansion.

Phono-semantic characters can have the shape on the left and sound on the right, such as in 'money,' 'material,' 'melt,' 'fuse'; the shape on the right and sound on the left, like in 'release,' 'duck,' 'decapitate,' 'neck'; the shape on top and sound below, as in 'reed,' 'simple,' 'empty,' 'room'; the shape below and sound above, such as in 'firewood,' 'sauce,' 'basin,' 'jar'; the shape inside and sound outside, as in 'hear,' 'ask,' 'Min'; and the shape outside with the sound inside, seen in 'divert,' 'bandit,' 'crawl,' 'firm.'

To understand phono-semantic characters, one must devote a long time to learning and using them. However, once they master common patterns, they can actively create new phono-semantic characters. It can be imagined that, on different cultural soils, the Mexica people will certainly create their own unique new phono-semantic Chinese characters in the future.

The elder finally stopped here. He watched Xiulote quietly, his gaze softening for a moment, then returning to its usual indifference.

"My child, rest well. Tomorrow is Aweit's coronation ceremony; I will take you to watch the Great Sacrifice and the tributes. Afterward, comes your answer."

The elder turned and left, continuing without pause. He was like the chill of the Arctic Circle, moving onward, never halting, marked by austerity and solitude.

On the last night of the seven days, without candles, Xiulote spent a lightless, quiet night. The little green snake coiled peacefully on his chest, ready for tomorrow's farewell. That night, Xiulote dreamt of creating characters; as he wrote the character for 'divine,' it turned into the sun and blood.

Early the next day, melodious and joyful singing flowed through the Lake Capital City, like the chanting of divine spirits, announcing the change of human monarchs. Xiulote awoke to the singing. He shook his head with effort and vaguely saw the brightness and crimson of the Capital City.