Chapter 7
Alphabets and Characters

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines visual-verbal connections that can be perceived in individual letters. Cultural patterns that build our visual literacy include visual writings in many modes and styles, visible stories, and visual rhetoric. The text examines old ways of communication attained by developing writing systems and discusses kinds of characters making different alphabets. Further text is about human characters, traits of their personalities, and then examining the visual power of characters that constitute the modern English alphabet by developing alphabet-based projects linking letters with human characters and human emotions.

INTRODUCTION

This text is a component of a set of chapters about visual potency of communication going through writing characters that together make an individual alphabet. In this section of the book, after performing a study on the characteristics of Chinese calligraphy Jingying Zhen draws human characters just personifying calligraphy. Adel Alanmi writes about characters related to the Arabic language alphabet. This chapter reflects on expressive features of individual characters and letters used in ancient cultures, and then the Latin and the modern English alphabet.

ALPHABETS

Old and Contemporary Ways of Writing

It is almost impossible to estimate how many languages with written characters exist in the world now; however, it is well known that extinction of many languages occurs every day. Proto-writing conveyed limited information through graphic or mnemonic, supporting memory symbols rather than through

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writing systems in specific languages. Old ways of visual communication involved numbers and their various representations, clay tablets, hieroglyphs, and many more forms. Archeologists found objects with such markings and dated them as belonging to Neolithic era in China and Europe (as Egyptian hieroglyphs, Sumerian proto-cuneiforms, and Cretan scripts), Bronze Age both Indian and European, and Nigerian (African) scripts from the Iron Age. Old Babylonian (1900 to 1500 B.C.) and Proto-Sumerian tablets contained number notations as cuneiform scripts (Friberg, 1997). A clay tablet from before 3,500 years that was found in an ancient city near today Baghdad contains an agricultural instruction manual (Kramer, 1997).

The *quipu*, a system of knotted cords, is a numerical recording system that was used in the Inca Empire in the Andean region in the 15th and 16th centuries. Marcia and Robert Ascher (1980, 1997) explored this system and found that *quipus* provide mostly numeric information. Numbers can be read, as each cluster of knots is a digit. Gary Urton, a specialist in Andean archaeology posed that combination of fiber types, dye colors, and intricate knotting contains a seven-bit binary code capable of conveying more than 1,500 separate units of information.

Logograms

Several nations have been using writing systems consisting of logograms – written characters that denote a sound of a word or even a phrase. Their alphabets (sets of characters or graphs representing speech sounds) and syllabaries (sets of written characters representing syllables) represent sounds rather than meaningful concepts. For example, Chinese people developed logographic system *hanzi* very long ago, and Chinese language is written exclusively in *hanzi*. The *hanzi* characters have been adopted in a great number of Asian languages. Thus, a countless number of people use now the Chinese characters; they became the most widely adopted writing system in the world.

Japanese characters *kanji*, as well as Korean *hanja* have a considerable component of Chinese characters. Even though *hanzi* and *kanji* belong to the same writing system, they are in service of different languages and they are pronounced differently. Japanese people changed the meaning of some *hanz*i and added more *kanji* characters of their own. Digital versions (e.g., the Unicode characters) of *hanzi* and *kanji* do not differ. There are tens of thousands of Chinese characters when taking into account minor graphic variants. However, well-educated people learn about three to four thousand characters. Also in Japan, students in secondary school learn more than two thousand characters, and then they learn more in everyday use. The Japanese government is working on simplifying *kanji*, and Chinese government strives to simplify *hanzi*. In addition to *kanji*, Japanese people use two *kana* systems: syllabic writings typical of Japanese language: *hiragana* and *katakana*. In both these syllabaries, each syllable is represented by one character (kana). Every *katakana* character has its complement in *hiragana* that represents the same sound. *Hiragana* is more ancient than *katakana*; it is often used for literary works and personal writings. *Katakana* is often used for words adopted from foreign origin, scientific terms, and official documents. *Hiragana* characters have more curly shapes, while *katakana* is more angular. Latin script called *rōmaji* is also used.

Several other languages have been applying logograms. For example, some of Egyptian hieroglyphs are logograms. The Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian people used mostly clay tablets for writing cuneiforms – wedge-shape graphs probably invented in Mesopotamia by Sumerians about 3100 BC (Claiborne & Editors, 1974). Graphemes (the smallest meaningful units) in cuneiform, wedge shaped scripts from Mesopotamia, Persia, and Ugarit in northern Syria are also considered logograms.