



Definition: Peace is like a diamond. Smile a little.
 Pronunciation: Buòbi
 Place: Shanghai, China
 Time: Winter, 2012



Definition: The sound of earth.
 Pronunciation: oòh
 Place: Shanghai, China
 Time: Fall, 2013



Definition: Wood.
 Pronunciation: Huancung
 Place: Shanghai, China
 Time: Fall, 2013



Definition: Shape the air that you breathe.
 Pronunciation: wálooh
 Place: Shanghai, China
 Time: Winter, 2012

ecographs

news from nature



Definition: Transfer of bounty.
 Pronunciation: nàup
 Place: New York, USA
 Time: Summer, 2013



Definition: People making the world better.
 Pronunciation: lìlì
 Place: Shanghai, China
 Time: Winter, 2013



Definition: With nature mutually.
 Pronunciation: Inwihthon
 Place: Shanghai, China
 Time: Winter, 2012



Definition: Frugally using water.
 Pronunciation: rù
 Place: Shanghai, China
 Time: Winter



Definition: A little awareness.
 Pronunciation: Royginba
 Place: Shanghai, China
 Time: Winter, 2012



Definition: Exploring is breathing.
 Pronunciation: shibùmlì
 Place: Redwood City, USA
 Time: Spring, 2013



Definition: Water flowing always.
 Pronunciation: yongyù
 Place: Shanghai, China
 Time: Winter, 2012



Definition: A fish, value life.



Definition:
 Pronunciation:
 Place:
 Time:

I. Preface

'Ecographs' is an arts practice and public artwork that fosters communion with nature through a playful investigation of language.

What's an ecograph?

An ecograph is a visual sign that conveys the sense of an experience of nature. They are created through an iterative process of representing any experience of nature visually (i.e. by drawing), and describing it with words. Like Chinese ideographs the resulting artworks are highly idiosyncratic and suggestive but also easily reproduced by anyone.

This guide describes a step-by-step process for creating an ecograph. It is not the only design approach, but it is especially appropriate for anyone with no special background in art, calligraphy, ecological science, philosophy of language, wilderness survival, etc.

One begins by drawing a simple representation of anything man-made. It is an easy task, and through this threshold of playful creativity the mind is gradually guided to a relaxed consideration of encounters with nature.


Why Ecographs?

To the general public ecographs are not comprehensible like the words on this page, but their delightful double life as picture-and-symbol always invites interpretation. Every ecograph that is created may be added to the growing "dictionary" of symbols. The dictionary includes the creator's ecograph, his or her definition, the sound associated with it, and the place and time associated with the experience that it represents. In addition to a continuous exhibition online, 'Ecographs' is exhibited from time to time in public venues where people can select their favorites and draw them in new renditions using Chinese brush and ink.

Whether communicating something funny, whimsical, unsettling, profound or otherwise, ecographs demonstrate that the potential for meaningful dialogue among humans and the rest of nature is as rich today as when human language first evolved. Out on the open savannas early humans had no basis to differentiate signs among the tribe from signs in the wild. Today, we live in strangely autistic conditions. To open our minds to meanings in nature which might be relevant to us is to invite a sort of ecological reconciliation in combination with personal growth undreamed of in the course of our ordinary everyday intra-human exchange.



II. Beginning



Ecographs are little artworks but they are full of spirit. To begin creating one first bring yourself consciously into the *present*. Physical action like rotating your arms around will help raise your awareness. A setting that is conducive to noticing subtleties is helpful, e.g. subtleties of sound and light, as well as the movements of one's own body. If you are among a group, the presence of others around you will help elevate your senses. If you are proceeding on your own, it might help to know that there are about 200 people as of this writing that have created about 200 different ecographs. Yours will be approximately number 201.

Here is a list of implements that will be needed:

A blank sheet of regular writing paper

A pencil and eraser

A Chinese brush

A container of Chinese ink



A bowl for the ink

A bowl with water in it

Several sheets of calligraphy paper (watercolor paper is fine also)

Your workspace should be a regular table without any clutter, but it is also possible to begin by drawing in a notepad outdoors, on a bus, or wherever one can draw. There are two basic stages in the process that follows, a design stage using pencil and paper, and a painting stage using brush and ink. Only for the the ink painting do you really need to be working on a flat surface.

Lastly, this guidebook may be used as a template for a single workshop (90 minutes is a good length) or for a series of workshops over several days, weeks or months, or simply as inspiration for an activity to explore in your free time. The possible formats and variations for creating ecographs is limited only by your imagination!



III. Ecograph Design

Step 1.

Fold the blank sheet of paper in half so that it resembles a pamphlet and then draw a grid on its facing side dividing it into six boxes as below. Using a pencil draw a simple picture in each box as follows:

1. Any man-made thing.

Really anything. Keep it simple, like cave art!

4. Something in nature you have encountered that is breathed, eaten, absorbed or otherwise consumed.

Alternatively: something that is produced.

2. A part of the body

5. Something in nature you have encountered that breathes, eats, absorbs, or otherwise consumes.

Alternatively: something that produces.

3. Someone or a group of people that you know.

Don't worry about accurate representation, stick figures are okay.

6. An experience of nature you have had anytime in your life.

Close your eyes and recall this experience. To draw it, you might choose something on the horizon, or something up close, something beneath you or up in the sky. Any scene that you remember is fine.



Important tip:

The term "experience of nature" is intentionally vague and may apply to a very broad range of experiences. Any experience that left an impression on your memory, no matter how small, and which seems to relate to this phrase is fine.

III. Ecograph Design

Step 2.

Open the pamphlet and draw a horizontal line bisecting one side. Now go back and look at drawing 6 from Step 1. Redraw it above the horizontal line.

In the space below the line, write a short statement of why this experience has remained in your memory.

Step 4.

Using the space on the right panel experiment with integrating and stylizing your picture(s) into a symbol. Any combination of simplification, accentuation, reshaping, rearranging etc. can be used.

The goal is to create a visual mark that is **easy for anyone to reproduce**, but that retains the essence of the meaning you wish to convey.

At the same time, continue revising your statement into a short caption.

Step 3.

Consider the statement you just wrote. It may seem quite simple, but there is probably also a hint of something meaningful.

Go back and look at your drawings from Step 1. With your statement in mind, pick another drawing that seems related, however loosely. Redraw it next to the drawing from Step 2 and revise your statement to account for this new addition.

Repeat this step until you are satisfied with the meaning expressed in your pictures and words.

Important tip:

As you start Step 3 pause and look at a few examples of Chinese characters (see glossary in section V). Learning about their components, meaning, and evolution over time will provide helpful inspiration for the development of your ecograph.



III. Ecograph Design

Step 5.

Draw your finished symbol on the back panel...

...and write it's caption below.

Then choose a sound to associate with your ecograph. This might sound like a word in your native language, or it might sound foreign and strange. It might be long and multi-syllabic, or short as a "click".

If your sound can be written alphabetically, write it on the back panel with the caption. Otherwise write a short description of how the sound is produced.

Finally, write down the approximate time and place where your "experience of nature" occurred, e.g. "London, 2002".



III. Ecograph Design

Step 6.

Create your ecograph. This is the archetype from which all subsequent renditions will be derived. For this step use Chinese brush and ink on rice paper. Chinese brush and ink is a naturally expressive medium, and will help produce a strong and striking visual image whether or not you have any previous experience with Chinese painting or calligraphy.

The ecograph should be centered on the paper, and drawn roughly as large as your forearm is long. This will probably take several attempts before you are satisfied.



Final note:

Are there any questions that have come up during this design process that call for further research? For instance you wanted to get a closer look at the structure of a particular species of plant or insect. Following up on these questions can lead to new thoughts about your ecograph design. All ecographs can be thought of as works in progress, subject to continuous revision and change.

IV. Exhibition

Now that you have created your ecograph it's time to send it out into the world of human culture! To begin, if you have created your ecograph as part of a group you might spend a few minutes introducing your artwork to everyone else. Remember that ecographs, like all artifacts of language, are works in progress. Even if your ecograph seems incomplete there is no cause for embarrassment or inhibition.

Next, your ecograph can be added to the growing "dictionary" that forms the heart of the 'Ecographs' public artwork. The dictionary is essentially an online database which includes an image of each symbol and its caption, including definition, pronunciation and the time and place it is associated with. Information about uploading ecographs can be found [here](http://ecographs.org):

ecographs.org

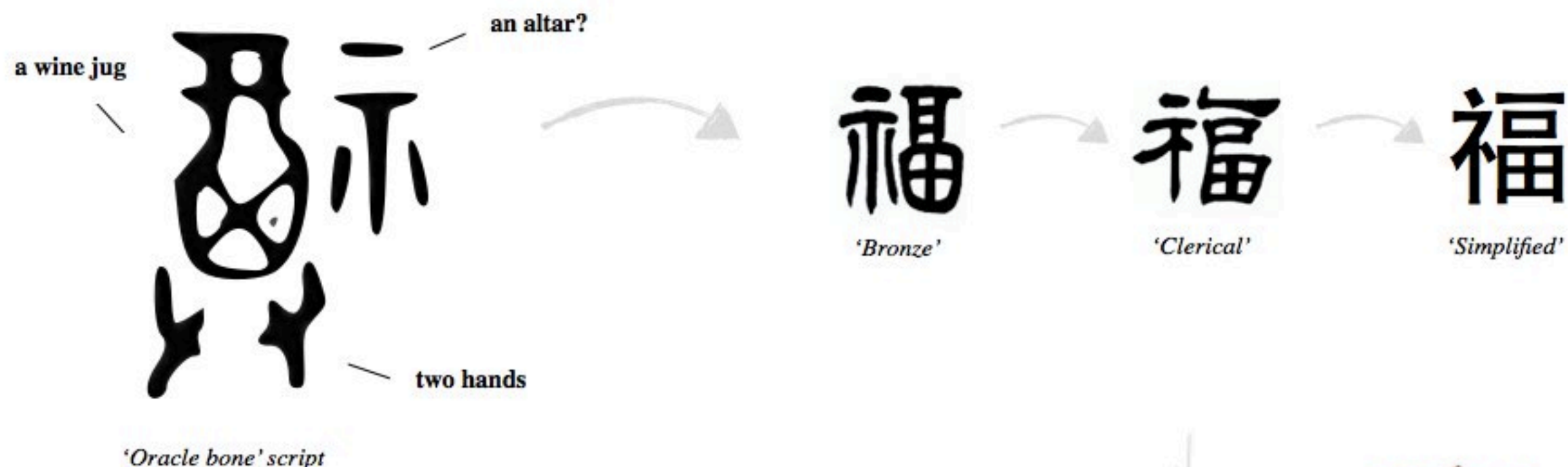


Finally, get involved in a public exhibition of 'Ecographs'. The exhibition format consists of a giant standing screen of rice paper on which visitors draw the ecographs of their choice from the "dictionary". Getting involved may mean spending an hour or two as a volunteer, introducing visitors to the project and assisting as they draw, helping with exhibition set-up and planning, or coordinating an exhibition yourself! All the tools and information you will need to help propagate this artwork and send your ecograph out into the world are available on the website, or simply send an inquiry to: info@art-spring.org.

For more information about the 'Ecographs' public artwork check the "About" section at the end of this guide.



V. Chinese Character Glossary



Pronunciation: Fú

Translation: Happiness, good fortune

Interpretation: A household with wine to offer the gods is blessed with good fortune.

Comment: 福 has a highly cherished meaning in traditional Chinese culture. It is a popular decorative motif on household objects, architecture, and all forms of visual art. Consequently it has been rendered in many different ways, often deviating considerably from the basic ideograph.

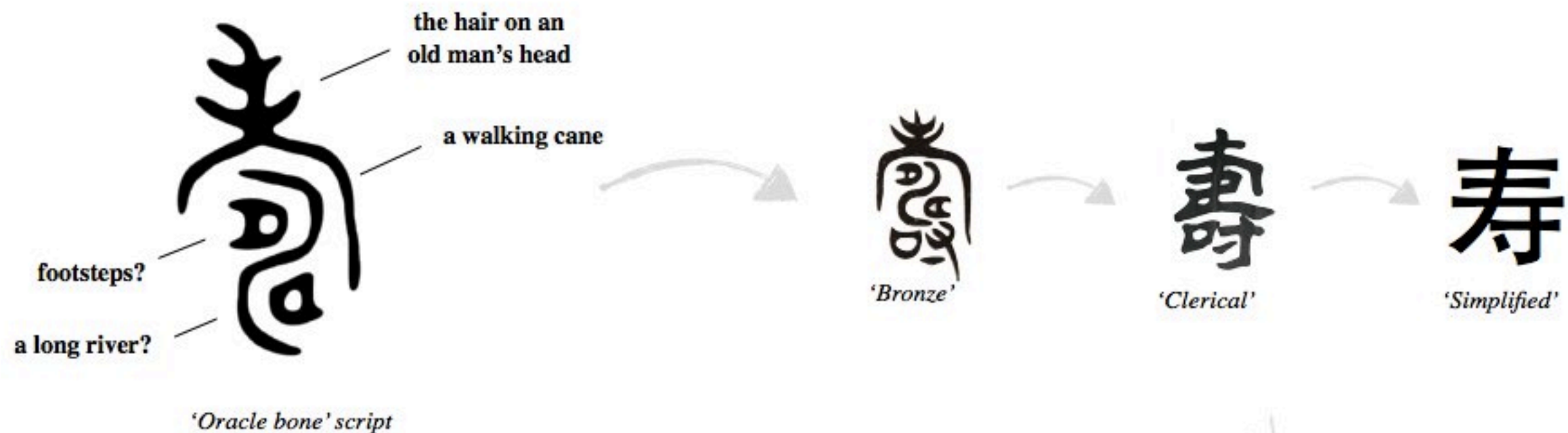


Facade of Hong Kong restaurant Fook Lam Moon



100 seals with renderings of 福

V. Chinese Character Glossary



Pronunciation: Shòu

Translation: Long life

Interpretation: An old man's long hair and cane are indicative of a long life; a walk along a river is a metaphor for one's life journey.

Comment: Longevity has been an important value throughout China's history, and different renderings of 寿 are used widely across cultural forms. The hair and walking cane are the same as found in the character for "old" (老). Scholars disagree over what the lower components of the oracle bone versions signify.

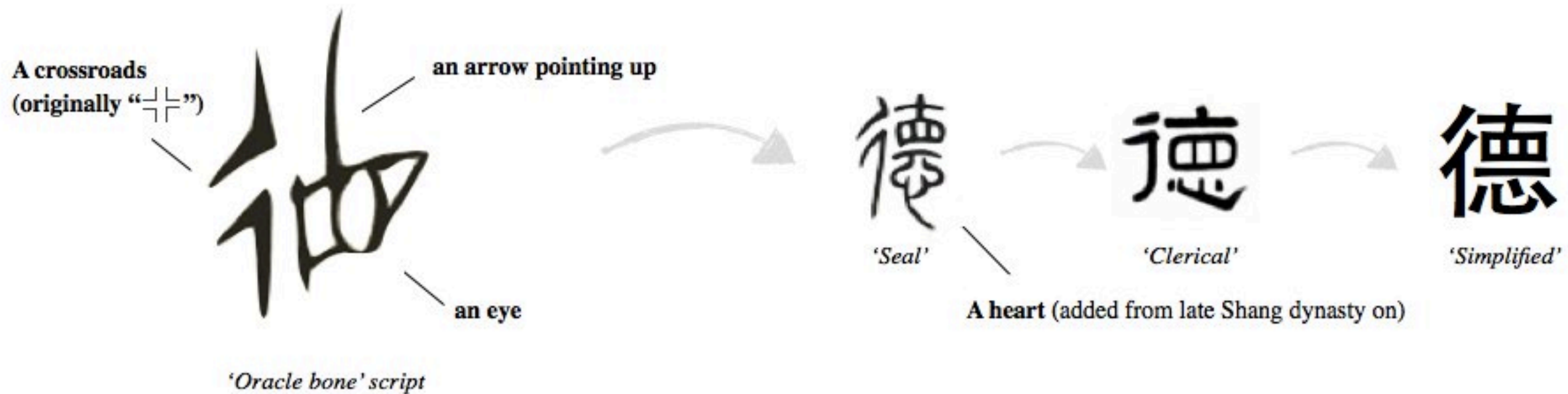


寿 as doorway adornment



100 renderings of 寿

V. Chinese Character Glossary



Pronunciation: Dé

Translation: Virtue, Morality

Interpretation: Rectitude is indicated by an arrow and eye, looking straight across an intersection. The heart suggests interiority or emotional sensibility. Together the symbol stands for inner rectitude, or morality.

Comment: Inspecting a military file along a road may have been the initial context for this symbol, that later became associated with the qualities of the inspector himself, i.e. the military commander. Today 德 has no military connotations, but it conveys an understanding of virtue as “seeing straight from one’s heart.”



V. Chinese Character Glossary

a mother with
outstretched
arms



a child

'Oracle bone' script



'Bronze'



'Regular'



'Simplified'

Pronunciation: Bǎo

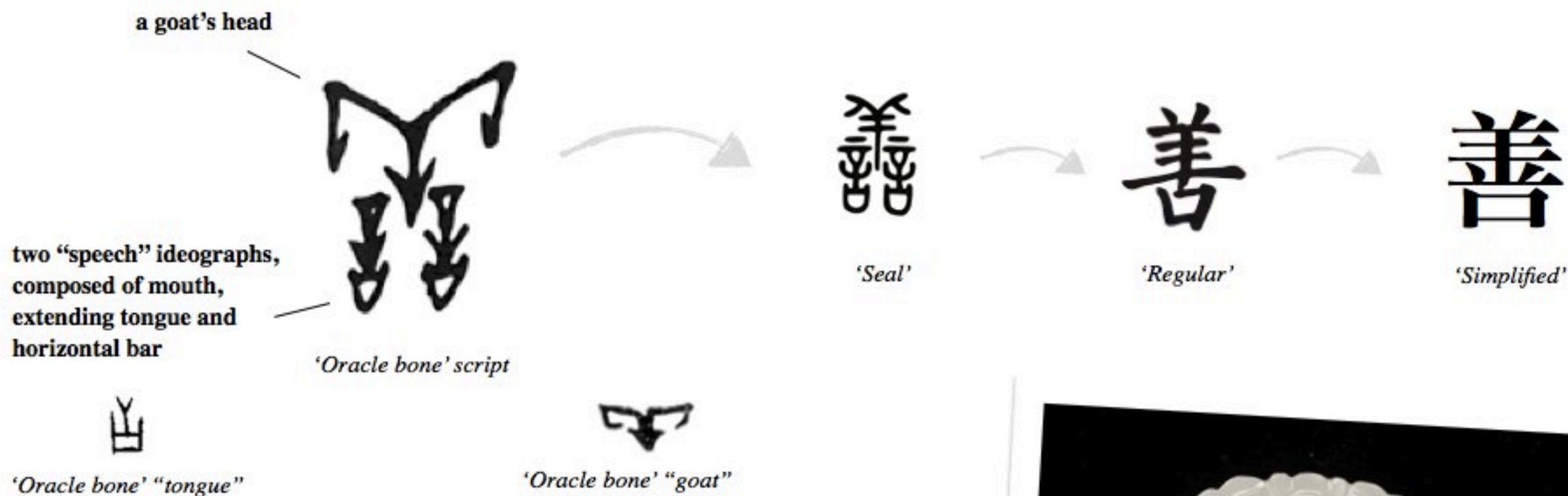
Translation: Protect

Interpretation: This is a straightforward ideograph of a mother embracing her child and providing protection from harm.

Comment: The meaning of the modern script has broadened beyond the relationship exemplified by mother and child. 环保 (environmental protection), 保险 (insurance), 保证 (guarantee) are a few examples of words in the same family. This raises an important question: to what degree do the symbols we use constrain our ideas? In other words, if conveyed through other symbols how might these concepts be differently understood?



V. Chinese Character Glossary



Pronunciation: Shàn

Translation: Good, Kind, Charitable

Interpretation: The horns of a goat were used for decorative headgear and masks worn on days of celebration, and later the pictograph for goat became a symbol for the aura of celebrations in general. The horizontal bar on top of the tongues represents the spoken word. Together the symbol suggests two people exchanging words in a positive, mutually supportive spirit.

Comment: This is a good example of how abstract ideas can be expressed by building up connected elements (i.e. mouth + tongue + horizontal bar), while other ideas can be introduced by adding separate elements (i.e. goat).



The 善 symbol has been further compounded in this talisman by the addition of two monkeys and a bat, which have their own significance.

V. Chinese Character Glossary

two strands of silk thread

a battle ax

a person

幾

'Bronze' script

'Oracle bone' "person"

人

'Oracle bone' "battle ax"

戈

幾

'Seal'

幾

'Regular'

几

'Simplified'

Pronunciation: Jǐ

Translation: How many, how much?

Interpretation: Two strands of silk indicate the quality of being fine or minute. A person holding an ax indicates danger. Combined, the ideograph suggests that small things can be dangerous, or more generally that quantity matters.

Comment: The radical stylization of the simplified script seems to have been in response to the fact that this is such a frequently used character. This is a great conversation starter about the pros and cons of simplified script, and a good example of how the letters of the alphabet got their start.

几者动之微，吉之先见几而作，不俟终日。

— 易经

"Minutest signs are the slight beginnings of movement, and the earliest indications of good (or bad) fortune. The exemplary person sees the minutest signs, and acts accordingly without waiting for a single day."

-- Book of Changes
(James Legge, trans.)

VI. About

'*Ecographs*' is a collaborative public artwork involving diverse organizations and individuals. Communications are facilitated through ARTSpring, a China-based curatorial hub that brings arts practitioners together with organizations that are searching for new ways of connecting with people. For more information about ARTSpring programs and publications please visit the website www.art-spring.org.

'Ecographs' was designed as part of an ongoing workshop series held with a group of university and high-school students in Shanghai. The content and structure of 'Ecographs' is in continual development. Suggestions, submissions, inquiries and collaborations are invited. Please visit www.art-spring.org for updates and to get in touch.

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