

# 物

How the character for “ox”  
evolved to encompass everything  
within the cosmos

万事万物，起源于“牛”？

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In a Tibetan creation myth, it is the sacrifice of an ox that brings our world into being. The yak, now a revered animal in Tibetan culture, brought order to the chaos of the universe. Its head formed towering mountain ranges, its tail became expansive roads, and its hide painted the vast wilderness with life. This myth echoes the ancient belief, shared by many ethnic Han people, that all natural phenomena and living things are ultimately born from cattle.

This notion is captured in the character 物 (wù). It first appeared in oracle bone script over 3,000 years ago, as a compound of 牛 (niú, ox, yak) and 勿 (wù), which contributes to its pronunciation. Initially, this denoted an ox with multicolored fur, but *The Analytical Dictionary of Chinese Characters* (《说文解字》) from the 2nd century states that “物 represents all entities. The ox is a being of significance, since all things under heaven arise from the ox’s plowing. (物，万物也。牛为大物，天地之数，起于牵牛。Wù, wànwù yě. Niú wéi dà wù, tiāndì zhī shù, qǐ yú qiān niú.)”

While the character has largely retained its form and pronunciation through the ages, its meaning has broadened far beyond the original reference. In contemporary Chinese, 物 encompasses various aspects of existence, from the biological to





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ORACLE BONE SCRIPT

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CLERICAL SCRIPT

Illustration by Fengzheng Yisheng and Cai Tao



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## *Beyond physical objects, 物 also ventures into intangible realms, representing the content of speech and writing.*

the cultural, such as 人物 (rénwù, person), 动物 (dòngwù, animal), 植物 (zhíwù, plant), 食物 (shíwù, food), and 文物 (wénwù, cultural relic). Places like 植物园 (zhíwùyuán, botanical garden) and 动物园 (dòngwùyuán, zoo) serve as urban sanctuaries connecting us with nature and lead to important discussions on 动物权益 (dòngwù quányì, animal rights). 生物 (shēngwù, living beings) encompasses all life and reminds us of our fundamental link to the natural world, as humans are but a kind of 高等生物 (gāoděng shēngwù, advanced animal).

Many idioms featuring 物 implicitly advocate for the traditional Chinese virtue of moderation. 玩物丧志 (wánwù sàngzhì) warns against losing ambition due to indulgence in hobbies; 暴殄天物 (bào tiǎn tiānwù) criticizes the squandering of natural resources; 物极必反 (wùjí bǐfǎn) suggests that extremes will inevitably lead to their reversals; while the proverb 一物降一物 (yí wù xiáng yí wù) reminds us that everything has its match and no one is invincible.

Beyond physical objects, 物 also ventures into intangible realms, representing the content of speech and writing. 言之有物 (yánzhī yǒuwù) describes speech with meaningful content, as opposed to 空洞无物 (kōngdòng wúwù), or empty talk. The idiom 睹物思人 (dǔwù sīrén, to think of someone when seeing something associated with them) captures the human connection to objects and memories. Likewise, the nostalgia for a bygone time is poignantly expressed by the sorrowful lines of Song dynasty (960 – 1279) poet Li Qingzhao (李清照): “Things remain the same while the people change, and everything is over. I wish to speak, yet my tears fall first. (物是

人非事事休，欲语泪先流。 Wùshì rénfēi shìshì xiū, yù yǔ lèi xiān liú.)”

Philosophically, 物 extends to 唯物主义 (wéiwù zhǔyì), or materialism, which asserts that reality is materially based and independent of human perception. The academic term 物化 (wùhuà, objectification) has recently entered public discourse, especially in discussions related to gender and sexual harassment, highlighting the character’s role in framing our understanding of reality.

Eventually, 物 evolved to denote people or environments beyond oneself. 待人接物 (dàirén jiēwù) refers to the way we engage with others, and 恃才傲物 (shìcái àowù) describes an arrogant and contemptuous individual. The phrase 物我两忘 (wùwǒ liǎngwàng) describes a state of complete absorption in an activity to the point where one becomes oblivious to oneself and one’s surroundings, often experienced during moments of intense creativity or focus.

Another interesting term is 物色 (wùsè). While it can be defined in today’s terminology as searching selectively (such as when a director casts actors), back in the Spring and Autumn period (770 – 476 BCE) it referred to the hue of animal fur, harking back to the character’s ancient origin.

In our present-day world, filled with an abundance of material wealth, one might wonder if it is still possible to remain true to oneself amidst the allure of worldly possessions. The answer may lie in the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (庄子) from around the 4th century BCE, who advises us to “物物而不物于物 (wù wù ér bú wù yú wù, make use of things without being dominated by them)” — a timeless piece of wisdom for reflection.