

ON THE CHINESE CHARACTER “春”

The charms of spring can't be locked into a box, but they can be quickly summarized in a single meaningful character.

春意渐渐地浓了，扑面而来的是挡也挡不住的温暖气息，正如这个小小的“春”字，带我们览尽无限春光。

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“春”的意思是春天，春天是一年四季的第一个季节。每当春天来的时候人们都要庆祝，春节就是庆祝春天到来的节日。

春天来的时候，冰雪消融、大地复苏，在春天温暖的阳光照耀下，草儿醒了，花儿开了，树儿绿了。很多人可能不知道，“春”字最早的字形就是表示这样的意思。

在距今3000多年前的甲骨文里，“春”字由“日、草、屯”组成，也有的写做“日、木、屯”。“日”是太阳，“草、木”指花草树木，意思是说花草树木生长的季节就是温暖的春天；“屯”没有意思，它只表示读音，那时候“春”字念“屯”，后来语音发生了变化，“春”字的读音跟“屯”就相差比较大了。

“春”字在周代的铜器铭文里写成“𡗗”在上面，“屯”在中间，“日”在底下的形状。秦代小篆里的“春”字没有什么大的变化，只是把“屯”的末笔向右边弯折过去，而且写得也比较端正了。

在古文字向隶书体转变的过程中，为了书写快捷方便，圆转弯曲的线条逐步变得平直，一些线条的连接方式也相应改变，结果“春”字上面的“草”和“屯”在隶书中就变成了“三”加个“人”的样式了，这种写法一直延续至今。

虽然“春”的字形变了，它的意思却没有变，“春”字大多表示春天的意思。例如：“春光”是说春天的景色，“春意”是说春天的气象，“春游”是说春天到郊外游玩，“春联”是春节时贴的对联，我们喜欢吃的“春卷”古代叫做“春饼”，原本是立春也就是春天开始的那天要吃的食品。

春天给人类带来温暖，给大地带来生气，人们喜爱“春”字，所以由“春”字组成的词语也都表示好的意思，例如：“春风得意”形容一个人事业顺心而洋洋得意的样子；“满面春风”形容一个人愉快和蔼的面容；“妙手回春”赞美医生医道高明，能把垂危的病人医治好；“春心”则是指男女之间相思爱慕的心情。

由于隶书的“春”和另一个汉字“蠢”上部分的写法变得相同，下部分又比较接近，这两个字特别容易弄错，我们看书写字的时候一定要小心仔细。“春”字后来又组成了“蠢、蠢”等字，这些字里面的“春”字只表示读音，不表示意思。

Sunshine on runny snow banks, small buds rustling in the trees, the fresh smell of new grass, mud, squishy ground, rubber boots... don't tell me you hate spring. Well, the charm of Chinese works its magic here again as it takes all the fun of this glorious season and bundles it up into one syllable. Three thousand years ago, in oracle bone inscriptions, the character 春 (chūn), or spring, was made up of the very elements of spring: 日 (rì, sun) and 草 (cǎo, grass), or 日 (sun) and 木 (mù, wood). 屯 (tún) was attached as a phonetic so 春 was actually originally pronounced tún.

During the Zhou Dynasty, from 1046 B.C. to 256 B.C., bronze inscriptions rearranged the character by putting “grass” on top, “tun” in the middle, and the “sun” on the bottom. The 屯 radical then took on a new look in seal script, developed during the 221 B.C. to 206 B.C. Qin Dynasty. The radical's final stroke was curved to the right, and the whole character started to take on a much more symmetrical form.

During the transition from the ancient characters to the official script, to increase efficiency, the time-consuming curves were changed into straight lines. 草 and 屯 partnered up to become the head radical, combined with 三 (sān, three) and 人 (rén, human being), as it appears today.

While the character evolved, and lost its clear reference to grass, 春 still retained its original spring meaning. This can be seen in words such as 春光 (chūnguāng, spring scenery), 春意 (chūnyì, spring is in the air), and even in everyone's favorite, 春卷 (chūnjuǎn, spring rolls). Once known as 春饼 (chūnbǐng, spring pancakes), these are traditionally eaten on the first day of spring.

Spring offers a fresh start, and brings smiles to faces, so the character resounds with positive connotations. 春风得意 (chūnfēng déyì) means “enjoying success,” while if someone is 满面春风 (mǎnmiàn chūnfēng), it means they are “radiating with happiness.” A miraculous cure can be described as 妙手回春 (miào shǒu huí chūn), and 春心 (chūnxīn) refers to the feelings between two lovers.

Many characters do use the radical 春 as a phonetic, and have nothing to do with the season itself, such as 蠢 (chūn, a stinkbug), and 蠢 (chǔn, clumsy). Also, keep your eye out for 舂 (chōng), or “to pound,” which bears a striking resemblance to 春. For a pleasant start to the year, you really don't want to get these two mixed up.

Translated by Nicholas Richards.

The evolution of the character 春:

Oracle bone inscription

Bronze inscription

Seal script

Clerical script

Regular script