

On the Character

Why is the character for “family” a pig inside a house?

“家”是人居住的地方，可是最早的“家”字里面为什么画的是一头猪呢？

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means home. The character 家 (jiā) first appeared over 3,000 years ago on Shang Dynasty bronzes. At that time, it was just a drawing that depicted a house with a pig inside it. Looking at the pictures, you can see that while one is quite complex and the other very simple, they're both lifelike.

Later, there were significant changes to the form of the character. On Shang Dynasty oracle bones, the character 家 slowly loses the feeling of being a drawing, and today's 家 is written with some of the strokes used to write all modern characters: dots, horizontal strokes, downward diagonal strokes both right and left, and so on. Although the form has changed, the structure hasn't. The top of the modern character (宀) still represents a house, and the 豕 below still represents a pig.

What was the earliest meaning of this character? More than 2,000 years ago, the first Chinese dictionary defined it as “home;” in other words, 家 is a place where people live. So why is there a pig inside it and not a person?

One way of explaining it is that by the Shang Dynasty, animal husbandry had already been developed. People had domesticated pigs, sheep, oxen and horses. Because pigs were kept indoors with their owners, having a pig inside the house indicated that it was a place where people also lived; that's why “a house with a pig in it” could be used to write a character that meant “the place where people live.” Sometimes in the oracle bones one can even see versions of 家 that depict a house with two pigs inside.

In the 3,000 years between the Shang Dynasty and the modern



era, 家's meaning has been extended to include things that are related to home. The modern 家 is most often used to mean “family” and “the place where a family lives.” For example, when we say “our 家 has five people” or “the father is the master of the 家” it means family. When we say “Our 家 is in Beijing, and going back to our 家 is very easy,” the meaning is “the place where our family is.”

家 can also be used to describe a certain kind of person or indicate an identity, as in 渔家 (yújiā, fisherman), 农家 (nóngjiā, farmer) and 东家 (dōngjiā, landlord). Additionally, 家 can be added to designate a school of thought. For example: 儒家 (Rújiā, Confucianism), 道家 (Dàojiā, Daoism), 百家争鸣 (bǎi jiā zhēngmíng, 100 schools of thought contend), and 一家之言 (yì jiā zhī yán, one particular school of thought).

家 is also used to express a person who has mastered a specialized area of knowledge or a specific activity, like 专家 (zhuānjiā, expert), 科学家 (kēxuéjiā, scientist), 社会活动家 (shèhuì huódòngjiā, social activist), 画家 (huàjiā, artist), 音乐家 (yīnyuèjiā, musician), and 舞蹈家 (wǔdǎojiā, dancer). The 兵家 in the expression 胜败乃兵家常事 (shèng bài nǎi bīng jiā cháng shì, victory and defeat are common in military operations) refers to someone who has mastered military affairs.

Sometimes, as a way of showing respect, people will call experts 大家 (dàjiā). For example, you might say that somebody is a calligraphy 大家, or somebody is a literary 大家. Here, we must be careful not to confuse this 大家 with the 大家 that's used to mean "everybody," as in "请大家安静。" (Qǐng dàjiā ānjìng. "Please be quiet, everyone.")

Translated by Charles Custer

说“家”

“家”字最早见于3000多年前的商代铜器铭文，那时“家”字就像是一幅图画，画的是房子里面有一头猪。你看图中这两个“家”字，一个画得仔细，一个画得简单，但是都画得十分逼真。

后来“家”字的形体发生了很大的变化。从商代甲骨文到周代铜器铭文，从秦朝小篆到汉代隶书，“家”字逐渐失去了图画意味，今天的楷书“家”字是由点、横、撇、捺等笔画组成的。“家”字的形体虽然发生了变化，但是结构没有变，它上面的“宀”表示房子，下面“豕”表示猪。

“家”字最早的意思是什么呢？2000多年前的《说文解字》说：“家，居也。”意思是说：家是人居住的地方。很多人不明白，“家”既然是人居住的地方，为什么房子里不是人而是猪呢？

有一种解释说，商代畜牧业已经很发达

了，那时候人们养猪、养羊，养牛、养马。因为当时人们是把猪养在家里的，房子里有猪，说明有人居住，于是人们就用房子里有猪的“家”字来表示人的住所。在甲骨文中偶尔还能见到房子里有两头猪的“家”字呢。

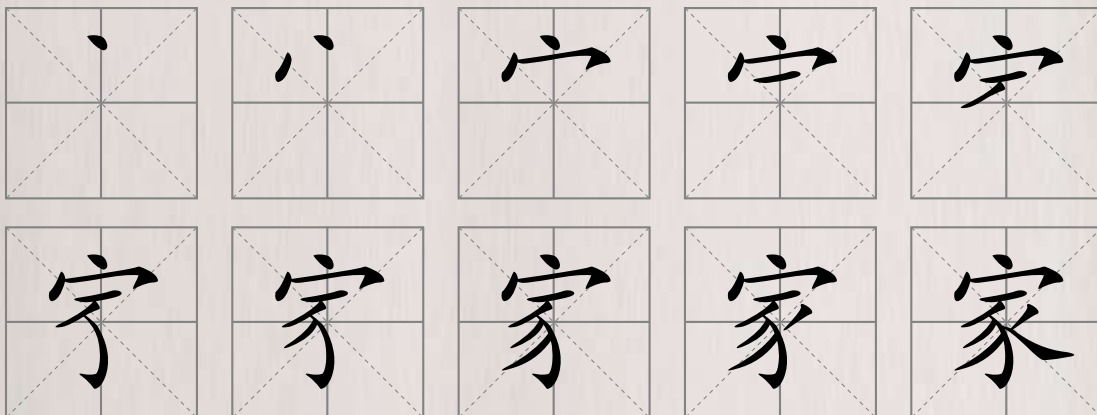
从商代到今天，3000多年来，由于语言的发展和变化，“家”字由表示人的住所引申出了一些相关的含义。现在“家”字最常用的是家庭和住所的意思，例如：我们说“我家有五口人，爸爸是一家之主”的时候，这个“家”表示家庭；我们说“我的家在北京，回家很方便”的时候，这个“家”字表示家庭的住所。

“家”字也用来表示经营某种行业的人家或者具有某种身份的人，例如：渔家、农家、东家、店家等等。“渔家”是以捕鱼为业的人家，“农家”是从事农业生产的人家。此外，人们把学术流派也称做“家”，例如：儒家、道家、百家争鸣、一家之言等等。

“家”字还表示掌握专门学识或者从事某种专门活动的人，例如：专家、科学家、社会活动家以及画家、音乐家、舞蹈家等等。我们常说的“胜败乃兵家常事”的“兵家”就是掌握军事知识，用兵打仗的人。

有时人们为了表示尊敬，把著名的专家称做“大家”，例如：说某人是书法大家，某人是文学大家。遇到这类语句时我们要当心，不要把表示著名专家的“大家”，误解为我们平常说“请大家安静”的那个表示一定范围所有人的“大家”。

Stroke order



Pronunciation: jiā

Strokes: 10

Radical: 宀

Used in the words

to move bānjiā 搬家
furniture jiājù 家具