

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Fertility Culture in Chinese Characters from the Medical Point of View

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**Abstract:** In this paper, 9 Chinese characters related to fertility culture are listed and analyzed from three aspects: gestate of life, birth of life and upbringing of life. Combined with the research of ancient and modern Chinese and western medicine, the definition of Chinese characters composition and evolution is further enriched.

**Key words:** Fertility culture; Chinese characters; Medical;

Around 4000 BC, the Chinese civilization along the Yellow River gave birth to a primitive script that has evolved and been used to this day, making each character an historical record of what our ancestors saw, heard and thought. Fertility, as an important social event in the continuation of the nation, has the characteristics of practicality, uniqueness, mystery and worship<sup>[1-2]</sup>. Childbirth as a social and medical event in modern society, many concepts and phenomena still exist in Chinese folk culture, which is also consistent with the practice of modern Chinese and Western medicine.

## 1. The conception of life: Pregnancy, Expectancy, Gestation

1.1 Pregnancy: This character is up and down structure.

Annotation of *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* said The structure of this Chinese character consists of the Chinese word Nǎi (means be; be really; be indeed) and Zǐ (means son). The original meaning is to conceive a child. In the oracle bone and ancient bronze objects texts, the word Pregnancy is an associative character. It does graphically outline a side-standing figure with a child in the belly. The character Nǎi above is interpreted in the book *Shuo Wen* as *The pronunciation, which requires the use of the tongue to obstruct airflow, can make the mouth breathe poorly*. Li Shizhen records in his book *Research on Pulse-taking*: when

the slippery pulse appears in the general population it means that the person has problems such as food stagnation, phlegm and blood stasis that stagnate Yang Qi and lead to poor Qi flow, whereas in a woman who is not ill it is a sign of pregnancy.<sup>[3]</sup> That is, The word Nǎi fits the meaning of *poor Qi flow*. So the character for Pregnancy may have started out as a pictograph, expressing the presence of a child in a woman's womb, but its later evolution may be deduced from the fact that as the ancients made further observations and summaries. They found that pregnant women would have slippery veins, similar to the condition of *poor Qi flow*. The word Nǎi was then used to refer to this phenomenon.

1.2 Expectancy: This character is a phonological symbol.

Shuo wen pointed out that Expectancy is also used to refer to pregnancy. If we take the character Expectancy part, the character on the left represents a woman, while the character on the right resembles a spindle used for winding threads, and is used to refer to the growing belly of a pregnant woman. The character Rén means big as stated in the *Er Ya Shi Gu*<sup>[4]</sup>. From the perspective of Chinese medicine, the addition of a *people* next to the character Rén is one of the important meridians of the human body, the Ren Meridian, which is known as the sea of the Yin meridian and has the function of regulating the Qi and blood of the Yin meridian and promoting reproductive

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function. In the Huangdi's Inner Classic, it is said, *When a woman is about 14 years old, she will have the conditions for sexual maturity, the Ren Meridian will be open and the Taichong Meridian will be flourishing, and she will start to have menstruation, so that she can become pregnant and have a child.*

### 1.3 Gestation:

When a woman is pregnant and her body changes, she is said to be pregnant. In the book Shuo Wen, it is explained that all words from the character **Chén** have the meaning of movement. The word **Chén** is a hieroglyphic character, which in oracle script resembles a worm. Its original meaning is a worm that moves. In March, when the Yang energy moves and the thunder and lightning vibrate, it is also the time for people to farm, all things are born. And from a modern medical perspective of the growth and development of the fetus during pregnancy, at the end of the 12th week, the placental structures are formed, the fetus is basically formed, the limbs can move, the five senses can be distinguished, and the beating heart is visible<sup>[5]</sup>. Perhaps this is not a coincidence, but rather that the ancestors, by observing the workings of the world, perceived the signs of that new life within the mother and recorded this perception in Chinese characters.

## 2. The birth of life: Childbirth, Birth-giving, Smoothly, Reverse

### 2.1 Childbirth:

In Shuo Wen this character means *The process of giving birth*. From the oracle bone and inscriptions on ancient bronze objects, the character Childbirth appears to be a child between parted legs. On the left is the word for female, and on the right is the verb which was initially interpreted as meaning to take off a hat just as the process of separating the fetus from its mother by shedding its fetal membranes. This process called Childbirth is both separation and rebirth.

### 2.2 Birth-giving:

This character is a verb, associated character. Means to nurture, to give birth to. In the eyes of the Chinese ancients, heaven was the father and the earth was like a mother, nurturing all things with its full, generous embrace. The character Birth-giving has the word **Měi**(means every; per; often) on its left side. The original meaning of the character **Měi** is that the grass and trees grew in abundance under the nurturing of the Mother Earth. On the right side of Birth-giving is a **Liú**, which in oracle script is a small person with its head downwards and water below its head. Modern medicine shows

that 99.75% of full-term pregnancies are delivered in a longitudinal fetal lie, with 95.75-97.75% fetal presentation is head-first<sup>[6]</sup>. At the time of labor, the membranes rupture naturally and the amniotic fluid flows out, which serves to flush and lubricate the birth canal. Therefore, the word Birth-giving depicts the process of a woman giving birth, have water flowing out first and then the child coming out head down.

### 2.3 Smoothly

This character is an associated character. To the left of Smoothly is the word **Chuān**, which means water with banks on both sides. The right side of the oracle bone character looks like a small person with big eyes, and overall it looks like a small person coming out of the water, which is exactly the direction of the child's head coming out of the amniotic fluid during normal delivery. Nowadays, we still call natural childbirth as eutocia.

### 2.4 Reverse

This character is a pictophonetic characters. In oracle bone Reverse looks like a person walking backwards. The original meaning is that the person on the other side is walking backwards in his own direction, so it means *to welcome*. In a Chinese history book, there is a passage about the birth of the Duke Zhuang of Zheng: he was born breech-first, his mother was frightened by he, so his mother hates this boy. The explanation of reverse birth in Volume 2 of the ancient Chinese medical book Valuable Prescriptions for Emergencies is also known as foot on the lotus flower birth, kicking the ground birth, upside down birth<sup>[7]</sup>. It refers to the birth of a child foot first. Therefore, in the process of childbirth, the word *reverse* can be used to describe difficult labor due to fetal malposition. Later, it was derived to mean the opposite and disobedient.

## 3. Nurture of life: Nurse, Word

### 3.1 Nurse:

Many dictionaries and commentaries believe that Nurse is a variant of *Birth-giving* and both agree. However, from the point of view of the evolution of the word Nurse and medical science, there may be a slight difference between the two. The character Nurse in the small seal script is very close to the modern type, with an up-and-down structure, a small upside-down person on top and a meat below. In here we could look at this *meat* as the placenta. During the fetal period, the fetus receives material and gas exchange from the mother through the placenta to grow. It seems more reasonable to derive the meaning of this process to that of raising and nurturing a child.

### 3.2 Word:

The oracle bone word *Word* looks similar to the modern Chinese word *Word*, but the meaning seems to be very different. From ancient times to the present, the composition of this word has always been a *roof* on top with a *child* below. Its original meaning is to give birth to a child in the house, but also has the meaning of pregnancy. Another explanation of Word in book *Shuo Wen* is: Building a house to have children and then nursing them to grow up. And the meaning of Word in today's world is actually derived from 'birth and nourishment'. The book *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* says: the radicals of Chinese characters were created by Cang Jie in the creation of Chinese characters, with the pictogram method, and then on the basis of the radicals and according to the understanding and other methods to combine the radicals into words. So, the Chinese character is like the result of the reproduction of the radicals.

## 4. Multi-perspective interpretation of fertility culture in Chinese characters

From the rise of the discipline of Chinese character culture, studies on Chinese characters and various cultural phenomena in ancient China have gradually increased<sup>[8]</sup>. The interpretation of Chinese characters related to fertility culture is mostly interpreted from the traditional Chinese social view of fertility, such as the preference for male children, fertility worship, and filial piety, which is slightly one-sided and limited. As a living history that records what the ancestors saw, heard, and thought in the past, it is more important for modern research to combine multiple fields and interdisciplinary approaches to examine the culture and ideas hidden in the evolution of Chinese characters, rather than defining the ancestors' perception of fertility as backward or superstitious solely from the backward productivity. Researching the culture of fertility behind Chinese characters from multiple perspectives will help us better understand the philosophical and worldview of the ancients, further strengthen the interpretation of Chinese characters in their construction and evolution, and facilitate the integration of traditional culture with the development of modern science.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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