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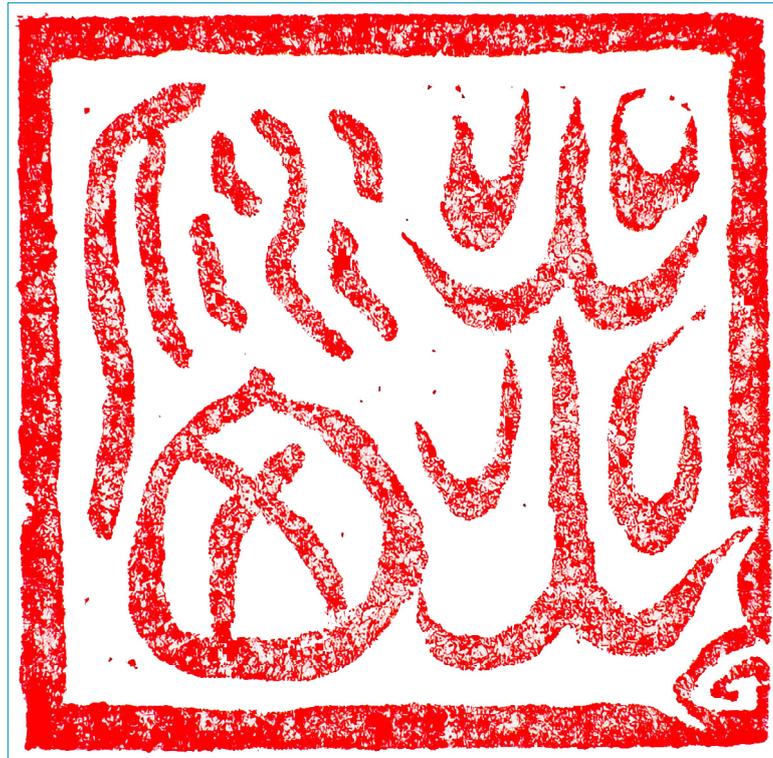


Figure: Chinese hieroglyphic character for encephalitis

Pictographs of encephalitis in Chinese characters

Chinese is perhaps the only hieroglyphic language still in use. The oldest Chinese characters are found in oracle inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty (16th–11th century BC), expressing concepts through hieroglyphic and ideographic forms. But modern medical terms such as encephalitis can also be expressed with Chinese characters.

Encephalitis in Chinese characters is 脑炎, pronounced Nao-Yan. 脑 (Nao), which was a hieroglyph of the head in oracle inscriptions (𠄎 or 𠄏), means brain. Parts of the hieroglyph are 𠄎, indicating a pouch or a skull, and 𠄏, indicating cerebral gyrus or hair. 人 is the pictograph of human beings, which indicates that the brain is a part of the human body.

炎 (Yan) was initially written as 炎 or 𤇀 and consists of two superimposed flames (火, pronounced Huo). So 炎 is

a double flame, representing a violent fire. The double flame 炎 (Yan) might have been named after a tribal leader in ancient China (approximately 5000 BC), Emperor Yan—one of the forefathers of Chinese—after he promoted the use of fire.

Brain on fire: my month of madness, a book by Susannah Cahalan, details her struggle with anti-NMDA-receptor encephalitis. The title of this autobiographical recollection fascinates me, because of its relation with the Chinese characters to express encephalitis, which are a pictograph of a brain on fire (figure).

I declare no competing interest.

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Hongzhi Guan
guanhz@263.net

Department of Neurology, Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, Beijing 100730, China

For more on Susannah Cahalan's book see [In Context](#) *Lancet Neurol* 2013; **12**: 337