

漢字簡介

Writing Chinese Characters



Six Etymological Principles of Chinese Character

1. Principle of imitating the form, 象形 xiàngxíng

Pictographic characters are originated from pictures of objects.

For instance:

	→		→	日 rì 'sun'
	→		→	月 yuè 'moon'
	→		→	山 shān 'mountain'

2. Principle of pointing at the thing, 指事 zhǐshì

Indicative characters indicate the idea or ideas that are related to an action, situation, quality, event, and so forth. For instance:

	→		→	上 shàng 'above'
	→		→	下 xià 'below'

3. Principle of Compound ideographs, logical aggregates, 會意 huìyì

These are implicative or suggestive compounds consisting of two or more signifiers. For instance:

木 mù 'tree' + 木 mù 'tree' → 林 lín 'grove'

(If there are two trees, there is a grove.)

人 rén 'person' + 人 rén 'person' → 從 cóng 'follow' *(One person walks*

after another one, which means to follow.)

4. Principle of harmonizing the phonetic compounds, 形聲 xíngshēng

There are characters with one part indicating the meaning and the other part indicating the sound of the compound. For instance:

媽 mā 'mother' is a compound of 女 nǚ 'woman' and the phonetic 馬 mǎ 'horse.'

烤 kǎo 'to bake' is a compound of 火 huǒ 'fire' and the phonetic 考 kǎo 'exam.'



5. Principle of borrowing and loaning of homophones, 假借 jiǎjiè

Borrowed characters are used arbitrarily and their meaning are often different from the originals. They were ‘borrowed’ to represent a phonetically identical or similar word. For example, 萬 wàn ‘ten thousand’ is originally a pictographic character, was ‘borrowed’ to represent 10,000.

6. Principle of borrowing the sound, 轉注 zhuǎnzhù

This category is the most controversial of the six principles inviting debate for centuries. The general consensus now is that these characters are used and based on a derivative principle. This category is very useful when students are learning literary language.

Of the six principles discussed above, there is no doubt that the majority of Chinese characters falls to the fourth one, the harmonizing of the phonetic compounds.

Chinese Radicals

The semantic significance of radicals is definitely not an absolute rule followed in the written Chinese, but rather a dominant pattern for beginners to observe closely. There are 214 radicals available in most of the dictionaries.






Radicals often provide a key to the general meaning of the character it belongs to. For example: 說 ‘to speak,’ 話 ‘saying,’ 語 ‘language,’ 講 ‘to talk,’ 討 ‘to beg,’ 論 ‘to discuss,’ all use ‘speech’ as a radical because they are all related to language activities; and 河 ‘river,’ 流 ‘flow,’ 江 ‘large river,’ 湖 ‘lake,’ 海 ‘sea,’ contain the ‘water’ radical because their relationship with water. If characters share the same radical, they will generally have the same semantic associations. However, there are some exceptions, as ‘private’ in the character 去 ‘go’ and ‘bamboo’ in the character 等 ‘to wait.’

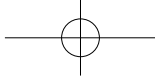









Ways of Tackling Chinese Characters

If a character is not itself a radical, the first step is to break the whole character into two or three parts. In most of the cases there will be one part on the right hand and another on the left, examples are as follows, 你, 好, 嗎, 形, 叫, 說, 到, 頭, 後. The division also can be done horizontally, one half being above, the other beneath, for example, 要, 思, 姿, 另, 是, 買, 些, 息. However, some cases are not quite simple, for example, one half may enclose the other on two or more sides as exemplified by 右, 道, 同, 底, 關, 回, 看, 這, 原. There are still other cases which are harder to divide.

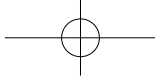
In order to solve this problem, the learner can analyze the square-shaped construction of Chinese characters in the following 12 ways. It is easy for the student to visualize and memorize the characters he is studying.

1.  One lexical-part occupies the full square, as in
人 ‘people’ 山 ‘mountain’ 日 ‘sun’ 月 ‘moon’ 木 ‘tree’ 中 ‘middle’
2.  Two lexical-parts balance horizontally, as in
香 xiāng ‘perfume’ → 禾 + 日
要 yào ‘to want’ → 西 + 女
3.  Two lexical-parts balance vertically, as in
好 hǎo ‘good’ → 女 + 子
他 tā ‘he’ → 人 + 也
4.  Two lexical-parts with the left and bottom part surrounding the upper right part, as in
起 qǐ ‘to get up’ → 走 + 己
道 dào ‘way’ → 辶 + 首
5.  Two lexical-parts with the upper and right part surrounding the lower left, as in
司 sī ‘to govern’ → 丁 + 口
可 kě ‘may’ → 丁 + 口



6.  Two lexical-parts with the left and upper part surrounding the lower right, as in
 床 chuáng 'bed' → 广 + 木
 房 fáng 'house' → 户 + 方
7.  Two lexical-parts with the outside part surrounding the inside, as in
 回 huí 'to return' → 口 + 口
 因 yīn 'cause' → 口 + 大
8.  Three lexical-parts in a tripartite horizontal form, as in
 查 chá 'to check' → 木 + 日 + 一
 等 děng 'to wait' → 竹 + 士 + 寸
9.  Three lexical-parts in a tripartite vertical form, as in
 谢 xiè 'to give thanks' → 言 + 身 + 寸
 街 jiē 'street' → 彳 + 圭 + 行
10.  One or more lexical-parts surrounded on three sides with only the bottom open, as in
 问 wèn 'to ask' → 门 + 口
 周 zhōu 'one round' → 冂 + 吉
11.  One or more lexical-parts surrounded on three sides with only the right side open, as in
 匹 pī 'a bolt' → 匸 + 儿
 匠 jiàng 'craftsman' → 匚 + 斤
12.  One or more lexical-parts surrounded on three sides with only the upper side open, as in
 函 hán 'letters' → 凵 + 彖
 凶 xiōng 'fearsome' → 凵 + 彖

Some characters are constructed by using the above lexical-parts, one added to another, as in



	椅 yǐ 'chair'		部 bù 'section'
	想 xiǎng 'to think'		菇 gū 'mushroom'
	幫 bāng 'to help'		彎 wān 'to bend'
	隨 suí 'to follow'		圓 yuán 'round'

By this way, the lexical-parts in a character and their relationships are getting clearer.

Basic Strokes and Stroke Order

Chinese characters are composed by strokes. In order to learn how to write Chinese characters, or try to look them up in a dictionary, one has to learn the number of strokes in a radical or in a character.

To learn the exact number of strokes in a character is very important. If one does not know the pronunciation of a character, one must know how many strokes it contains before one look it up in a dictionary.

The following 20 different strokes can be considered as the “alphabet” of Chinese language.

1. One direction

- ① 丶 as in 斗 ② - as in 三 ③ | as in 中
 ④ 丿 as in 人 ⑤ 丶 as in 父 ⑥ 丶 as in 次

2. Two directions

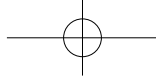
- ① 丿 as in 犯 ② 丶 as in 戈 ③ 一 as in 也 ④ 乚 as in 巡
 ⑤ 丿 as in 又 ⑥ 一 as in 丑 ⑦ 丿 as in 厶 ⑧ 丿 as in 七

3. Three directions

- ① 丿 as in 刀 ② 丿 as in 亞 ③ 丿 as in 孔 ④ 丿 as in 飛

4. Four directions

- ① 乙 as in 乾 ② 勺 as in 勺



In Indo-European languages, letters of the alphabet are written horizontally from left to right, but Chinese characters are written in a square form following definite stroke orders. They can be grouped as follows:

1. Left first, then right as in 人 rén.
2. Top first, then bottom, as in 三 sān.
3. A horizontal line before a line crossing it, as in 十 shí.
4. A right-slanting line first, then an intersecting left-slanting line, as in 父 fù.
5. A central part before symmetrical sides, as in 水 shuǐ.
6. Outside before inside, as in 月 yuè, except that if the surrounding is complete on four sides, the last stroke is the bottom one, as in 因 yīn.

For writing each stroke, there is also a conventional direction, according to the four following principles.

1. Horizontal lines are written from left to right.
2. Vertical lines are written from top to bottom.
3. The forms (slant lines) are written from upper left to lower right.
4. The forms (slant lines) are written from top right to lower left.

For example:

人	ノ	人			
三	一	三	三		
十	一	十			
父	ノ	ハ	父	父	
水	ノ	才	才	水	
月	ノ	月	月	月	
因	丨	冂	冂	因	因

When a student tries to learn a character, he or she has to observe the structure of the character by radicals. Next, one should pay attention to the number of strokes, as well as their positions. Finally, one should follow carefully the stroke order with its length and direction.