

Introduction to Chinese Characters 3: Function and Formation

Function

In Old Chinese (and Classical Chinese, which is based on it), most words were monosyllabic and there was a close correspondence between characters and words. In modern Chinese (esp. Mandarin Chinese), characters do not necessarily correspond to words; indeed the majority of Chinese words today consist of two or more characters due to the merging and loss of sounds in the Chinese language over time. Rather, a character almost always corresponds to a single syllable that is also a morpheme. However, there are a few exceptions to this general correspondence, including bisyllabic morphemes (written with two characters), bimorphemic syllables (written with two characters) and cases where a single character represents a polysyllabic word or phrase.

Modern Chinese has many homophones; thus the same spoken syllable may be represented by many characters, depending on meaning. A single character may also have a range of meanings, or sometimes quite distinct meanings; occasionally these correspond to different pronunciations. Cognates in the several varieties of Chinese are generally written with the same character. They typically have similar meanings, but often quite different pronunciations.

Principles of formation

Strokes

Usually a Chinese character is formed by radicals (parts), and radicals are formed by

strokes. The basic strokes are shown in the following picture:



Radicals

The radicals usually, but not invariably, gives a name or clue as to the meaning of the character. Some radicals can form a character by itself. The following list shows part of most commonly used radicals:

Radical	Radical name	Pronunciation	Meaning	Example	Meaning
亻	单人旁	dan1ren2pang2	human	他	he/him
冫	两点水	liang2dian3shui3	cold	冰	ice
子	子字旁	zi3zi4pang2	child	孩	child
口	口字旁	kou3zi4pang2	mouth	吃	to eat
女	女子旁	nv3zi3pang2	female	姐	older sister
木	木字旁	mu4zi4pang2	wood	林	forest
扌	提手旁	ti2shou3pang2	hand	打	to beat
氵	三点水	san1dian3shui3	water	江	river
疒	病字框	bing4zi4kuang1	disease	病	disease
鸟	鸟字旁	niao3zi4pang2	bird	鸡	chicken

Structures

There are 5 main structures to form a character, they are single structure, such as 木, 水; up-down structure, such as 早, 呆; left-right structure, such as 休, 时; half-surrounded structure, such as 这, 廷 and surrounded structure, such as 国, 围。 Some characters could be hard to allocate to one of the structures due to their unique shapes.

Sequence of writing

In general, while writing Chinese characters, one should follow the general rule of "left to right, and up to down". This is the case for both writing strokes and radicals (though in some cases there might be exceptional). Following is the stroke order of one character:

丶	一	㇏	㇏	立	立
辛	亲	亲	亲	新	新
新					

(Adapted from threads on www.wikipedia.org)