

Introduction to Chinese Characters 4: Six Fold Classification

Chinese characters represent words of the language using several strategies. A few characters, including some of the most commonly used, were originally pictograms, which depicted the objects denoted, or ideograms, in which meaning was expressed iconically. The vast majority were written using the rebus principle, in which a character for a similarly sounding word was either simply borrowed or (more commonly) extended with a disambiguating semantic marker to form a phono-semantic compound character.

The traditional six-fold classification (liùshū 六书 / 六書 "six writings") was first described by the scholar Xu Shen in the postface of his dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* in 100 AD. While this analysis is sometimes problematic and arguably fails to reflect the complete nature of the Chinese writing system, it has been perpetuated by its long history and pervasive use.

Pictograms

象形字 xiàngxíngzì

Pictograms make up only a small portion of Chinese characters. Characters in this class derive from pictures of the objects they denote. Over time they have been standardized, simplified, and stylized to make them easier to write, and their derivation is therefore not always obvious. Examples include 日 rì for "sun", 月 yuè for "moon", 木 mù for "tree" or "wood", and 麻 má for "hemp".

There is no concrete number for the proportion of modern characters that are

pictographic in nature; however, Xu Shen placed approximately 4% of characters in this category.

Simple ideograms

指事字 zhǐshìzì

Also called simple indicatives, this small category contains characters that are direct iconic illustrations. Examples include 上 shàng "up" and 下 xià "down", originally a dot above and below a line.

Compound ideograms

会意字 / 會意字 huìyìzì

Also translated as logical aggregates or associative compounds, these characters have been interpreted as combining two or more pictographic or ideographic characters to suggest a third meaning. Commonly cited examples include 休 "rest" (composed of the pictograms 人 "person" and 木 "tree") and 好 "good" (composed of 女 "woman" and 子 "child").

Xu Shen placed approximately 13% of characters in this category.

Rebus

假借字 jiǎjièzì

Also called borrowings or phonetic loan characters, the rebus category covers cases where an existing character is used to represent an unrelated word with similar or identical pronunciation; sometimes the old meaning is then lost completely, as with characters such as 自 zì, which has lost its original meaning of "nose" completely and exclusively means "oneself", or 萬 wàn, which originally meant "scorpion" but

is now used only in the sense of "ten thousand".

Phono-semantic compounds

形声字 / 形聲字 xíngshēngzì

Semantic-phonetic compounds or pictophonetic compounds are by far the most numerous characters. These characters are composed of two parts: one of a limited set of characters (the semantic indicator, often graphically simplified) which suggests the general meaning of the compound character, and another character (the phonetic indicator) whose pronunciation suggests the pronunciation of the compound character. In most cases the semantic indicator is also the radical under which the character is listed in dictionaries.

Examples are 河 hé "river", 湖 hú "lake", 流 liú "stream", 冲 chōng "riptide" (or "flush"), 滑 huá "slippery". All these characters have on the left a radical of three short strokes (氵), which is a reduced form of the character 水 shuǐ meaning "water", indicating that the character has a semantic connection with water. The right-hand side in each case is a phonetic indicator. For example, in the case of 冲 chōng, the phonetic indicator is 中 zhōng, which by itself means "middle". In this case it can be seen that the pronunciation of the character is slightly different from that of its phonetic indicator; the process of historical phonetic change means that the composition of such characters can sometimes seem arbitrary today.

Xu Shen (c. 100 AD) placed approximately 82% of characters into this category, while in the Kangxi Dictionary (1716 AD) the number is closer to 90%, due to the extremely productive use of this technique to extend the Chinese vocabulary.

This method is still sometimes used to form new characters, for example 钚 / 鈾 bù ("plutonium") is the metal radical 金 jīn plus the phonetic component 不 bù, described in Chinese as "不 gives sound, 金 gives meaning". Many Chinese names of elements in the periodic table and many other chemistry-related characters were formed this way.

Transformed cognates

转注字 / 轉注字 zhuǎnzhùzì

The smallest category of characters is also the least understood. In the postface to the Shuowen Jiezi, Xu Shen gave as an example the characters 考 kǎo "to verify" and 老 lǎo "old", which had similar Old Chinese pronunciations (*khuʔ and *c-ruʔ respectively) and may once have been the same word, meaning "elderly person", but became lexicalized into two separate words. The term does not appear in the body of the dictionary, and is often omitted from modern systems.

(Adapted from threads on www.wikipedia.org)