**Classification of Chinese Characters**



Like other written languages, Chinese has built a system of connections between meaning, sound, and shapes. Its partly ideographic nature enables some direct links between meaning and shapes.

It has been proposed in one of the earliest Chinese dictionary (Shuowen 說文解字) that Chinese characters are created following 6 methods (LST 六書通). Here I'm proposing 3 more.

NB: to keep the article short and concise, I’ll assume that the reader has a pop-up Chinese dictionary installed, giving meanings and pronunciations. I recommend "[Mandarin popup](https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/mandarin-popup/?src=api)" with Firefox.

**1 象形字 Pictograms**
These characters represent the meaning of the object, with direct depiction: 山, 行, 田,土,火,水, 川, 州,雨, 屮, 竹, 米, 禾, 人, 士, 夫, 大, 女, 母, 子, 儿, 大, 齿, 舌, 耳,毛, 乃, 也,肉, 止, 之, 彳, 足, 甲, 龟, 鱼, 马, 牛, 羊, 犬, 鹿,鸟, 虫,刀, 戈, 弓, 殳,伞, 串, 矢, 矛, 盾, 门, 高, 舍,巠, 酉, 瓦,匋, 系，丝, etc.

The meaning of these has drifted towards more abstraction:

日 sun for day,

月 moon for month,

木 tree for wood,

金 bell for gold,

面 face for side,

首 head for chief,

页 head for page，

口 mouth for opening,

言 tongue for speech,

自 nose for self,

目 eye for item,

手 hand for activity,

心 heart for mind,

正 foot for uprightness

**2 指事字 Simple Ideogram**
They represent more abstract concepts, either by some symbolic shapes 一, 二, 三, 八, 十, 廿, 卅, 世, 力, 丄, 上, 丅, 下, 工, 示, 方, 回, etc. or by using a stroke to point at the part of an existing pictogram: 本, 末, 刃, and 血, 太?

**3 会意字 Combined Ideogram**
These are also ideographic, and are formed by the combination of 2 or more pictograms, to form a situation:

林, 森, 休, 明, 男, 字, 岩，

信 (trust the words of a person),

武 (foot and axe),

莫 （日+艸 sunset into the grass）,

事, 吏, 史 (口+丨+又 a hand writes down the words of a mouth),

及 （又+人 a hand grabs a man），

是（日+正 straight under the sun： exist here and now), 道（首+辵), 烦, 播,

多（夕 +夕several evenings of working）

半（牛+八 an animal split in two halves），

出 （屮+凵 a sprout rises from a pot） ，

去 （大+凵 a man leaving a enclosed area),

走 (大+止 a man walking with foot），

内 （入+冂 open the door curtains ），

开/開 （門+廾+一 hands lifting a door bolting bar),

关/關（門+丝+廾 hands closing door curtains）,

联 listen to each other and bind alliance,

名（夕+口 a mouth calls the name at night for identification)，

集 (birds on a tree),

看 (hand over the eyes),

采 (hand collecting fruits),

令 (mouth commanding to a kneeling man)，

葬 (hands carrying a dead under grass),

只/隻 (a single bird in hand),

双/雙 (2 birds in hand) ,

乘 a man climbing in a tree,

**4 形声字 Phono-semantic compound**
This is the most frequent method, where 2 characters are joined, one bringing the meaning and the other the pronunciation.

Sometimes the phonetic part is difficult to recognize (e.g. 在 = 才+土, 青 = 井+生)

**艸**indicates all kinds of grass (including蓝 indigo leaf), but also:

* Flowers 英 花 華
* Taste, smell: 苦 芬 芳 菲
* Made of grass 营 camp barrack, 薪 firewood: salary, 药 medicine
* Derived: 薄 thin as a leaf, 荒 uncultivated wasteland
* Deformed from 炎in 劳(勞) , 竹 in 节(節)

**水**indicates fluids or relationships with water. It may also give to the idea of:

* Cleaning: 洗, 清, 洁, 消, 淘, 净 Filling up: 满, 注, 涌 Sinking: 没, 沉, 潜 Crossing river: 渡 济 (then boat support, logistic, economy)
* Water qualities: 温 lukewarm, 污 filthy, 淡 watered down, 浓 condensed, 沙sand (fluid)

**木**generallyindicates a:

* Wooden object, a tree or part of tree: 标 top of tree, 根 root, 枪 spear (now gun).
* Abstract structure: 构 structure, 格 frame, 模 model, 概 outline, 梗 stem, 极 pole, extreme, 横 transverse, horizontal, 朴 simple, 机 mechanism, crucial point,

But also: 检 examine.

**竹**for:

* Objects made of bamboo管 pipe, 笔 pen, 箱 box,笼 篮 basket,符 筹 tally, 箭 arrow, 笛 flute, 筛 sieve, 筷 chopsticks
* Document: 简 small letter, 策 签wooden slips, 篇 article 籍 簿 registers, 答
* Some tools for counting: 等 第 算
* ..event emotions: 笑 笨
* And of course, bamboo to eat: 笋

**手** in full form below the character, or reduced on the left, it refers to

* Body parts of the hand, 指 掌 拳
* Various movements done by hand or arms: grab: 把 接 抓, hold or lift: 拿 提 持 挥 抬, pull or press: 拉 抽 按 推 托, etc... 报report, 据occupy, 抗resist, 护protect, 技 practical skill, 换 排 批 瑶挂 执 摸 攀 打 搞 找掉

**口** mouth, (not to be confused by囗 the enclosure)

* Voice and sound： 叫 听 响 唱
* Mouth and mouth activity嘴, 喝 drink, 咳 cough, 吹 blow, 呼 breath out, 吸 breath in, 味 taste， 含 hold in mouth
* phonetic role only for the character: 吗 啦 吧 哦 呀 嗯 嘛 咱 喂

**心** heart, below or on the left, or sometimes below in open form (恭 慕 添 ) ，indicating:

* Mind activity：想 意 思 懂 悉 惯 愿 志 虑 患 念 忆 忘 忙 息 rest, breath
* Feelings：情 感 恋 恭 慈 悲 恐 怕 怒 怨 恨 闷 怪 惊 怀 忧 怜 惜 忝 悔 慕
some feelings related to speed: 慢sluggish, 快pleasant, 急 urgent, 忽 sudden
* Heart quality：性 态 恩 惠 忠 恒 恰 恳 恶 愚

**虫**for:

* all insects and related: 虾 蟹 螺 various seafood, 蛇 snake, 蝙 蝠 bat
* insect products 蛋 egg, 蜜 honey, 蜡 wax, 茧 cocoon
* insect process and character: 蚀 eat, corrode, 蛮 rough

**言** generally on the left, for:

* Acts of language:说 话 语 讨 讲 谈 读 议 警 谢 论 辩 证 讯 询 请 访 评 调 课 训 谓 译 诊 试
* Promise and consent誓 许 订 让 该
* Produced text or design: 诗 词 设 计 谋
* Mental process:记 认 识 误
* Honor and praise誉 诚 谊
* Others.. 详 details 诞 brag (birth)

**糸** for:

* Textile making: 纯 pure silk, 绩 spin, 线 thread, 练 boil silk, 经 纬warp and woof, 综arrange thread, 组 织 编weave, 纳 patch, 缝 sew, 统 main tube of cloth, 纷 entangled, 继 绍 join 2 threads, 结 tie, 维约 bind, 绕 wind around, 绝 cut off, 终, 绪 end of thread, 缘 margin, 纸 paper made of fiber pulp, 纽 button，
* Colors of clothes : 红 绿 紫
* Thread related: 细 fineness, 缩 shrinking, and also: 给 级 ..

**金** a bell, for gold and all metals:

* metal elements, and items made of metal: 钟 铃 bell, 针 needle, 镜 mirror, 锁钥 lock and key, 键 door bolt, 铺 bed plank
* Metal qualities: 锐 锋 pointed, sharp, 钝 blunt, 错 metal amalgam, error, 铸 销 melt

**月** generally a simplified 肉, meat, indicating a part of the body.
In few rare cases it refers actually to the moon 月, either as a source of light: 明, 阴, 朗, or as a marker of time: 期, ,朔, or simply moon gazing 望 .
服 actually uses 舟 corrupted into月, indicating a support to a boat. Afterward, the idea of service and ministry is linked to the vocabulary of clothing (see 领 , 袖 ). In 朝 also, and舟 act as phonetic complement to 倝, dawn.

**耳**indicates the idea to listen and obey: 职 duty, 聘 employ,闻 listen, smell, 聪 intelligent, 耻 shame, 取 summon someone. 最 derives from 取 and冃.

**彳** is simplified from **行**, walking, behaving, generally indicates a behavioural aspect.

* Behaviour: 德 virtue, 律 statute, 待 treat, 役 service, 循 obey, 徒 disciple, 很 very
* Movement: 往 depart, 征 invade, 彻 pervade, 徐 slowly, dignified, 御 drive, 径 path

But also: 得 get, 彼 they

**禾**indicates a relationships with cereals: 种 seed, breed, 秀 ear of grain, 秆 stalk, 秒 beard of grain, second ( => 稍little), 移 originally: replant. It may also give the idea of:

* Payment in cereal: 税tax, 租 rent, tax
* Harvest: 季 season, 利 profit, 积 amass, 稳 originally: to trample grain, 称 to weigh, 程 grain to be weighted, 科 measure
* Phonetic in和.
* Unclear for 委,私, In 秘 the traditional key is actually 示。

**米**indicates a relationships with rice. It may also give to the idea of:

* Fineness: 精, 粹, 气 Coarseness: 粗 Dirt: 粪, 屎 Stickiness: 粘, 糊

**石** generally indicates an item made of stone, or a type of stone or solid material.
Other uses include:

* Solid quality: 硬 hard, 确 certain, real (compare with 实, hard and real)
* Solid contact: 碎 break, 破 destroy, 碰 collide, 砍 hack, 碍 obstruct, 磨 grind, 研 grind, study

**土**indicates a piece of land, or something made of earth. 地, 里, 址, 场, 块, etc.

It may also give to the idea of: Flatness: 均, 坦 And others meanings: 坐 sit down, 坏 spoilt with dirt, 堵 block, 培 earth up a plant, foster, 增 increase, 在 exist, be located, 社 land gods (then village, society)

**火**generally indicates fire, related tools and process, like cooking or forging, but also Brightness: 灿 炫 焕 煌., besides烦 vexed, and 烂 over-cooked => spoilt.

**十**indicates Wholeness and harmony: 协, 叶, 博, 章

**方** always with the flattened component人, indicates:

* Movement (4 cardinal directions based on the sides of a square): 旅, 斿, 游, 旋, 於(于), 施
* Flags (square cloth?): 旄, 旗, 旆, 旐, 旓, 旛, 旝, 旟, 旃, 旎, 旌, and Group identity: 族, 圀

**羊**generally indicates anything related to sheeps (meat, flock, smell, other aspects). It may occasionally indicate Virtue: 美, 善, 義, 對，盖，Reach: 達，着 but also have other negative meanings: 羞,差,蹉,傞...

**页**represent a head, and develops into more abstract meanings. The character itself means now “leaf” and is interchangeable with 叶.

* Head: 颏 chin, 颐 cheeks, jaw, 颡 forehead, 颈 neck, throat, 颅 skull, 颊 cheeks, jaw, 颌 mouth, jaw,
* Head and authority : 頭 head, first, end, chief, 领 neck, guide, 顶 carry on the head, top , 颠 top, fall, 项 neck, item, 额 forehead, amount, 题 forehead, topic, ,颜 face, appearance,
* Importance: 须,硕,颀,颉,颢,灏,颛
* Head emotions: 烦,顽,顼顸 large face, stupid,
* Head abstractions: 预,倾,顾,顺,顿,颁,颂,类

**5 假借字 Phonetic loan**
This group is interesting in that it debunks many myths about ideographic etymology. It is the only one where there is (a priori) no semantic link between the graphical and semantic content.

The construction scenario consists in using a character to represent another word which has a similar pronunciation, like a rebus. In English, SMS aficionados would write “This is 4 you”, because “four” and “for” are considered phonetically interchangeable. Later, the borrowed character, now being used for 2 completely different meanings, would typically be given a semantic key when used for its original meaning, becoming a kind of usurped word that has to wear this key to reassert its original meaning! (e.g. 四originally depicts nostrils to mean “mucous”. Now it means “4” and "mucous" is added the water key氵to become 泗)

However if some semantic connection exists between the 2 meanings, the pair could be regarded as what I propose to call a 变意字: semantic variation.

* 枼 “flat”, originally “leaf”, which is now 葉 (Possible links between “leaf” and “flat”)
* 北 “north”, originally “back”, which is now 背(Possible link if the Emperor was supposed to face south)
* 少 “few”, originally “sand”, which is now 沙 and 砂(Possible link between “few” and small grains of sand)
* 来”come”, originally “barley”, which is now 麥(Possible link between “coming” and the advent of a crop)
* 莫”do not”, originally “sunset”, which is now 暮 (Possible link between sun disappearance and negation)
* 四”4”, originally “mucous”, which is now 泗
* 要 “demand”, originally “waist”, which is now 腰
* 東 "east", originally "heavy bag", which is now 重
* 永 “eternity”, originally “swim”, which is now 泳
* 又”again”, originally “right hand”, which is now 右
* 亦 "also", originally "armpit", which is now 腋
* 也 "also", originally "snake" interchangeable with 它, which is now 蛇

**6 转注字 Derivative cognate**
Smallest group and least understood group. A word would evolve into 2 distinct meanings and be graphically modified to indicate this difference to account for this split. The akin characters therefore have all 3 similarities, of meaning, sound, and shape. The graphical modification doesn’t use semantic key like 变意字 but rather directly modifies the shape of the character. The only certain example so far is 考 “examine” and 老 “old”.

I suggest considering the kinship of shape, meaning and sound between: [之, 彳, 辵, 止, 夂, 正](http://www.chineseetymology.org/CharacterEtymology.aspx?submitButton1=Etymology&characterInput=%E6%AD%A2), and 是, and then between [事 and 史](http://www.chineseetymology.org/CharacterEtymology.aspx?submitButton1=Etymology&characterInput=%E4%BA%8B). It is also often admitted that 东 derives from重, as a heavy bag of stuff. This idea remains in 东西.

From observation, I’ve come to identify 3 more categories, somehow related to "3.会意字" and "6.转注字":

**33 二代会意字 Secondary Combined Ideogram**
This category contains the characters formed of 2 parts, both indicating the meaning, but without the pronunciation of any of the two. The construction method has 2 steps of combined ideogram:

* First 亼+口 => 合, then 合 => 答, 洽, 䆟, 恰, 拾, 拿
* First 止+止 => 步, then 步 => 涉 wade through, 陟 ascend => 骘 promote
* First 隹+木 => 集, then 集 => 襍 雜 (杂)
* First 羊+工 => 差, then 差 => 蹉, 傞
* First 人+匕 => 化, then 化 => 倾

**63 变意字 Semantic Variation**
Those characters have all 3 similarities (sound, sense, shape) and are obtained through additions of keys:

* 包 => 袍, 抱, 胞, 泡, 疱, 匏, 饱 (envelope)
* 长 => 张, 胀 growth
* 占 => 站, 店, 点, 贴, 坫 (occupied spot)
* 主 => 住, 驻 reside
* 工 => 功, 贡, 项 work contribution
* 才 => 材, 财 resourcce
* 反 => 返, 叛, 㤆
* 夬 => decision: 决, resolute speed: 快 趹 駃，take: 抉 刔 pierce: 鈌 䆢 䆕 䦼, fork: 筷, parting: 诀
* 仑 => 论, 伦 , 轮 (regular cycle, cf 法轮)
* 合 => 盒, 蛤, 颌
* 答 => 搭
* 容 => 熔
* 女 => [如](http://www.chineseetymology.org/CharacterEtymology.aspx?submitButton1=Etymology&characterInput=%E5%A6%82),[奴](http://www.chineseetymology.org/CharacterEtymology.aspx?submitButton1=Etymology&characterInput=%E5%A5%B4), 努
* 厄 => 阨, 危, 脆, 㧪, 垝, 卼, 峞
* 臤 => hard: 坚, 紧, 㹂, 䃘 wise: 贤, 竖, 㷂
* 亡 =>忘, 盲, 巟, 荒 , 慌，谎
* 莫 => 寞, 漠, 墓
* 正 => 证, 整, 政
* 旨 => 指, 恉
* 步 => 頻 frequency，濒 approach
* 方 => 房 square room, 坊 city quarter
* 令 => 命
* 分 => 份
* 州 => 洲
* 廷 => 庭
* 原 => 源
* 元 => 完 united whole
* 知 => 智， 痴 (antonym)
* 贯 => 惯
* 度 => 渡
* 并 => 拼
* 气 => 汽，忾，饩，㔕
* 道 => 导
* 王 => 皇
* 酉 => 酒
* 厶 => 私
* 從 (从) => 蹤 (踪)
* 力 => 勒, 劳, 励
* 执 => 势
* 连 => 链
* 曼 => 漫, 蔓， spreading time: 慢， 䟂
* 买 => 卖
* 告 => 造 (summon to create)
* 召 => 招
* 单 => 阐 (plain, explain),禅 ?
* 素 => 愫
* 贵 => 匮 (scarce hence valuable)
* 至 => 致
* 人 => 仁 (human and humane)
* 又 => 有 (hand, having)
* 直 => 植, 殖
* 官 => 馆, 管
* 朝 => 潮 (dynasty, time, tide)
* 生 => 性, 姓，甡，產，甦 (苏）
* 支 => 枝， 肢， 歧， 技，伎
* 辟 => 闢, 壁, 避
* 保 => 堡, 葆, 媬
* 井 => 青 => green 菁，clear and calm 晴, 静，靖，靓，清，婧，䨝
* 井 => 阱，穽，汫
* 夹 => 陕，挟，峡，䇲
* 昜 => sunlight 旸, 陽, 砀， burn: 烫, 汤, 炀, 疡, 肠, wide open: 场, 畅, 扬, 颺, 蕩
* 夗 => turn, bend: 宛, 婉, 蜿 wrist and knee: 腕, 捥, 踠 , bowl: 碗, 剜
* 户 => light door or fan: 扇, 煽, 煸, 谝 , bamboo door panel: 扉 扁 set of bamboo slips: 篇, 雇, open door: 启 肇, shelter: 护, 庐 fireplace/foyer: 炉 (after simplification)
* 函 => 涵
* 含 => 焓,颔
* 商 => 熵
* 丁 => 订,钉，盯
* 定 => 碇，椗
* 提 => 题
* 川 => 圳
* 干 => 旱
* 心 => 芯

**66 唯声转注字 Phonetic Cognates**
Besides, there are also many words with similar pronunciations and meanings, as if a common ancestor in spoken language had generated them after semantic variations, using various characters. This is not really a generation mechanism, but rather a kinship between characters.

* 无, 毋, 勿, 莫, 寞, 漠, 默, 唯, 惟, 未, 没, 歾, 末, 貉, 墓, 缪, 穆，and also 误, 污, 怃 ?
* 不, 否, 弗
* 和, 合, 协, 劦, 勰, 叶, 旪, 谐, 龤, 偕, 燮, 爕
* 连, 联 （with 连接 = 联结）
* 受, 收 （with 接收 =~ 接受）
* 监, 检, 鑒
* 查, 察 (with 检查 =~ 监察）
* 需,须 （with 需要 =~ 须要)
* 必, 逼
* 副, 扶, 辅, 附
* 父,夫,甫,傅
* 任 (allow) 认 (admit) 忍 (tolerate)
* 让，容
* 相, 像, 象
* 穿, 串, 贯, 惯
* 他, 她, 牠, 它
* 我, 吾, 余, 予, 卬
* 业, 艺, 役
* 训, 驯, 巽
* 工, 功, 贡, 供
* 作, 做, 措
* 错, 蹉
* 屈, 曲(curved)
* 吸,息 (breath)
* 义, 意
* 丁,订,钉，盯，定，碇，椗
* 扩, 阔
* 接, 结, 节 (bamboo section between two nodes: period), 季, 期, 纪, 届, 阶, 句
* 克, 可
* 共, 公
* 寻, 询, 讯, 巡
* 综, 统, 总, 丛, 同
* 原, 源, 元, 缘, 爰
* 理, 礼, 例 (order, rite, rule)
* 熔,融
* 注,铸 (pour, cast)
* 范,凡 (mould)
* 割,革 (cut, skin off)
* 进, 晋
* 兽,狩
* 娱, 愉,悦,乐，豫
* 告, 造, 叫，召，招
* 函,涵,含,焓,颔
* 鬼，怪
* 福，富

We can sum up all the options into this decision tree:



"Keyed" indicates the addition of semantic keys, whereas "complex" means that several sinograms are combined with a situation relationship.

“Modified" indicates that 转注字 are obtained by graphical modification of a common ancestral sinogram, whereas in my proposed 只声转注字 there is no graphical connection, only sound and sense. "Direct" indicates that 假借字 takes the target ideogram without modification, which forces of the original usurped meaning to form a new 变意字 to be written.

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