

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](#)" 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, 中, 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, 彗, 伞, 串, 矢, 矛, 盾, 门, 高, 舍, 罍, 酉, 瓦, 匚, 系, 丝, etc.

The meaning of these has drifted towards more abstraction:

日 sun for day,	面 face for side,	言 tongue for speech,	心 heart for mind,
月 moon for month,	首 head for chief,	自 nose for self,	正 foot for
木 tree for wood,	页 head for page,	目 eye for item,	uprightness
金 bell for gold,	口 mouth for opening,	手 hand for activity,	

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, 上, 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,	内 (入+冂 open the door curtains),
信 (trust the words of a person),	开/開 (門+升+一 hands lifting a door bolting bar),
武 (foot and axe),	关/關 (門+丝+升 hands closing door curtains),
莫 (日+艸 sunset into the grass),	联 listen to each other and bind alliance,
事, 吏, 史 (口+丨+又 a hand writes down the words of a mouth),	名 (夕+口 a mouth calls the name at night for identification),
及 (又+人 a hand grabs a man),	集 (birds on a tree),
是 (日+正 straight under the sun: exist here and now), 道 (首+辵), 烦, 播,	看 (hand over the eyes),
多 (夕+夕 several evenings of working)	采 (hand collecting fruits),
半 (牛+八 an animal split in two halves),	令 (mouth commanding to a kneeling man),
出 (中+凵 a sprout rises from a pot),	葬 (hands carrying a dead under grass),
去 (大+凵 a man leaving a enclosed area),	只/隻 (a single bird in hand),
走 (大+止 a man walking with foot),	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
- Simplified 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 generally indicates 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 pivot, mechanism, crucial point,

But also: 检 examine.

竹 for:

- Objects made of bamboo 管 pipe, 笔 pen, 箱 box, 笼 basket, 符 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
- ..even emotions: 笑 笨
- And of course, bamboo to eat: 笋

手 in full form below the character, or reduced form 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 the bigger 凵 for 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 1

- 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 𨇗, 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 冂.

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

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.

- 葉 “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, 攴, 正](#), and 是, and then between [事 and 史](#). It is also often admitted that 东 derives from 重, as a heavy bag of stuff.

This idea remains in 东西.

From observation, here are 3 new 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, 容, 恰, 拾, 拿
- First 止+止 => 步, then 步 => 涉 wade through, 陟 ascend => 鹭 promote
- First 隹+木 => 集, then 集 => 襍 雜 (杂)
- First 羊+工 => 差, then 差 => 蹉, 傿
- 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) | • 厶=> 私 |
| • 长=> 张 胀 growth | • 從(从) => 蹤(踪) |
| • 占=> 站 店 点 贴 玷 (occupied spot) | • 力=> 勒 劳 励 |
| • 主=> 住 驻 reside | • 执=> 势 |
| • 工=> 功 贡 项 work contribution | • 连=> 链 |
| • 才=> 材 财 resource | • 曼=> 漫 蔓 spreading time: 慢 □ |
| • 反=> 返 叛 □ | • 买=> 卖 |
| • 夬 => decision: 决, resolute speed: 快 跌 | • 告=> 造(summon to create) |
| 馱, take: 抉 划 pierce: 缺 窾 突 隄, fork: | • 召 => 招 |
| 篲, parting: 诀 | • 单=> 阐(plain, explain), 禪? |
| • 仑 => 论, 伦, 轮 (regular cycle, cf 法轮) | • 素=> 愫 |
| • 合 => 盒, 蛤, 颌 | • 贵=> 匱(scarce hence valuable) |
| • 答 => 搭 | • 至=> 致 |
| • 容 => 熔 | • 人=> 仁(human and humane) |
| • 女 => 如, 奴, 努 | • 又=> 有(hand, having) |
| • 厄=> 阨 危 脆 □, 垝 虺 崑 | • 直=> 植 殖 |
| • 叚=> hard: 坚 紧 □, □ wise: 贤 竖 □ | • 官=> 馆 管 |
| • 亡=> 忘 盲 荒 荒, 慌 谎 | • 朝=> 潮(dynasty, time, tide) |
| • 莫=> 寞 漠 墓 | • 生=> 性 姓 牲 產 甦(苏) |
| • 正=> 证 整 政 | • 支=> 枝 肢 歧 技 伎 |
| • 旨=> 指 悒 | • 辟=> 闢 壁 避 |
| • 步=> 頻 frequency, 濒 approach | • 保=> 堡 葆 媯 |
| • 方=> 房 square room, 坊 city quarter | • 井=> 青=> green 菁, clear and calm 晴 |
| • 令=> 命 | 静 靖 靚 清 婧 霄 |
| • 分=> 份 | • 井=> 阱 穿 洪 |
| • 州=> 洲 | • 夹=> 陝 挟 峡 筭 |
| • 廷=> 庭 | • 易=> sunlight 昉 陽 晒, burn: 烫 汤 炆 |
| • 原=> 源 | 痲 脰 wide open: 场 暢 扬 颺 蕩 |
| • 元=> 完 united whole | • 夊=> turn, bend: 宛 婉 蜿 wrist and knee: |
| • 知=> 智 痴(antonym) | 腕 挽 腕, bowl: 碗 剗 |
| • 贯=> 惯 | • 户 => light door or fan: 扇, 煽, 煽, 编, |
| • 度=> 渡 | bamboo door panel: 扉 扁 set of bamboo |
| • 井=> 拼 | slips: 篇, 雇, open door: 启 肇, shelter: 护, |
| • 气=> 汽 汽 汽 气 | 庐 fireplace/foyer: 炉 (after simplification) |
| • 道=> 导 | |
| • 王=> 皇 | • 函 => 涵 |
| • 酉=> 酒 | • 含 => 烩, 颌 |

- 商 => 熵
- 丁 => 订, 钉, 盯
- 定 => 碇, 椗
- 提 => 题

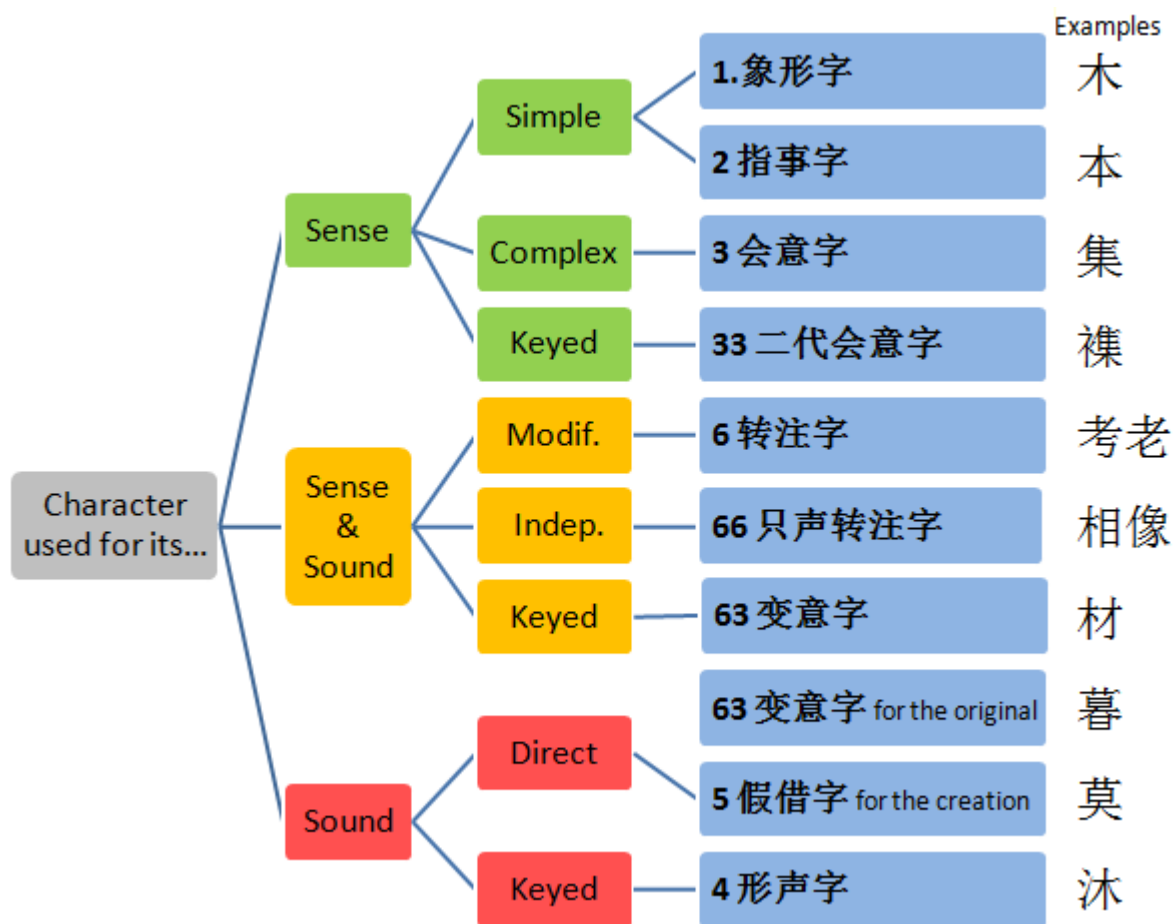
- 川 => 圳
- 干 => 旱
- 心 => 芯

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, 殒, 末, 貉, 墓, 缪, 穆, and also 误, 污, 怵?
- 不, 否, 弗
- 和, 合, 协, 荔, 颯, 叶, 叶, 谐, 齧, 偕, 變, 燮
- 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, 印
- 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, 焮, 颌
- 鬼, 怪
- 福, 富

We can sum up all the character creation 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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