

汉字入门 THE CHINESE WRITING SYSTEM

Chinese characters can be thought of as square-shaped “signs” which fit into blocks that are independent of each other. Generally speaking, a character may consist of one, two, or three parts, each standing for an independent semantic unit. In general, the arrangement of these semantic units in Chinese characters falls into the following patterns:

1. One-semantic-unit characters:



e.g., 女, 山

2. Two-semantic-unit characters:



e.g., 你, 奶



e.g., 盲, 雷



e.g., 回, 国



e.g., 起, 这



e.g., 闻, 周



e.g., 句, 气



e.g., 巨, 匠



e.g., 床, 层



e.g., 凶

3. Three-semantic-unit characters:



e.g., 谢



e.g., 意



e.g., 想



e.g., 筷



e.g., 语

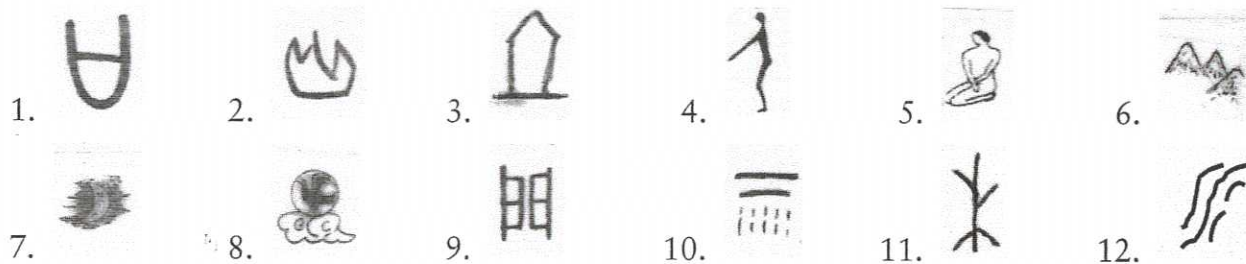


e.g., 部

Radicals

Radicals are pictographs which represent objects in the real world. Some of them can stand alone as independent, one-semantic-unit characters. Examples include 人 (person), 口 (mouth), and 雨 (rain). Radicals may also be combined with other components to form

a new character for which the radical serves as a clue to its meaning. Examples include 吹 (to blow) and 妹 (younger sister). Some radicals cannot be used as independent characters but only serve as a part of another character. Their function is to provide a semantic clue to the character, such as 宀 in 家 (home), 艹 in 菜 (vegetable), and 辶 in 逛 (to stroll). According to most dictionaries, there are 214 commonly used radicals in Chinese. Look at the following archaic examples of radicals:



Below are their modern forms. Can you use the archaic forms as clues to figure out the meaning of the modern forms?



Each of these characters, when combined with other components to form a new character, provides a clue to the meaning of that character. For example, 吃 [chī] (to eat) is formed by the radical 口 (mouth) and a phonetic clue 乞 [qǐ]. Characters with the radical 口 generally have meanings related to the mouth, such as 喝 [hē] (to drink), 唱 [chàng] (to sing) and 吸 [xī] (to suck). Here are some more examples:



练习一 Practice (1)

Circle the radicals in the following characters:

姐	鳄	晴	悲	驾	轮	劈	枝	聪	期
jiě	è	qíng	bēi	jià	lún	pī	zhī	cōng	qī
sister	crocodile	sunny	grief	to drive	wheel	cleave	branch	clever	period

Some of these characters also take a slightly different form when used as radicals. They often have a specific name commonly used by Chinese when referring to them as radicals. The following are those most frequently used:

人	rén - person	→	亻	<i>dān lì rén</i> - single standing person e.g., 你 (nǐ - you) 他 (tā - he)
手	shǒu - hand	→	扌	<i>tí shǒu</i> - lift hand e.g., 打 (dǎ - to strike) 拉 (lā - to pull)
水	shuǐ - water	→	氵	<i>sān diǎn shuǐ</i> - three dot water e.g., 江 (jiāng - river) 海 (hǎi - sea)
	bīng - ice	→	冫	<i>liǎng diǎn shuǐ</i> - two dot water e.g., 冷 (lěng - cold) 冰 (bīng - ice)
心	xīn - heart	→	忄	<i>shù xīn</i> - vertical heart e.g., 忙 (máng - busy) 情 (qíng - feelings)
火	huǒ - fire	→	灬	<i>sì diǎn huǒ</i> - four dot fire e.g., 煮 (zhǔ - to boil) 蒸 (zhēng - to steam)
刀	dāo - knife	→	刂	<i>lì dāo</i> - standing knife e.g., 到 (dào - to arrive) 利 (lì - sharp)
邑	yì - town	→	阝	<i>yòu ěr dāo</i> - right ear knife e.g., 都 (dōu - all) 那 (nà - that)
阜	fǔ - dam	→	阝	<i>zuǒ ěr dāo</i> - left ear knife e.g., 陡 (dǒu - steep) 陆 (lù - land)
犬	quǎn - dog	→	犴	<i>fǎn quǎn</i> - reversed dog e.g., 狗 (gǒu - dog) 狐 (chú - fox)

练习二 Practice (2)

F-36 Circle the radicals in the following characters:

冻	伯	怪	摔	信	踢	拔	煎	海	割
dòng	bó	guài	shuāi	xìn	tī	bá	jiān	hǎi	gē
freeze	uncle	strange	tumble	believe	kick	pull	fry	sea	cut

F-37 Match the following radicals with their original characters:

()	()	()	()	()	()
火	水	心	刀	手	人
a. 扌	b. 亅	c. 灬	d. 亅	e. 讠	f. 亻

There are some radicals which are actually only part of the original characters, such as:

丝	sī - silk	→	糸(纟)	jiǎosī (mì) - tangled silk e.g., 纸 (zhǐ - paper)	绸 (chóu - silk)
草	cǎo - grass	→	艹	cǎo zì tóu - top of grass character e.g., 花 (huā - flowers)	菜 (cài - vegetable)

The following characters show very little change when used as radicals. For example,

金	jīn - gold	→	钅	e.g., 钟 (zhōng - clock)	钱 (qián - money)
食	shí - food/eat	→	饣	e.g., 饭 (fàn - rice)	饿 (è - hungry)
衣	yī - clothes	→	衤	e.g., 裙 (qún - skirt)	裤 (kù - pants)
示	shì - display/reveal	→	礻	e.g., 礼 (lǐ - ritual)	视 (shì - to view)
玉	yù - jade	→	王	e.g., 珍 (zhēn - treasure)	珠 (zhū - pearl)
竹	zhú - bamboo	→	竹	e.g., 篮 (lán - basket)	笔 (bǐ - pen)
火	huǒ - fire	→	火	e.g., 炸 (zhà - to fry)	爆 (bào - to explode)
足	zú - foot	→	足	e.g., 跑 (pǎo - to run)	跳 (tiào - to jump)

A few radicals do not have corresponding characters and can only be used as a component of a character to provide the semantic clue to the character:

宀	mián	bǎo gài tóu, precious cover head, which is used to imply "roof" e.g., 家 (jiā - home) 室 (shì - room)
辶	chuò	zǒuzhī, walking zhi, used to imply walking or running e.g., 道 (dào - path/way) 逃 (táo - to run/escape)

THE RADICAL

Strokes are the basic building blocks of Chinese characters. Strokes are organized into units, and recognizing these units will help you learn and remember Chinese characters.

The first unit of a character to identify is the *radical*. A radical is the part of the character that is used to categorize it in a Chinese dictionary. For traditional characters, there are 214 radicals. For simplified characters, there are 189 radicals. You should consult the radical index of a Chinese dictionary to become familiar with the radicals of Chinese characters.

Radicals sometimes provide information about the meaning of the character. For example, the *mouth* radical (口) usually indicates that the character has something to do with speaking. It is a part of the characters 问·問 *to ask a question* and 吗·嗎 (sentence-final marker of yes-no questions). A variation of the *water* radical 水 (氵) is part of the characters for 海 *ocean* and 湖 *lake*.

Most radicals are located in a predictable position within the character. The variation of the water radical that occurs in the characters for *ocean* and *lake* is always located on the left side of the character. As you can see, the mouth radical occurs on the left when a character has a left-to-right orientation, but it may occur on the bottom when a character has a top-to-bottom orientation. Sometimes, the character is a radical all by itself. For example, 口 *mouth* and 水 *water* are distinct characters.

A few common radicals occur on the right. Examples include 阝, which comprises the right side of the character 都 *dōu all*, and 寸 *cùn*, which comprises the right side of the character 对·對 *duì correct*.

RECURRING PARTS IN CHARACTERS

Once you have identified the radical in a Chinese character, you should look for other recurring parts. Many characters consist of sequences of strokes that recur in many other characters. Identifying the recurring parts makes it much simpler to memorize new characters. Note the recurring parts in the following groups of characters: 很 腿 跟, 是 提, 早 掉 朝. Recurring parts sometimes provide cues to pronunciation. For example, in simplified characters, 让 *ràng* and 上 *shàng* rhyme with each other, and 很 *hěn* and 跟 *gēn* rhyme in both character sets. However, 腿 *tuǐ* does not rhyme with 很 *hěn* and 跟 *gēn*, even though it shares a recurring part with them.

Basic Radicals

水 (氵) water shuǐ	土 earth; dirt tǔ	玉 (王) jade yù (wáng)
艸 (艹) grass cǎo	月 moon yuè	日 day rì
口 mouth kǒu	纟, 糸 silk mì	石 rock; stone shí
木 wood mù	虫 insect chóng	鱼, 魚 fish yú
手 (扌) hand shǒu	讠, 言 speech yán	山 mountain shān
人 (亻) person rén	女 female nǚ	足 foot zú
金 metal; gold jīn	竹 (⺮) bamboo zhú	鸟, 鳥 bird niǎo
心 (忄) heart xīn	火 (灬) fire huǒ	疒 illness huǒ

Using a Mandarin Chinese dictionary, look up the pronunciation and meaning of each of the following important radicals. The 10 radicals can be found in either a traditional character dictionary or a simplified character dictionary.

Character	Pronunciation	Meaning
1. 用	_____	_____
2. 豆	_____	_____
3. 小	_____	_____
4. 水	_____	_____
5. 日	_____	_____
6. 月	_____	_____
7. 土	_____	_____
8. 大	_____	_____
9. 火	_____	_____
10. 方	_____	_____