

Formation of Chinese characters

The origin of the Chinese antique script is very long and there are not enough documentary resources about its history. Chinese characters can be traced to a time when people made records in their daily life by tying knots in ropes or strings. The most accepted legend is that the inventor of Chinese writing was a minister named Ts'ang Chieh, who recorded the history in the court of Emperor Huang Ti, the first king of China. People in different regions of China speak differently, including such dialects as Mandarin, Min Nan, Hakka, Cantonese, etc. But while certain characters may be pronounced differently depending on the dialect, the meaning and the written Chinese language is the same for everyone. Mandarin is the official spoken language of the People's Republic of China.

There are three elements in a Chinese character: image (form), sound, and meaning. There are also six principles that used to define and explicate the characters:

1. Pictograms (象形)

Pictograms are words formed from things which can be drawn (such as animals, a person, or objects.)



2. Simple indicatives (指事)

Simple indicatives are words formed from things that cannot be drawn (such as directions or numbers.)

Character	Pinyin	Meaning
一	yī	one
二	èr	two
三	sān	three
上	shàng	up
下	xià	below
本	běn	root
末	mò	apex

3. Compound indicatives (會意)

Compound indicatives are words formed to be understood easily after the pictograph and indicatives are formed.

Character	Pinyin	Meaning
木 × 2 = 林	lín	two trees → grove
木 × 3 = 森	sēn	three trees → forest
人 + 木 = 休	xiū	a man leaning against a tree → rest

4. Phono-semantic compound characters (形聲)

A phono-semantic compound character represents a word that is formed from another word to which it is similar, with additional signs or characters added to make the new character. The word is pronounced like one of the original words.

Original word		+	Added character		=	New word	
Char.	Meaning		Char.	Pron.		Char.	Pron. Meaning
氵	water	+	木	mù	=	沐	mù to wash one's hair
氵	water	+	林	lín	=	淋	lín to pour
艹	grass	+	采	cǎi	=	菜	cǎi vegetable

5. Borrowed characters (假借)

A borrowed character was originally borrowed from another word that was pronounced the same (a homophone).

For example, the character 來 lái depicts the wheat plant and meant *wheat* in ancient times — it was a pictogram. Because the words for *wheat* and *to come* were pronounced the same, the character 來 was then borrowed to write the verb *to come*. The pronunciation of the original word meaning wheat has changed in modern times to mài (now written 麥), and the original homophony between the two words has disappeared.

6. Derived characters (轉注)

Derived characters represent words that share the same root word or meaning.

For example, the characters 老 lǎo (old) and 考 kǎo (a test) are the most commonly cited examples of derived characters, which come from a common etymological root but differ in that one part is changed to indicate a different pronunciation and meaning.

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