A dictionary of Chinese characters

'The whole thrust of the work is that it is more helpful to learners of Chinese characters to see them in terms of sound, than in visual terms. It is a radical, provocative and constructive idea.' Dr Valerie Pellatt, University of Newcastle.

By arranging frequently used characters under the phonetic element they have in common, rather than only under their radical, the Dictionary encourages the student to link characters according to their phonetic. The system of cross referencing then allows the student to find easily all the characters in the Dictionary which have the same phonetic element, thus helping to fix in the memory the link between a character and its sound and meaning.

More controversially, the book aims to alleviate the confusion that similar looking characters can cause by printing them alongside each other. All characters are given in both their traditional and simplified forms.

Appendix A clarifies the choice of characters listed while Appendix B provides a list of the radicals with detailed comments on usage. The Dictionary has a full pinyin and radical index.

This innovative resource will be an excellent study-aid for students with a basic grasp of Chinese, whether they are studying with a teacher or learning on their own.

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A dictionary of Chinese characters
Accessed by phonetics

Stewart Paton
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Foreword

This Dictionary of selected Chinese characters, together with its cross-references, has been prepared with the aim of helping non-Chinese-speaking students of the characters who are just emerging from the initial stage of study. It is in the form of a supplement to the standard Chinese–English dictionary, adding two features not present in such a dictionary, in the hope of offering these two further aids to the memory in the difficult task of fixing the link between the character, the sound and the meaning.

The first, and more significant, of these features aims to stress the importance of the phonetic element in the Chinese characters by grouping together the most frequently used characters which have the same ‘phonetic’ under one ‘key’ character and linking them by cross-references.

The second feature attempts to deal with a simple but persistent difficulty for the foreigner: the tendency to confuse similar looking characters which need to be distinguished one from another. These difficult cases are confronted by printing the characters next to one another and again linking them with cross-references.

As a student of the Chinese characters I have found, and continue to find, the use of these two aids in memorising characters increasingly useful. In presenting this list, primarily for the use of students, may I invite comments from all those interested in the process of acquiring a reading knowledge of Chinese.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude in the first place to two specialists in Chinese, Dr Valerie Pellatt of the University of Newcastle-on-Tyne and Dr Nigel Wiseman of Chang Gung University, Taiwan, who, over a number of years, encouraged me to persist in my efforts to acquire a reading knowledge of Chinese. They, together with a number of other friends, were kind enough to read through and make comments on the various drafts of the material which was being compiled during this rather lengthy process and which then formed the basis of this Dictionary. I remain conscious of the debt of gratitude I owe to them and to Jackie Addison, Moira Bambrough, Professor Greg Benton of Cardiff University, Jim Doyle of Napier University, Edinburgh, and to two former colleagues in the Department of Languages of Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh: Professor Ian Mason and Dr Jerry Payne.

Even though I did not always accept the comments and criticism offered, I was always glad of the opportunity to discuss the points raised and, while incorporating some of the suggestions made, I must stress that I bear the sole responsibility for the arguments put forward in the Preface and Introduction to the Dictionary and for any errors which occur in the entries in the Dictionary.

Stewart Paton
Edinburgh April 2008
Introduction

For the foreigner studying the Chinese characters there is bound to be much 'brute' memory work, to quote John DeFrancis. However, the situation is not as bad as it sounds, since this kind of memory work is required principally for a limited number of frequently used characters which we could categorise as 'simple', in the sense that they consist of one shape without additions of any kind. Such simple characters would be for example 剖 dāo (knife), or 人 rén (man).

However, the overwhelming majority of Chinese characters are 'compound' characters, and with a compound character help is being offered by each of the two elements which compose it. These are a 'radical', which gives a general indication of the meaning, and another element which gives an indication of the sound and is therefore referred to as the phonetic. Such a compound character would be for instance 吸 xi (breathe in), where the radical is 亻 kǒu (mouth) and the phonetic is 及 jí (reach).

The radicals, 214 in number in the traditional count (see Appendix B), are the modern conventionalised forms of the original pictograph characters, under which the Chinese characters are ordered in the dictionaries. Radical No. 30 is 亻 kǒu (mouth), as in the example above. All the compound characters in which it appears are listed in the dictionary under radical 30, giving therefore a general indication of the meaning, so that one finds here the characters for 'to breathe', 'to smoke', 'to spit', 'to kiss', etc. This of course is a useful aid for the student: but the main aim of this Dictionary is to direct the attention to the other element in the character, the phonetic, since the radical generally gives no help at all with the sound of a particular character.

As a student I have found that the most useful 'hook' for the memory is to fix in the mind the link between one shape and one sound. Thus 分 fēn (divide), and this continues to be the case, except for a change in tone, in such compound characters as 粉 fěn (powder) and 份 fèn (portion). The entry in the Dictionary for this character (No. 199) also includes two compounds which, while using the same phonetic, have two variant pronunciations: 盆 pén (basin) and 贫 pín (poor). As a general rule each phonetic appears only once as a key character in the Dictionary, linked to the one sound, and I do continue to find this approach useful.

I have also tried to include in the Dictionary another 'hook' to help the memory. This is an attempt to confront the tendency to confuse similar looking characters by printing them alongside one another, following but considerably expanding the practice in the Mathews dictionary. Clearly this is a more controversial issue, since

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2 For a note on the Chinese tones see p.x.
by its nature it has to be partially subjective, and since what I confuse may not
worry others. But objectively, when faced with 各 and 名, 哀 and 衷, or 末 and 末
the difference can be said to be slight, perhaps one stroke only. In other cases
another student may very well dismiss my suggestion of possible confusion as
misplaced. (These items in the Dictionary are marked D.f. = distinguish from).

In choosing which characters to include in the Dictionary, either as one of the key
characters or as one to be referred to in the cross-references, the overriding factor
has been that of usefulness. By this is meant frequency of use and I have relied
heavily for these decisions on the recently published character frequency count by
Liu Yuan and his colleagues (for details see Appendix A). For each character he gives
what might be called a 'usage number' and, for reasons given in Appendix A, I have
included in the Dictionary, either as a key character or in the cross-references, only
those characters having a usage number of 200 or more.

The method advocated in this list can best be illustrated by taking a typical
Chinese character such as ountain, meaning 'a place where people
gather', and consisting of a radical ± often, as here, placed on the left, plus a
phonetic, i.e. a shape which gives an indication of the sound.

The helpful feature for the student, and indeed the principal justification for
producing this Dictionary for the study of the Chinese characters, is that the
phonetic, once learned is a kind of constant, which occurs in combination with
many other radicals, meaning many different things, but generally all pronounced
in a similar and sometimes in an identical way. A conscious attempt to memorise
the more frequently occurring phonetics has certainly, for me, accelerated the
learning process.

Having memorised the shape for ountain, and given a cross-reference list, one has
also effectively learned to recognise very easily many other characters with the
same phonetic, such as the following five:

+ radical 130: 肠 cháng intestines (radical 130 = flesh);
+ radical 85: 汤 tāng soup (radical 85 = water);
+ radicals 85&86: 燙 tàng to scald (radical 86 = fire);
+ radical 64: 杨 wāng to raise (radical 64 = the hand);
+ radical 75: 杨 yáng the poplar tree (radical 75 = tree).

The pinyin for the last four characters above is underlined, as it is in the Dictionary,
to indicate a variant pronunciation.5

The system of cross-references used in the list ensures that all the frequently used
compound characters with a particular phonetic are readily available, listed under
the entry for the key character, which in this instance is entry No. 77 for ountain, cháng.

One important further feature of the Dictionary is that it presents both the
traditional (unsimplified) and simplified forms of the characters listed. Simplified
forms of the Chinese characters were introduced in the 1950s for a large number of the traditional forms and, where both simplified (S) and traditional (T) forms exist for any particular character mentioned, the T form is given in brackets immediately after the S form.

Thus the layout for entry No. 77 begins as follows:

77 chäng (場) a place where people gather.

D. phonetic in T form f: 易 yi easy, No. 826 in list.

The second line of this entry is an example of the second ‘hook’ for the memory: to help to distinguish between very similar characters. In this case the ‘helpful hint’ would only apply when reading a text printed in traditional (unsimplified) characters. As here, the characters to be distinguished one from another are printed in close proximity to each other. (D.f. = distinguish from).

These first two lines of entry No. 77 are then followed by those compound characters, chosen for their frequency, which are formed with this phonetic, beginning in this instance with:

+ 130: 肠(腸) chäng intestines.

The radicals used in the entries in the list are designated by their number in the traditional list, see pp. xiv–xv and Appendix B.6

The layout of the entries in the list follows the pattern indicated above for entry No. 77: 1. Key character with basic phonetic, followed by 2. either items in the ‘distinguish from’ (D.f.) category and/or 3. compound characters using the basic phonetic.

As has been indicated, it is intended that this list should be used together with a Chinese–English dictionary. For all the characters in the list, the pinyin, the appropriate tone mark,7 and the meaning are also given, making the list usable with any Chinese–English dictionary. However, students are strongly advised to make use of a full Chinese–English dictionary particularly to verify the range of meanings for any particular character. A recommended dictionary is: A Chinese-English Dictionary, ed. Wu Jingrong, Beijing 1987.

The Dictionary is provided with a full pinyin and radical index. These include all the characters mentioned in it, either as key characters or in the cross-references.

Two further examples will illustrate in greater detail the benefits of the phonetic approach to the study of the Chinese characters.

6 In the reign of Emperor Kang Xi the system of classifying the Chinese characters under 214 ‘significs’ (radicals) was used in the dictionary of 1716. Since then it has remained the traditional way of classifying the characters.

7 The tones. Chinese is a tonal language, each character is a syllable and each syllable must be pronounced with one of four tones. They are indicated by diacritics placed above the appropriate vowel. Tone 1 is high level, as in both syllables of pinyin; tone 2 is ‘high rising’, as in mén (gate); tone 3 is ‘low dipping’ as in chäng (a place where people gather); tone 4 is ‘high falling’, as in the first syllable of tàitái (lady). Exceptionally, some syllables are toneless, as is the second syllable of tàitái, and are then left unmarked.