An Introduction to The Chinese Writing System for ESL Professionals

by

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Overview

- Importance of Chinese
- Chinese Language (Mandarin)
- Structure of Chinese Characters
- Morphemes and Syllables
- Words
- Sentences
Importance of Chinese

• Number of Chinese speakers
• Number of ESL learners with Chinese as L1
Mandarin tones

• First tone (high level) (mā) (mother)
• Second tone (high rising) (má) (hemp)
• Third tone (low falling) (mǎ) (horse)
• Fourth tone (high falling) (mà) (to scold)

• Neutral tone (ma) (question particle)
Mandarin tones

- chinesepod.com/tools/pronunciation/section/17
Structure of Chinese Characters

• Calligraphy–Imaginary Square
• Strokes– Stroke Order and Direction
• Components
• Spatial Arrangement
• Character Types
  • Pictographs, Ideographs,
  • Compound Ideographs, Phonetic Compounds
• Radicals/Significs
• Phonetics
Structure of Chinese Characters

• Calligraphy–Imaginary Square

人
Structure of Chinese Characters

• Strokes
• 17 basic strokes

www.clearchinese.com/chi#4194B0
Structure of Chinese Characters

• Strokes--Stroke Order and Direction

www.archchinese.com.webloc
Structure of Chinese Characters

• Components
• Spatial Arrangement

www.yellowbridge.com/.webloc
Structure of Chinese Characters

- Basic character types
- Pictographs
  - 日 (rì) (sun)
  - 月 (yuè) (moon)
  - 口 (kǒu) (mouth)
  - 手 (shǒu) (hand)
  - 水 (shuǐ) (water)
Structure of Chinese Characters

- **Basic character types**
  - Ideographs
  - 一（yī）(one)
  - 二(èr) (two)
  - 三(sān) (three)
  - 上 (shàng) (above)
  - 下 (xià) (below)
  - 中 (zhōng) (middle)
Structure of Chinese Characters

- **Basic character types**
- **Compound Ideographs**

- 好 = 女 + 子
- “good” = “woman” + “child”
- 明 = 日 + 月
- “bright” = “sun” + “moon”
Structure of Chinese Characters

• Basic character types
• Phonetic Compounds
Structure of Chinese Characters

• Phonetic Compounds (Significs + Phonetics)

• Most Chinese characters (about 90%) consist of one signific element that indicates meaning, and one phonetic element that indicates sound.

• These types of characters are called “phonetic compounds.”
Phonetic Compound Characters

• A “signific” part, which indicates meaning
• plus
• A “phonetic” part which indicates sound
• 妈 [mā (mother)] = 女 (female) + 马 [mǎ]
Structure of Chinese Characters

- Phonetic Compounds (Significs + Phonetics)
  - 马 (mǎ) (horse)
  - 妈 (mā) (mother)
  - 吗 (ma) (question particle)
  - 骂 (mà) (to scold)
Structure of Chinese Characters

- **Phonetic Compounds (Significs + Phonetics)**
- 马 (mǎ) (horse)
- 妈 (mā) (mother)
- 吗 (ma) (question particle)
- 骂 (mà) (to scold)
- The character 马 (mǎ) (horse) is a phonetic element in other compound characters, i.e., it lends its pronunciation to the other characters.
Structure of Chinese Characters

• Radicals
• There are 214 radicals, or keys, used to organize characters in a traditional Chinese dictionary, such as the famous Kangxi dictionary of 1716.
• Many radicals are also significs, and impart some degree of semantic information to a character.
Structure of Chinese Characters

Radicals

• In the phonetic compound character
  妈 [mā (mother)] = 女 (female) + 马 [mǎ],

  女 (female) is also a radical.
Structure of Chinese Characters

• Phonetics
• There are approximately 900 to 1200 phonetic elements that comprise most Chinese characters.
The Mandarin Syllable

• A syllable in Modern Standard Mandarin
• Consists of:
  • An initial
  • A final
  • A tone
The Mandarin Initial

- The Mandarin initial consists of the initial consonant in a syllable.
The Mandarin Final

• The Mandarin final consists of all of the vowels and consonants that occur after the initial consonant, i.e., the rest of the syllable after the initial (initial consonant).
Types of Phonetic Series Based on Phonemic Congruence (Kraemer 1980, 1991)

Seven Categories:

• Totally Perfect
• Segment Perfect
• Initial Perfect
• Final Perfect
• Tone Perfect
• Initial – Tone Perfect
• Final – Tone Perfect
Totally Perfect

• 成 [tʂʰəŋ2] (chéng-become)
• is a phonetic in
  城 [tʂʰəŋ2] (chéng-city)
Totally Perfect

• 丈 [tʂɑŋ4] (zhàng-measure (land))
• is a phonetic in
  仗 [tʂɑŋ4] (zhàng-weapons)
  杖 [tʂɑŋ4] (zhàng-cane; stick)
段 [tʂanŋ3] (zhǎng-grow) is a phonetic in
张 [tʂanŋ1] (zhāng-surname, measure
word)
Segment Perfect

马 [ma3](mǎ-horse) is a phonetic in

吗 [ma0] (ma-question word)
骂 [ma4] (mà-scold)
妈 [ma1] (mā-mother)
门 [mən2] (mén-door) is a phonetic in
们 [mən0] (men-plural)
方 [fɑŋ1] (fāng-place) is a phonetic in

房 [fɑŋ2] (fáng-house)
防 [fɑŋ2] (fáng-guard against)
访 [fǎŋ3] (fǎng-visit)
放 [fɑŋ4] (fàng-let go)
Initial  Perfect

• 先  [ɕiɛn1]  (xīan-first) is a phonetic in
• 洗  [ɕi3]  (xǐ-wash)

• 你  [ni3]  (nǐ-you) is a phonetic in
• 您  [nin2]  (nín-you-polite)
Initial Consonant + Vowel (CV) Perfect

• 先 [ɕiɛn1] (xīan-first) is a phonetic in
• 洗 [ɕi3] (xǐ-wash)
• both share [ɕi-] xi-

• 你 [ni3] (nǐ-you) is a phonetic in
• 您 [nin2] (nín-you-polite)
• both share [ni-] ni-
Final Perfect


Rime Perfect (NE Perfect)

- In a rime perfect phonetic series, the characters share this same main vowel or nucleus (N) followed by the same final vowel or consonant ending (E).
Rime Perfect

• 门 [mən2] (mén-door) is a phonetic in
• 间 [wuən4] (wèn-ask).

• They share the rime [ən] (-en ).
Rime Perfect: Underlying Forms

- 山 [ʂan¹] (shān-mountain) is a phonetic in 仙 [ɕiɛn¹] (xiān-immortal).

- They have the two rimes [an] and [ɛn]
- But they share the same underlying form of the rime (-an) (See Cheng 1973).
Rime Perfect: Underlying Forms

• 占 [tʂan1,4] (zhān-to divine; zhàn-to occupy) is a phonetic in
• 点 [tiɛn3] (diǎn- a point) and
• 店 [tiɛn4] (diàn-shop).

• They have the two rimes [an] and [ɛn.]
• But they share the same underlying form of the rime (-an ) (See Cheng 1973).
Similar Vowel Features

• 是 [ʂʅ4] (shì-to be) is a phonetic in
• 題 [t’i2] (tí-topic) and
• 提 [t’i2] (tí-lift from above).
• C1 V / C2 V (V = i) (phonemic) same final V phonemically)
• [ʂʅ4] / [t’i2]
• (shi) / (ti)
Chinese Characters-Morphemes

- Characters are morphemic
- Usually one character = 1 morpheme

- 我 (wǒ) (I, me)
- 你 (nǐ) (you)
- 他 (tā) (he)
- 她 (tā) (she)
- 图书馆 (túshūguǎn) (library) (charts + books + place)
- 美国 (Měiguo) (beautiful + country)
- 中国 (Zhōngguo) (central + country) (middle + kingdom)
Chinese Characters-Syllables

• Characters are syllabic
• Usually one character = 1 syllable

• 我 (wǒ) (I, me)
• 你 (nǐ) (you)
• 他 (tā) (he)
• 她 (tā) (she)
• 图书馆 (túshūguǎn) (library) (charts + books + place)
• 美国 (Měiguó) (beautiful + country)
• 中国 (Zhōngguó) (central + country) (middle + kingdom)
Chinese Writing System

• The Chinese writing system can be thought of as morpheme–syllablic (DeFrancis).
Morphemes Versus Words

• The single Chinese character is a morpheme.
• Most words in Chinese (Mandarin) are 2 or more syllables (disyllabic or multisyllabic).

• 我 (wǒ) (I, me)
• 的 (de) (Possessive)
• 我的 (wǒde) (my) (I + possessive)
• 图书馆 (túshūguǎn) (library) (charts + books + place)
• 本子 (běnzi) (notebook)
• 学习 (xuéxí) (study)
你好吗? (Ní hǎo ma?) (how are you?)  
我很好。 (Wó hén hǎo.) (I am very well.)  
谢谢。 (Xièxié.) (Thank you.)
Sentences

• 你到那儿去?
  • (Nǐ dào nǎr qu?)
• (Where are you going?)
• 我到图书馆去。
• (Wǒ dào túshūguǎn qu.)
• (I am going to the library.)
Sentences

• 你有几本书？(Ní yǒu jǐ běn shū?)
• (How many books do you have?)
• 我有三本书。(Wó yǒu sān běn shū.)
• (I have 3 books.)
Sentences

• Modern Chinese sentences in the PRC are written from left to right.

• Sentences in Chinese are written with equal spacing between characters.
Traditional versus simplified characters

• Traditional characters can be found in Taiwan and certain overseas Chinese publications.
• Simplified characters are the officially simplified forms used in the People’s Republic of China.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Simplified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>馬 (horse)</td>
<td>马 (mǎ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>讓 (let)</td>
<td>让 (ràng) （上 = shàng）</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>蝦 (shrimp)</td>
<td>虾 (xiā) （下 = xià）</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
谢谢

• Xièxie (Thank you.)
References


References


References

• Kraemer, Stephen M. (1991b). *Levels of phonological regularity in the Chinese writing system*. Working paper. [https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/8133](https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/8133)


References
