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Preface

This book is designed to introduce Classical Chinese to students with no previous exposure to Modern Chinese. This differs from the approach used in most textbooks, which assumes you already have studied Chinese for at least a couple of years. (Some of these books also seem to assume that you plan on being a Sinologist and already have a master's degree in linguistics!)

I started studying Classical Chinese as an undergraduate (with Nathan Sivin at the University of Pennsylvania), after completing three years of Modern Chinese (studying under Victor Mair and the late A. Ronald Walton, among others). I continued my study as a graduate student in philosophy at Stanford, and translation has been an important part of my research and publications ever since. However, I learned from my teacher, the late David S. Nivison, that it is possible to teach Classical Chinese to students with no previous exposure to the language; he routinely included language instruction as part of his introductory course on ancient Chinese philosophy. Later, I was one of the founders of the Department of Chinese and Japanese at Vassar College, and I offered our first course in Classical Chinese. In the first years of the program, we simply did not have enough students to make two years of Modern Chinese a requirement for Classical Chinese. Consequently, I wrote the first draft of this textbook for our students. The Department of Chinese and Japanese at Vassar has flourished, and I now use Paul Rouzer's *A New Practical Primer of Literary Chinese* to teach students who have already learned Modern Chinese.

I still got some use out of my old textbook, though, sending PDFs to Western-trained philosophers and interested amateurs when they asked for a recommendation for a text to help them learn at least a little of the language of the classics of Confucianism and Daoism. On a whim, I

submitted the manuscript to my editor at Hackett Publishing Company, Rick Todhunter, and he reported that there is a real hunger for a book like this.

So I owe a debt to my own teachers, to my students, and to my colleagues at Vassar, all of whom were essential for the eventual completion of this book. I am also grateful to my colleagues at Yale-NUS College, Scott Cook and Jing Hu, for assistance on some technical issues. Justin Tiwald and four anonymous referees also provided invaluable feedback and corrections to earlier drafts. Rick Todhunter has been very encouraging of this project from the beginning. In addition, Hackett's production director, Liz Wilson, and this book's copyeditor, Shannon Cunningham, and its proofreader, Leslie Connor, have made me sound much more articulate than I am. None of these people is responsible for my mistakes, of course.

Introduction

Classical Chinese is the form of Chinese that was written in the period between roughly 500 BCE and 220 CE. It is the language of classical Confucianism and Daoism. This book is designed to introduce you to the fundamentals of Classical Chinese grammar, some basic vocabulary, and fundamental skills in using a dictionary and classical commentaries. After reading this book, you will still have a lot to learn. However, you should be ready to continue learning from a more conventional textbook. In addition, with perseverance and the help of a good grammar and dictionary, you will be able to work your way through a few elementary Chinese texts on your own.

Two aspects of this book are distinctive. First, most other textbooks of Classical Chinese assume that you have already completed at least two years of Modern Chinese or Japanese. However, this textbook assumes no previous familiarity with the Chinese or Japanese spoken or written languages. Second, from the very first lesson, this book teaches you using selections from actual Chinese philosophical texts. These include readings from the sayings of Confucius, Laozi (the legendary founder of Daoism), and some Tang dynasty poetry. In three lessons I edited the text slightly, but all of the other readings are complete, and none of the readings are artificial or dumbed down.

Classical Chinese is a style of Literary Chinese, the written language used by the educated in China for approximately 2,500 years.[1] It was also adopted as the literary language of premodern Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. In a way, Literary Chinese played a role in East Asia similar to Latin in the West. Latin and Literary Chinese were originally the written form

1. There is also an earlier pre-Classical language (called Old Chinese or Archaic Chinese) that we know from inscriptions on artifacts and the older portions of works like the *Classic of Odes* (詩經 Shījīng) and the *Classic of Documents* (書經 Shūjīng), which were already ancient by the time of Confucius.

of the language spoken natively by a particular group of people. However, the ordinary vernacular language evolved into various spoken dialects, and Latin and Literary Chinese became the common written languages of the educated elites. In the West, books were first printed using vernacular English, German, etc. during the Protestant Reformation (beginning in the sixteenth century), but educated people were expected to know Latin until the beginning of the twentieth century. In China, almost all texts were printed in Literary Chinese until the New Culture movement of the early twentieth century.

1. The Five Types of Chinese Characters

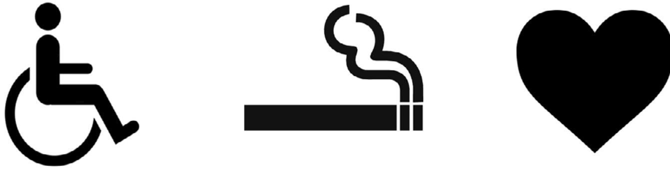
Everyone knows that there is something distinctive about the Chinese writing system, but there is considerable ignorance and confusion about how that writing system works.[2] Almost two thousand years ago, the Chinese lexicographer 許慎 Xǔ Shèn noted that there are five kinds of Chinese characters: pictograms, simple ideograms, compound ideograms, loan characters, and semantic-phonetic compounds.[3] We can illustrate four of these five types using symbols that are familiar to contemporary English readers.

---

2. Sections 1–3 of this Introduction are reprinted, with modifications, from Bryan W. Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2011), Appendix B, 235–47.

3. Nerd note: In Chinese, these are known as 象形字 xiàngxíngzì (pictograms), 指事字 zhǐshìzì (simple ideograms), 會意字 huìyìzì (compound ideograms), 形聲字 xíngshēngzì (semantic-phonetic compounds, which are also referred to as 諧聲字 xiéshēngzì), and 假借字 jiǎjièzì (phonetic loans). Xǔ Shèn explained his system in his 說文解字 Shuōwén jiězì, *Explanation of Simple Characters and Analysis of Complex Characters*, from about 100 CE. Xǔ Shèn also identified a sixth type of character, but there is no consensus about what he thought the defining feature of this type is, so people generally ignore it.

Pictograms were originally drawings of something:



As these examples illustrate, the pictures are usually stylized, sometimes to the point of being purely conventional. The image on the far right looks nothing like a real human heart, but children are taught in kindergarten that it is a “picture” of a heart. In addition, the relationship between the picture’s meaning and what it depicts has a large element of conventionality. The middle symbol means “smoking permitted here,” but our culture could equally well have decided that it means “tobacco sold here” or “warning, flammable materials present.” So pictograms are pictures of something, but their meaning is still determined to a great extent by social convention.

Simple ideograms are characters whose structure suggests their meaning, but which were not pictures of anything concrete:

The simple ideogram on the far left means “five,” but it is not a picture, because the number five is an abstract entity, so there could not be a picture of it. As with pictograms, there is an element of conventionality in the meanings of simple ideograms. The middle symbol is posted on roads and means “U-turn allowed,” but we as a society could have decided that it means “watch out for falling balls” and posted it on golf courses or baseball parks.

Compound ideograms are characters with two or more meaningful components that in conjunction suggest the meaning of the composite symbol:

Notice that the components of the compound ideogram on the left are themselves ideograms. However, the compound ideogram in the middle has one component that is a pictogram and one that is an ideogram. The compound ideogram on the far right has two components that are pictograms. In general, the components of a compound ideogram do not have to be ideograms themselves. All that is necessary is that the conjunction of meaningful symbols suggests the meaning of the whole.

The previous three types of characters categorize them according to the way in which they are *created*. The next category, phonetic loans, includes characters that already exist but that are *recycled* to represent a new meaning. Simply put, a phonetic loan is a rebus. If you are not familiar with that term, consider the following "sentence":

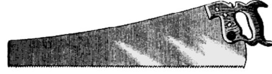
It means, "I love you." But how does it get this meaning? Left to right, the symbols are a pictogram of an eye (from the seal on the back of the US dollar bill), a pictogram of a human heart, and a pictogram of a hand pointing at the reader. The eye pictogram does not stand for a human eye here, of course. Instead, it stands for a word that sounds the same as "eye" in English: "I." This is how phonetic loans work: they borrow pre-existing symbols that already have a word associated with them and use them to represent *different* words that *sound* the same.

Most people, if they have any preconceptions about Chinese characters, seem to think that they all work like pictograms or ideograms. In fact, only a small percentage of Chinese characters are either pictograms or ideograms. Almost all Chinese characters (97 percent) belong to the fifth group of characters: semantic-phonetic compounds. As we have seen, there are examples of pictograms, ideograms, and even phonetic loans that will be familiar to English readers. However, semantic-phonetic compounds are a little harder to illustrate. Consider the following sentence:

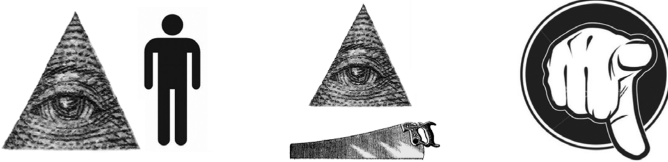
The first symbol in the above sentence is a pictogram of an eye, being used as a phonetic loan for "I." The third symbol is still a pictogram for "you." But what is the eye pictogram doing in its second occurrence? It means "see." So the sentence means "I see you." Perhaps you guessed this immediately, but if there were lots of pictograms in common use and they had different meanings, sometimes used as phonetic loans and other times pictograms proper, you could easily get confused. So we might start to distinguish one use of a symbol from another by providing an additional hint:

The first symbol is now a semantic-phonetic compound. The eye pictogram in the first symbol is the phonetic component: it tells us what the pronunciation of the character is. The man pictogram in the first symbol is the semantic component: it gives you a hint about what the meaning

of the symbol is. If we were properly trained in reading this written language, we would immediately read the above sentence as "I see you." Now consider the following pictogram of a handsaw:



Suppose we combine this symbol with the eye symbol, producing the semantic-phonetic compound in the middle of the sentence below:



This sentence would mean "I saw you." The first two symbols in this sentence are both semantic-phonetic compounds, in which one part gives you a hint about the pronunciation of the symbol and one part gives you a hint about the meaning. Chinese semantic-phonetic compounds work the same way.

Now that we understand the five types of Chinese characters, let's look at some actual examples. Pictograms, once again, are stylized pictures that have a meaning that is conventionally connected to what they depict:

日 月 女 子

Try to guess what these four characters are pictures of, and then look at the footnote for the answer.[4] If you guessed even one of them correctly, you have done as well as any student has ever done in the thirty years that I have been using this example. In all likelihood, you couldn't guess any of them. As I stressed before, pictograms are highly stylized symbols whose meaning is not transparent.

---

4. Believe it or not, these are (from left to right) pictograms of the sun, the moon, a woman, and a child.

Simple ideograms, you will recall, are characters whose structure suggests their meaning but which are not pictures of anything. Simple ideograms are quite rare in Chinese, but here are some examples:

一　二　三　上　下

You might be able to guess the meanings of the first three symbols, especially when you see them written side by side like this. The fourth and the fifth characters are less transparent, though.[5]

Compound ideograms are characters with two parts, each of which has a meaning on its own, which suggests the meaning of the whole character when they are brought into conjunction:

明　好

You now know the meanings of the components of each of these two compound ideograms. (Look back under the examples of pictograms if you have forgotten.) Based on the components, try to guess the meaning of each of these compound ideograms before looking at the footnote.[6]

Semantic-phonetic compounds have one part that hints at the meaning of the character (the semantic component) and one part that hints at the pronunciation (the phonetic component). For example, the pictogram 門 depicts a gate and is pronounced mén, but it occurs as the phonetic component in the following semantic-phonetic compounds:

---

5. From left to right, these are the simple ideograms for the numbers one, two, three, above, and below. (And, no, the character for "four" is not what you would guess.)

6. The compound ideogram on the left means "bright" (suggested by the combined brightness of the sun, 日, and the moon, 月), while the one on the right means (in Classical Chinese) "to be fond of" (suggested by a woman, 女, holding her child, 子). The original form of 明 may have shown a window and the moon, which would also be a compound ideogram, but with different components.

問 wèn, "to ask" (the semantic component is 口, "mouth")
聞 wén, "to hear" (the semantic component is 耳, "ear")
們 men (pluralizing suffix in Modern Chinese; the semantic component is 亻, "person")
悶 mèn, "to be sad" (the semantic component is 心, "heart")

Not all phonetic components are as useful as these. The pronunciations of Chinese characters have changed greatly over time, so a phonetic element that was helpful when the character was first created two thousand years or more ago may be almost useless today. However, it is good to get into the habit of recognizing phonetic elements in characters, because they do often aid in memorization.

Phonetic loan characters are originally created in one of the four previous ways: pictograms, simple ideograms, compound ideograms, or semantic-phonetic compounds. But they are recycled to represent different words that sound the same as (or similar to) the words that they originally represented. For example, the character 來 was originally a pictogram of wheat. It was borrowed to represent the homophone meaning "to come." Similarly, the character 其 was originally a pictogram of a basket, but it was borrowed to represent the meanings "his," "her," "its," or "their." The phonetic loan principle is very important in explaining the origin of many characters. In addition, we have learned from ancient manuscripts discovered in excavated tombs that it was once extremely common for scribes to substitute homophonous characters for one another.

In summary, almost all Chinese characters (again, about 97 percent) are semantic-phonetic compounds, in which part of the character gives a hint about the meaning and part gives a hint about the pronunciation. In addition, a handful of characters are created as pictograms, simple ideograms, or complex ideograms—in which there is a conventional connection between the structure of the character and its meaning. Finally,

some characters that are created in one of the preceding ways are used to represent homophones in the spoken language.

I have been stressing two things: the conventionality of the meaning of Chinese characters and their strong connection with the spoken language. I have been doing this in order to inoculate you against what is sometimes called "the ideographic myth," the mistaken belief that Chinese characters somehow directly represent ideas or meanings, without conventions or connections to the spoken language. One extreme illustration of the ideographic myth is provided by the 1960 science fiction film *12 to the Moon*. In this film, an international crew of astronauts receives a video transmission from space aliens that is written in what the astronauts describe as "hieroglyphs." The Japanese crewmember helps out by sight-translating the alien script.[7] The "logic" here is apparently that *kanji* (the Chinese characters used in written Japanese) are hieroglyphs, and both are pictures, and as such they have intrinsic meaning that can be understood by anyone familiar with any picture-language. I hope that, even before reading this book, you would roll your eyes at this scene, but you are guilty of a similar misconception if you think that Chinese characters are all pictures, or have no connection with spoken words. So remember: characters usually provide some phonetic information, and even if you know exactly what the structure of a Chinese character is, you will not necessarily know what it means. Like a word in any language, written or spoken, to know the meaning of a character you must know how it is used.

How many characters are there? This question is not as easy to answer as it might seem, because the answer depends on whether we count variant forms of the same character (some of them extremely obscure) and whether we count characters that are now completely obsolete. (Is the British "civilisation" a different word from the American "civilization"?

---

7. Nerd note: Part of this scene is shown in the trailer for the film, which can be found on YouTube. If you find the complete film, the relevant scene starts around 45 minutes in. By the way, Egyptian hieroglyphs are not all pictograms either. Many of them are phonetic loans.

Is Shakespeare's "fardels" still an English word?) The larger Chinese dictionaries that aim at being comprehensive have sixty thousand characters or more. But don't despair: the three thousand most common characters include 99 percent of all characters in use in contemporary Chinese documents. In addition, the eight thousand characters in Kroll's *Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese* include almost every character you are likely to run across in the most commonly read premodern documents.

There have been various proposals for reforming or simplifying the Chinese written language. In the 1950s, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) introduced a set of simplified characters. These characters are often based on the handwritten cursive style of characters that have been used for centuries when writing informally. So, for example, 習, "to practice," was simplified to 习, and 門, "gate," was simplified to 门. Not all characters have a simplified form; in those cases, people still use the "long" or "traditional" form.[8] Most contemporary Chinese language programs in the United States teach the simplified forms. However, the traditional forms are often used by Chinese outside the PRC, including the Republic of China (ROC on Taiwan). In addition, well-educated people in the PRC also recognize the long-form characters.

People sometimes have very passionate views about the choice to use simplified or long forms. (I once got yelled at by someone at a conference in mainland China for including some traditional characters in the printed version of my talk.) In any case, in this book we will use primarily the long forms of the characters, although I will supply the simplified form of a character in parentheses (when there is one) in the vocabulary list for each lesson.

8. Nerd note: In Chinese, "simplified character" is jiǎntǐzì and is written (with the simplified form in parentheses) 簡體字 (简体字). "Long form" or "traditional" characters are called 繁體字 (繁体字) fántǐzì.