Chinese Characters

THE ART AND MEANING OF HANZI

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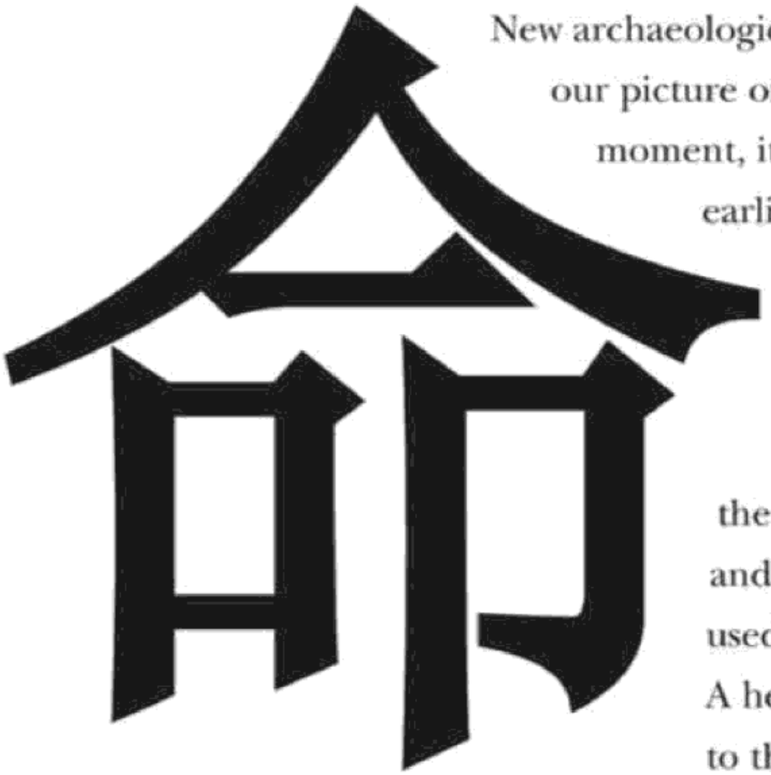
Introduction



MÌNG (PRONOUNCED *MING*)
MEANING: LIFE, FATE

New archaeological discoveries are changing our picture of China's history but, for the moment, it is universally accepted that the earliest form of Chinese characters are found on what are known as oracle bones from the Shang Dynasty (around 1500–1050 BCE). These are the shoulder blades of cattle and tortoise shells that were used for predicting the future. A heated metal point was applied to the surface of the bone or shell making it crack. From the way the cracks ran, priests would interpret the answers to questions, which could be as simple as, 'Will it rain tomorrow?' Some of the characters used on these bones are identical in form to those in use today: 王 *wáng*, meaning 'king', is a good example, and more than half of all modern characters are clearly related to them. Inscriptions cast into bronze vessels from the Western Zhou Dynasty (1066–771 BCE) are the next early form of character.

The many different states that grew up after the decline of the Western Zhou developed their own variations on the character systems. In 221 BCE, First Emperor Qin Shihuang unified China and, to help establish his control, declared a single universal form of character for all official

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purposes. From then on the development of the writing system can be traced as a fairly continuous process to the present day. The final major change came when the Communist Party of the People's Republic of China introduced a simplified character system. In order to increase literacy among the people, existing simplifications were adapted, standardized, and added to in two waves in the 1950s and 1960s. This resulted in the forms in use today throughout mainland China. Full-form traditional characters are still used in Taiwan, and by other Chinese communities outside the People's Republic. The characters in this book are written in the traditional full-form because, in general, they are more decorative and perhaps carry a little more of the mystery and tradition of the thousands of years of Chinese civilization they represent.

The basic structure of a Chinese character is in two parts, known as the radical and the phonetic. The phonetic is normally a pre-existing recognized character that is supposed to give an indication of how the character is pronounced. The radical indicates the basic concept behind the meaning of the character. In the traditional system there are 214 radicals. Some radicals have more than one form depending on where they occur in the character. For example, both 性 *xìng* and 志 *zhì* have the heart

HUĀ (PRONOUNCED *HW-AH*)
MEANING: FLOWER

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radical on the left and at the bottom respectively. The "water" radical 水 *shuǐ* is more commonly seen as the three dots in 酒 *jiǔ* and the "fire" radical 火 *huǒ* often appears as four dots at the bottom as in 熱 *rè*. The phonetic only gives an approximate idea of how the character might be pronounced, and often is of no use at all. As an example of a character where the phonetic works, let's look at 銅 *tóng* meaning copper or bronze: 金 is the 'metal' radical and 同 is the phonetic, a character in its own right also pronounced *tóng* and meaning 'identical, the same'. But with the character 話, pronounced *huà* and meaning 'speech', 言 is the speech radical, but the phonetic 舌 by itself is pronounced *shé*.

XÌNG (PRONOUNCED *SING*)
MEANING: LUCKY

The sounds of the characters above are shown in the standard Romanization called pinyin. In the text of this book a pronunciation guide is given along with the pinyin because pinyin itself is not always pronounced as a Western reader might expect it to be. You will also have noticed the marks over the vowels in the examples given above. These indicate tone. Chinese is a tonal language, which means that changes in the tone and pitch with which you make a sound alter that sound's meaning. Mandarin Chinese has only four tones. To a Western ear, these are four different ways of saying the same sound; other dialects have more. The first tone, shown like this, *mā*, is a level tone as though holding a note when singing. The second tone, *má*, is

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JIĀ YÓU (PRONOUNCED *JAR YO*)
MEANING: COME ON!, GO!

a rising tone as though asking a question. The third tone, *mǎ*, drops and then rises, like a dip in a roller coaster. The fourth tone, *mà*, is a falling tone, as though you are annoyed or making an emphatic point. To the Chinese ear, these are not the same sound said four different ways, but four different sounds and represent completely different words. *Mā* (first tone) means mother; *má* (second tone) means hemp or numb; *mǎ* (third tone) means horse; *mà* (fourth tone) means to scold. Characters carry no indication of tone. In fact, you cannot tell at all from the sound of a word how it is written, nor from the form of its character how it is pronounced. The two have to be learned side by side through constant repetition and recognition.

In today's digital world Chinese characters may seem inconvenient and out of place, and it is pinyin that is used to type Chinese into computers and other modern communication devices. However the beauty, complexity, and 3,500-year tradition of 漢字 *hàn zì* are so much a part of China's cultural identity that it is unlikely they will ever truly be replaced.

WǓ (PRONOUNCED *WOO*)
MEANING: DANCE

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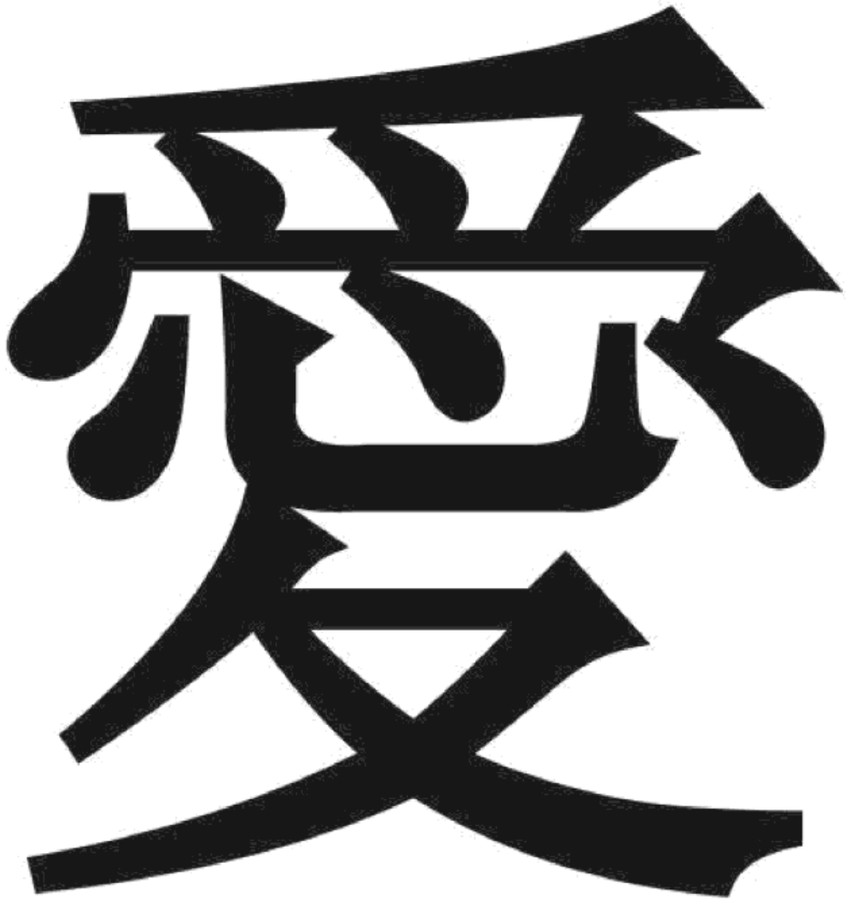

Ài

ài (pronounced *aye*) meaning love

This is the universal character for love in all its aspects, physical, emotional, and idealistic. In various combinations it means to make love, lover or spouse, fan or enthusiast, or even patriot (someone who loves their country). Appropriately, in the very middle is the character for the heart. However, its radical, which is found at the top, is the claw or talon, suggesting, perhaps, a person in the fierce grip of emotion.

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Bàng

bàng (pronounced *bung*) meaning brilliant, great, excellent

This character illustrates the range of meanings a single character can carry. Its original meaning is a stick or club, and in more modern times a bat, such as a baseball or cricket bat. It also means a cob of corn or an ear of maize. However, in speech, its most common usage is as an all-purpose expression of approval or admiration, meaning great or excellent.

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Biàn

biàn (pronounced *bee-en*) meaning change

This is the basic character for change of any kind and is found in compound words with meanings as varied as rebellion, chameleon, and transsexual. It is an old character and the idea of change embodied by 變 is an important idea in Confucius' concept of what embodies a proper man. In the Analects he writes: 'They must often change who would be constant in happiness or wisdom,' and 'Only the wisest and stupidest of men do not change.'

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Bīng

bīng (pronounced *bing*) meaning ice

This is a very good example of a character that combines the meanings of its different parts to create a new word. Here, the two dots on the left-hand side, which are the 'freezing' radical, are combined with the character for water, resulting in a primary meaning of ice. In Chinese, ice carries the same connotations of purity as in English but not the suggestion of being emotionally uptight. So, in China it is a compliment to describe a woman as having 'flesh of ice and bones of jade.'

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Bīng

bīng (pronounced *bing*) meaning soldier

As a language, Chinese works in concepts, so words get their exact meaning from the way in which they are used in a sentence. Here, although the translation of soldier has been given, the character actually represents many different aspects of warfare and the military. While this character particularly refers to a private as opposed to an officer, it can also mean army, weapons, military affairs, and even a pawn on a chessboard.

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Chán

chán (pronounced *charn*) meaning Zen

Although Zen is commonly believed to be a Japanese religion, it is originally Chinese. Zen is a form of Buddhism based on meditation, taught by the Indian monk Bodhidharma at the Shaolin Temple in northern China in the sixth century CE. There the shadow of Bodhidharma is said to be permanently imprinted on a wall because he sat so long in meditation. A 禪杖 *chán zhàng* is a stick used for waking someone up who has fallen asleep while meditating.

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Chāng

chāng (pronounced *chaang*) meaning glorious, prosperous

This character is not usually seen except in traditional New Year greetings, though it was used regularly in the years of Chairman Mao's leadership (1943–75) in slogans praising the glory and prosperity of China under the 'Great Helmsman.' It is, however, a very lucky character as well as a pleasingly symmetrical one. Its meaning of glorious is clear once you know that it is composed of two sun characters.

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Chéng

chéng (pronounced *ch-ng*) meaning change, become

This is a very positive character, which complements 變 *biàn* in the compound word 變成 because it carries the meaning of bringing change to a successful completion. It implies permanence, or the accomplishment of something right and proper. It may also be more neutral but seldom carries negative connotations. 成年 *chéng nián* translates as 'complete years', which means to come of age, and an adult is a 成人 *chéng rén*, a finished person.

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Dà

dà (pronounced *dah*) meaning great

This is a fundamental Chinese character that can be traced back in recognizable form to the very earliest fully formed character systems on oracle bones of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1500–1066 BCE) and inscriptions cast into ritual bronze vessels of the Western Zhou (1066–771 BCE). It is a pure pictogram showing a man stretching his arms out to indicate size (although we cannot be sure whether or not the original man had just returned from an unsuccessful fishing trip).

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Dào

dào (pronounced *dow*) meaning *dao* (*tao*) the way, reach, arrive

This is probably one of the most commonly recognized Chinese characters in the West, and also the most frequently mispronounced. 道 is a term used by both Daoism and Confucianism to represent the inexpressible yet inherently knowable true nature of the world. Knowledge of the Dao is achievable through 德 *dé*, virtue. The principal text of Daoism is Laozi's *Dao De Jing* – the classic of the Way and Virtue.

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Fēng

fēng (pronounced *fung*) meaning wind

This elegant character seems to suit its meaning. It is a very versatile word, with a basic meaning of wind. It forms one half of feng shui, (literally wind and water), the ancient Chinese system of harmonizing the natural flow of energy. But it also means reputation, fame, taste, style, and gossip – all things that may symbolically be carried on the wind. If you want to wish someone 'Bon Voyage', 一帆風順 expresses hope that their sails will be filled by a good wind.

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