

Chinese Characters: Words and Symbols

Ingrid Seman
University of Tasmania

Introduction

The Chinese written language is a script that is rich in history, style, meaning and culture. The written script is an art form in itself and yet it can be daunting to a Western observer. We see many lines, curves, and dots that first appear to be senseless, but upon deeper study one can find a written form packed with recurring symbols guiding the reader to sound and meaning. Chinese characters are sometimes viewed as archaic and not worth the time or effort to study. Unfortunately, this point of view causes one to miss out on one of the most fascinating cultures in the world. An in depth study of the characters brings a sense of accomplishment and an understanding of traditional Chinese beliefs. As Karlgren noted in 1923, Chinese script is “indispensable” and “the day the Chinese discard it they will surrender the very foundation of their culture” (p.41).

Thankfully the Chinese have preserved their written language and recently there seems to be a deeper appreciation for Chinese writing as more Western people realize the mere beauty of the language itself and the vast influence China may have in the future. In order to make the Chinese language easier to learn, there have been attempts to both simplify and Romanize the characters. Fortunately, these attempts have not caused the eradication of the original, traditional characters nor its contemporary usage in modern day linguistic study. This paper presents the history of the Chinese script, the Chinese script as an ideographic script, the meaning related to character style and structure, the meaning related to aspects of culture and finally the recurring symbols in a select group of traditional characters that demonstrate the interrelation of words in characters.

History of the Chinese Script

The point of origin for the Chinese script is difficult to determine but it can be traced to a time when people used the knot method to try to remember things (Hsueh & Wu, 1998). Fazzioli (1987) explains that these knots marked the first attempts by Chinese men to establish some form of record. This system of tying knots into ropes every time something happened soon became ineffectual as more and more knots were tied things were forgotten (Hsueh & Wu, 1998). Eventually, the knot system was replaced by drawing pictures on the ground in order to remember things. “The most acceptable legend of the inventor of Chinese writing was a minister named Ts’ang Chieh...” (U of Oregon, 1999, p.1). One account tells how one night while “hearing the ghosts wail for the creation of writing” he looked to the star Wen Ch’ang, Lord of Literature (Aria, 2001).

This divine being’s face had unique characteristics that resembled a picture of writings

(Feibao, 1998b). After this encounter Ts'ang Chieh looked down and saw the footprints of birds and other animals whose shapes and lines were clear and perceivable (Wah as cited by Peng, 1999a). He also observed other shapes of nature such as shadows cast by trees and the designs of tortoise-shell markings (Aria, 2001). Deeply inspired, Ts'ang began to draw pictures of the objects by scratching them onto sticks of bamboo (Aria, 2001). "These picture characters were often, especially in their archaic forms, very expressible and were called **xiang xing**, literally 'image shapes'. ...or 'pictography' ... (Wah as cited by Peng, 1999a, p. iii).

Thus we have an idea of origin based solely upon mere legend but physical evidence of the origins of the Chinese script lie in the findings of 'oracle bones'. Oracle bones consisted of tortoise shells or animal scapulae and these 'bones' were engraved with questions for the gods in the practice of divination (Ager, 1998). Archaeologists have discovered 3,500 year old sheep bones carved with Chinese characters such as the Chinese word for "six" and a symbol that means "divination" (Associated Press, 1998). "The discovery of the oracle bones in China goes back to 1899, when a scholar from Peking was prescribed a remedy containing 'dragon bones' for his illness: 'dragon bones' were widely used in Chinese medicine and usually refer to fossils of dead animals" (Galambos, 2000, p.1). The scholar recognized the markings on the bones as some form of writing and at this time these writings would already have been 3500 years old (Wood, 2001).

Subsequent to the oracle bone findings, many pieces of Neolithic pottery, bearing marks were found dating back to c.4000 BCE (Wood, 2001). According to Lo (1996), the culture during this time was "characterized by a high degree of social organization, particularly in pottery production" (p.2). This systematization required a method to record the measurements and numbers of pots constructed, resulting in an orderly way to log numbers and objects (Lo, 1996). Although pottery predates the oracle bones by more than a thousand years, the characters found on some of these vessels are described as stylized pictures of some physical objects (pictographs) closely resembling the markings on the oracle bones (Feibao, 1998). Archaeological digs in Anyang County, Henan Province, at the site of the remains of the last Shang Dynasty capital have turned up more than 100,000 pieces of bones and shells all carved with words (Feibao, 1998a). "About 4,500 different characters have been counted, and 1,700 of them deciphered" (Feibao, 1998a, p. 1). Galambos (2000) claims that the oracle bone inscriptions, also known as *jiaguwen*, tell us that Chinese writing was already a highly developed writing system by 1200 BC.

The content, inscribed on the bones by Chinese diviners, consisted of records of topics that interested the ruling dynasty (Galambos, 2000). The shells and bones were engraved with written characters and then after heat application, an interpretation of the resulting cracks was made to determine the gods' answers (Ager, 1998). The topics of divination often included "the potential outcomes of military campaigns, hunting expeditions, sickness, childbirth or agricultural events" (Wood, 2001, p.1). As tortoises grew scarce due to drought, the people began to use bamboo strips (Feibao, 1998a).

“From this grew the practice of asking the gods about the future by drawing bamboo sticks, as one may see today at certain temples... a practice that has its remote root in the superstition of the Shang people” (Feibao, 1998a, p. 2). The oracle bone discoveries demonstrate that ancient Chinese writing is related to nature, magic, and religion and as having layers of cultural and political meanings (Bendheim, 2000).

The evolution of Chinese writing can be divided into several phases. Lo (1996) mentions four stages but Wood (2001) includes an additional three stages. The earliest form, as discussed above was *jiaguwen* or the oracle bone script from approximately 1500 BC to 1000 BC (Lo, 1996). The Greater Seal or *da zhuan* script (1100 BC to 700 BC) was cast on to bronze vessels (Lo, 1996). The content usually referred to ritual ceremonies or commemorations and the style was similar to that found on the oracle bones (Galambos, 2000).

The third stage, the Lesser Seal or *xiao zhuan* script is “the direct parent of the modern, unsimplified Chinese script” (Lo, 1996, p. 1). This script may be observed in modern calligraphy and landscape painting (Lo, 1996). Karlgren (as cited by H.S.U., 2002) claims that modern script is based directly upon the Lesser Seal. Lo (1996), however, believes that the next phase *lishu* or clerkly script is basically the modern Chinese script. Galambos (2000) states that “A major event in the history of Chinese script is the standardization of writing by the First Emperor of Qin who unified China in 221 BC” (p.2). The clerical script became the official writing and it unified the states as before this declaration many states had their own styles and therefore the scripts had many deviations (Galambos, 2000). The *lishu* script has a more flowing style that made it more easily adaptable to pens and brushes (Lo, 1996).

Wood (1998) asserts that *lishu* was officially adopted but that it was still succeeded by *kaishu*, regular script and *xingshu* or running script which was a cursive form of *kaishu*. The seventh phase mentioned by Wood (2001) is the highly cursive *caoshu* – rough or draft script. The latter three scripts were used in calligraphic works whereas the seal script forms were kept for inscriptions on coins or formal inscriptions such as stone-carved eulogies and epitaphs (Wood, 2001).

In spite of the fact that several different scripts have developed over the years, amid some controversy over which script became the modern form, what is truly amazing is that the Chinese writing system underwent relatively little change over its 3500 years of evolution (Lo, 1996). Aria (2001) reiterates this point:

Chinese is unique among the languages of the world in that it has changed little over the centuries; texts written three thousand years ago can still be read and understood today, and the sprawling characters emblazoned by students on long red banners between bamboo poles at Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989 were essentially the same as those once scratched on bones in the dawn of China’s history (p.10)

The Chinese Script as an Ideographic Script

The formation and progression of Chinese characters are interrelated with the evolution of Chinese culture (Guanghui, 1996). “Chinese characters are the basic carriers of the traditional Chinese culture, and, as an important tool for extending spreading and exchanging ideas, they have played a critical role in the long history of the Chinese nation” (Guanghui, 1996, p. 1). It could be said that Chinese culture may not have attained its grandeur without its characters (Gaunghui, 1996).

The Chinese writing system is an ideographic script where the graphic structure is directly connected to the meaning (Guanghui, 1996). In order to better understand Chinese characters, it is helpful to take a closer look at the characteristics of their composition. There is a traditional theory of etymology for Chinese characters called the *Liu Shu*. The *Liu Shu* is comprised of six categories that classify the Chinese characters by methods of character composition and use (China-inc, 2000).

The first category pictographs (*xiang xing*) represents the characters derived from the oracle inscriptions, which depict concrete objects (China-inc, 2000). Originally, most Chinese characters were pictures of objects and these simple pictograms were known as “imitating the form” (Aria, 2001). For example *mu* 木, “The character for ‘tree’ shows a stylized trunk, roots, and branches” (Aria, 2001, p.10). Another example is the character for *shan* 山 (mountain), which is a “stylized representation of the peaks of a mountain range” (China-inc, 2000, p.2). This character has three ‘peaks’ which represents the concept of many. This character does somewhat resemble a mountain and with some imagination it is possible to see the representations of the characters especially if the origin and evolution of the character is known (Lang, 2002). Other characters that retain a close connection with original pictograms include *ri* 日 (sun, day) and *tian* 田 (field) (Crystal, 1987). However, the number of pictographs that directly symbolize meanings are very few, only one percent of the characters in use today are pictographic (Wood, 2001). An important point to realize is that pictographs are identified with exact meanings and pronunciations, and have become symbolic (Guanghui, 1996). Pictographs are therefore quite different from their originals as a result of simplification and abstraction (Guanghui, 1996). Their limited number is due to the impossibility of depicting abstract concepts in language which are formless but pictography is till the most important method of composing Chinese characters as successive methods are only developments of pictography (Guanghui, 1996). Galambos (2002) claims that all phonetic systems grew out of pictographic ones.

Wood (2001) asserts that “Despite the relative scarcity of ‘picture’ words, many Western writers still characterize Chinese as a pictographic script and describe amusing combinations such as the graph for ‘roof’ over the graph for ‘pig’ meaning (together) ‘home’...” (p.2). Tan Huay Peng a well-known Singaporean cartoonist has written several books which show the origins, legends and stories behind Chinese characters and festivals. Even though he takes a humorous approach he still provides an informative look at Chinese culture. What may seem amusing to a person from a Western culture actually may have deep-rooted beliefs for those from the Chinese culture.

The analysis of the characters in *Fun with Chinese Characters* traces the evolutionary development from the original seal character to the regular and simplified forms. “Based on authoritative source materials, both Chinese and English, it draws inspiration from the lofty, yet down-to-earth, wit and wisdom of the Chinese mind” (Peng, 1999a, p.xiii).

Looking at the pictograph *shi* 豕, a literary term for pig, one finds the explanation that “The domestic pig might well symbolize prosperity to man, so closely knit and tied together were their lives” (Peng, 1999a, p.6). If this account is taken into the examination of the character *jia* 家 (home) then the significance of using the graph for pig with the graph for roof can be better understood. When a person realizes that the graph for pig is a symbol for prosperity, one can comprehend why it would be used for the character *jia*, as most people desire a prosperous home. “In order to be able to marry, a man should have a house and at least one pig (productive capital)” (Fazzioli, 1987 p.155).

I asked a Taiwanese certified teacher, Mrs. Shi, about this particular character and she told me this character has true meaning because years ago many of the Chinese people were farmers and the possession of a pig equated to success. She also told me that children are taught some of these meanings at school. I also spoke with professor Dr. Hsieh, who added that if a man, has a pig then he can take care of his family and the pig will help them to make their fortune. According to Vaccari and Vaccari (1964) the pig was the first animal to be domesticated by the prehistoric Chinese so the honor was given it to be remembered in the character for home.

From a Westerner’s perspective the combinations may seem strange but as Wood (2001) said, in the same article, the Chinese script is seen as symbolic. Pictography may not be a correct way to describe today’s Chinese script but no one can deny that it supplied the foundation for what the written language is today. “That Chinese characters originated from pictographs is a matter of unanimous agreement” (DeFrancis, 1984, p.78).

The second category of the *Liu Shu* is ideographs or *ji shi*. Ideographs can be defined as graphic representations of abstract ideas; “that is for ideas that do not have a physical form that can be readily rendered into a line drawing format, an abstract symbolic representation is created” (China-inc, 2000, p.2). Examples include: *shang* 上 “on”, “above”; and *xia* 下 “below”, “under” where a dot or shorter line was placed either above or below a horizontal line to symbolize the ideas of above and below (China-inc, 2000). Less than two percent of all characters fall into these first two categories (Kanji, 1999).

Compound ideographs (*hui yi*) consist of two or more existing characters (Guanghui,1996). The characters will be structured by having one on top of the other or by placing two or more characters next to each other (Guanghui, 1996). The character *xiu* 休, meaning “to rest”, consists of character elements for “person” 人 (*ren*) and “tree” 木 (*mu*). The reasoning being that when someone is tired he will look for a tree

in order to take a break (China-inc, 2000). Something that is large (大 *da*) at the bottom, and steadily becomes small (小 *xiao*) at the top is pointed; so the characters for large and small join to create the character *jian* 尖 which means “pointed” or “sharp” (China-inc, 2000).

The fourth category belongs to *xing sheng* or phonetic-semantic compounds.

These compounds literally mean ‘form and sound’ that is “a combination of a visual meaning element with a phonetic element (China-inc, 2000). The semantic element is also known as the radical (Aria, 2001). The Chinese language has many homophones (words that sound the same but have different meanings). The meaning can be determined, in the written form, by looking at the radical (Aria, 2001). In Chinese, ‘mother’ (*ma*) 媽 and ‘horse’ (*ma*) 馬 are homophones. The character for mother contains the pictogram for horse which tells us the sound of the word and it is combined with the character for ‘woman’, signifying the meaning of the word (Aria, 2001). *Shui*, 睡 “to sleep”, for instance, has the phonetic element *chui* 垂, which means to hang down and *mu* 目 (eye) is the semantic radical so “when a person’s ‘eye hangs down “he” sleeps” (China-inc, 2000, p. 3). The pronunciations for both *chui* and *shui* are similar. “Most phonetic compounds are also at the same time compound ideographs, since the phonetic element not only represents a linguistic sound, but also contains a meaning that is related to the new character as a whole (China-inc, 2000.p.3). These compounds with cues for both pronunciation (phonetic) and meaning comprise approximately 80 percent of characters (Feldman & Siok, 1999).

Quan qu, or as Guanghai (1996) labels it, mutual explanatories, are characters that share the same semantic element and are mutually explainable by comparison. New characters are not created but existing ones are used. (Guanghai, 1996). On the other hand, scholars disagree as to what *quan qu* really is (China-inc, 2000). Other sources don’t include this category at all (Kanji, 1999). China-inc (2000) points out that one school of thought refers to *quan qu* as characters whose pronunciation has been altered over time and a new character is made to better demonstrate the new pronunciation. “For example, the character *kai* was created in response to the emergence of a new pronunciation of its original character *qi*” (China-inc, 2000, p.3). The true meaning of this category still remains controversial.

The final category of the *Liu Shu* is the *jia jie* or the phonetic loans group.

Basically, an existing character is borrowed to denote an unrelated word because of its similar pronunciation (China-inc, 2000). In other words, an existing character has obtained a new meaning, but a new character has not been formed (Guanghai, 1996). The character *zi* 自 was a pictograph at first, but today it is used to represent ‘self’ as a result

of phonetic loan (Guanghui, 1996). Country names are typically based on phonetic loans as well. America is written using the character *mei* 美 which means beautiful (Kanji, 1999).

Meaning Related to Character Style/Structure

The basic units of Chinese characters are the strokes that, simply stated, are the marks produced by a single continuous motion by various writing instruments (DeFrancis, 1984). The strokes can be categorized into dots, lines and hooks and can be further described by the direction in which they are written, their beginning and ending characteristics and their contour (DeFrancis, 1984). Ager (1998) maintains that a character may consist of one to 48 strokes whereas DeFrancis (1984) mentions the most complex character, *tie* (verbose) as having 64 strokes, but this is a rare dictionary find. Whatever the number, authors agree that there is a proper sequence to follow when writing characters. “The strokes are always written in the same direction and there is a set order to write the strokes of each character” (Ager, 1998, p.2). Rules such as writing left to right, top to bottom, and outside followed by inside dictate order (Zhao as cited by Liu, 1999). If the underlying rules of writing Chinese are understood then the learning process becomes easier to accomplish rather than simply trying to learn by rote memorization (Chan & Nunes, 1998).

Is there any significance behind the strokes? DeFrancis (1984) contends that the strokes are “the building units of Chinese characters but in themselves have no particular significance...” (p. 75). However, DeFrancis (1984) then states that “Aesthetics plays an exceedingly important role in Chinese writing.... Calligraphy has been elevated to an artform” (p.78). “To the Chinese, writing is an art called calligraphy” (Petrucci, 2000, p.1). Aria (1992) discusses a spiritual element behind the strokes.

In Chinese thought, the act of writing a character is seen as parallel to the universal process of creation, and an embodiment of the principles that govern all life...In this system of beliefs, just as the universe was created from primeval chaos in one single stroke, so can it be expressed in one stroke that signifies the whole of nature and humanity (p.8-9).

Similarly, each character originates from the first stroke, the one that preceded all others (Aria, 1992). This reflects the concept that “the universe was created from an original ‘oneness’ – a central idea in Chinese thought as it developed over the centuries” (Aria, 1992, p. 9).

Aria (2001) points out that the Chinese written language is abundant in nature images and that the strokes themselves imply natural forms found in the world. The ‘Seven Mysteries’ are seven systematized strokes (including horizontal, vertical, sweeping left and right, dots, hooks and diagonals) that can be associated with a natural

form if they are completed faultlessly (Aria, 2001). For example, “a horizontal stroke should be like a cloud that slowly drifts across the sky....” (Aria, 2001, p.14). The quality of movement becomes an important aspect of creating a character. The strokes require specific movements of the hand and arm and the order of strokes must be obeyed because altering the order and direction will cause the character to look incorrect, unnatural and discordant following the idea that the correct sequence represents universal order and the harmonious movement visible in nature (Aria, 1992). Once these “seven mysteries” are mastered one is qualified to write the character for ‘eternity’ (*yong*) 永, whose seven strokes symbolize each of the seven mysteries (Aria, 1992).

The flow of the strokes should move in such a way that they achieve balance giving the characters the impression of a temporary equilibrium (Evelyn, 2000). For instance, Evelyn (2000) compares the character for ‘thought’ to a picture of someone who is seated with his arms folded in the middle. The ‘folded arms’ cause a sloping in the character but the balance is maintained because it does not give the impression that it will topple over (Evelyn, 2000). Bendheim (2000), in his article, *Some words are worth a thousand pictures*, states, “calligraphy can be seen as an analytical process. The different types of brush strokes are codified as forces (*shi*) in dynamic composition, each with a perfect form and method (*fa*)” (p. 2107). McNair (1999) supports the above ideas by stating the goals of calligraphy as “harmony, naturalness and variety within unity” (p. 794). The flow, balance, and visual imprint are also emphasized “by the invisible square framework within which each character is set” (Acsion, 2002, p.2).

As mentioned earlier Chinese characters are composed of common constituent parts, technically known as “radicals” (Fergusson, 1997). Each character consists of a sign or radical which indicates meaning and a second sign, a phonetic radical which suggests how the character is to be pronounced (Keyser, 2002). This method of combining one element for meaning and the other for sound is also referred to as pictophonetics (Feibao, 1998b). “Because they indicate meaning and pronunciation, characters have the useful property of distinguishing forms that have the same pronunciation but different meanings, which are quite common in Chinese” (Lang, 2002, p.2). *Lu* (4th tone), for example, has many different meanings but each is written with a different character (Lang, 2002). *Lu* can mean land, a deer, happiness, mediocre, to unite, to send a gift, a road, to slay, to record, the foot of a hill or mountain, dew, and an egret (Yeh, 2000). Even though it has the same sound, there are twelve different meanings that can be deciphered by looking at the written character. The only way to be certain which words are to be understood in speech depends upon the context in which it is used (Reid, 1998).

“Each Chinese character generally corresponds to exactly one syllable and one morpheme” (ROC Yearbook, 2001b, p. 1). A morpheme, being the smallest unit of meaning (DeFrancis, 1984). Many syllables can and do represent a single word such as *shan* (mountain) however most Chinese words are written in clusters of characters (ROC Yearbook, 2001b). “Most words in modern Chinese are two syllables (two characters)” (Light, 1982, p.18). For instance, *ming* 明 means ‘clear, bright’ and

bai 白 means ‘white, blank’ and these two words together, *mingbai*
明白 means ‘understand, clear’ and only *mingbai* can be used to mean
‘understand’ (Light, 1982, p.18). “Ming can never be used alone, and bai means
something different when it is used alone” (Light, 1992, p. 18).

The Chinese language has thousands of compounds, which mainly consist of two syllables and it is necessary to learn these combinations in order to understand the language (Zhang, 1991). There are compounds where the meanings of the individual characters cannot give you a clear meaning of the compound. In order to be understood, these compounds must be learned as a whole and cannot be separated into parts. The word *jing ji* means ‘economy’ but *jing* alone means ‘pass through, undergo, endure’ while *ji* means ‘aid, benefit’ so when separating the two it is impossible to assume the meaning economy (Lang, 2002). “Characters must thus be seen not as *words* but as the *building blocks* (called ‘morphemes’ by linguists) from which words are created” (Lang, 2002, p.3). There are also some cases where the morphemes themselves have more than one syllable in which the individual syllables have no meaning of their own (DeFrancis, 1984). For instance, *putao*, the word for grape, only ever appears in combination. Pu and tao never occur individually and neither one means ‘grape’ alone. The Chinese writing system does not allow for a single character to represent two syllables together (Lang, 2002).

Meaning Related to Aspects of Culture

Chinese characters are highly regarded by the Chinese people and this veneration was established from the beginning. The Chinese script itself was thought to be magical (Wood, 2001). It was believed that certain combinations and styles could cure disease and ease suffering (Wood, 2001). The Chinese viewed their written language with reverence, often protecting paper with characters written on it from improper usage (Wood, 2001). These papers were collected and stored.

Subsequently, the characters in imperial names were safeguarded. “During the Qin and Han, the characters used in any emperor’s personal name became taboo after his death and had to be replaced by variant forms...” (Wood, 2001, p. 4). Scholars were actually killed for being inattentive to the full implications of Chinese characters. One such instance found Cha Siting guilty for using a particular phrase on an exam for entrance to the government bureaucracy (Wood, 2001). “In the phrase he chose, ‘Where the people rest’, the first and last characters were the same as those of Yongzheng, the posthumous name of the Qianlong emperor’s grandfather but with the tops missing” (Wood, 2001, p.4). Unfortunately an enemy interpreted Cha Siting’s phrase as implying that the Yongzheng emperor should have been beheaded (Wood, 2001). Cha Siting was imprisoned and the emperor’s rage ensured that Siting’s body was dismembered upon his death and his brothers were also jailed (Wood, 2001).

According to Da Shiping (as cited by Zhang, 2001), “Chinese characters are an

important and indispensable part of Chinese culture, without which one can hardly grasp the real essence of the country”. Da Shiping (as cited by Zhang, 2001) teaches Chinese to expatriate students from Western countries and he believes that learning Chinese characters will help Westerners enjoy Chinese culture. His method entails tracing the history, underlying stories and meanings of the characters development and this method brings fun and understanding to the learning process. By gaining a deeper understanding it becomes easier to remember the numerous characters.

For example, in the character ‘an’ 安 (safe, secure), the upper part stands for ‘home’ while the lower part is another character that means ‘female or woman’. A home with a woman inside is safe and peaceful. The character reveals a glimpse of the ancient Chinese home structure, with men working outside and women caring for housework and home affairs. (Zhang, 2001, p. 2)

Another example that is often cited is the character for good, which is *hao* 好. This character combines the symbol for a kneeling woman and the symbol for a child (Keyser, 2002). Woman and child together mean good.

Chun Jie or Spring Festival is the most important festival for the Chinese people (Peng, 2000). It is more commonly known as Chinese New Year or Lunar New Year and it stands for the beginning of the year, or the signal to another fresh start in one’s life (Geocities, 2002). “It also heralds fresh hopes for happiness and prosperity among mankind” (Geocities, 2002, p. 1). What role do Chinese characters play in this all-important event? At this time, doors and windows are decorated with paper cuts and couplets that appear on silk scrolls, wooden and plastic boards, and strips of red paper (Geocities, 2002). The Chinese write the wishes on red paper because red is considered to be the luckiest color (Hsueh & Wu, 1998). Verses that are often written on the papers include: ‘*Gong Xi Fa Cai*’ 恭喜發財, ‘*Wan Shi Ru Yi*’ 萬事如意 and ‘*Long Ma Jing Shen*’ 戎馬精神. *Gong Xi Fa Cai* literally means “Congratulations. May your wealth increase” (Peng, 2000, p. 18). I discussed the meanings of *Wan Shi Ru Yi* and *Long Ma Jing Shen* with Dr. Hsieh. She informed me that *Wan Shi Ru Yi* translates into ‘everything as you wish’. *Long Ma Jing Shen* is difficult to translate as *Long Ma* refers to the army life. A soldier is regarded as strong and energetic so the saying itself refers to the wish for a person to have the qualities of a soldier such as energy, and strength. In my home I have a wooden plaque with the characters for *ru yi* 如意 on it. It was a gift for my home from a Taiwanese friend and it means ‘as you wish’. My friend wanted to provide my home with this Chinese blessing.

Other auspicious characters which are widespread and featured on New Year prints include the Chinese characters for good fortune, longevity, and financial prosperity (ROC Yearbook, 2001a). These characters are accompanied by decorative illustrations of “three beaming old men signifying happiness, success and long life, known as ‘The Three

Stars'. They are represented by single Chinese characters: fu 福, lu 祿, and shou 壽—happiness, success and longevity” (Peng, 2000, p.18). “Such a print would embody the filial wish that family elders might live as long as the legendary mountains of the south, with health and good fortune to match” (ROC Yearbook, 2001a, p.2).

Another character the Chinese people often write and place on their front door is the character for ‘Spring’ 春 (Hsueh & Wu, 1998). This character is hung upside down purposefully because those unfamiliar with this custom might say “Spring is upside down! Chun dao le!” 春到了 (Hsueh & Wu, 1998, p.14-15). This expression sounds similar to “Spring has arrived! Chun tian dao le!” (Hsueh & Wu, 1998, p.15). These words are considered lucky and it makes the people happy to hear them. (Hsueh & Wu, 1998).

Likewise, the character *fu* 福 (luck) is also displayed upside down on the wall or door. It too is deliberately hung upside down for the same reason as the spring character. *Fu dao*, “luck upside down” 福到了 is a pun on *fu dao*, “luck arrives” (Peng, 2000). There is a legend behind the mark of the *fu*. It is said that an emperor from the Ming dynasty noticed, while he was sightseeing during the Feast of Lanterns, an offensive painting of a barefooted woman with a lemon pressed to her breast (Peng, 2000). These pictures that were posted on a number of doors insulted the emperor because he thought the portraits mocked the empress’ large feet (Peng, 2000). The emperor had the character *fu* delivered to all the homes that did not have the painting and then a decree was issued to slaughter all families without the *fu* (Peng, 2000). So from that time on people thought it a good omen to post the mark of the *fu* and hope for that extra bit of luck (Peng, 2000).

A popular fish dish, eaten during the New Year season, which has cultural meaning related to Chinese characters is *yu sheng*. “The Chinese word for fish, *yu*, has the same pronunciation as the word for ‘excess’. *Sheng* means ‘life’. So *yu sheng* is eaten for a long life and abundant wealth” (Peng, 2000, p.21). During this New Year celebration the Chinese eat foods with auspicious and promising names such as “Sea-moss, or *fa cai*, sounds like the phrase meaning ‘to prosper’. Red dates, or *hong zao*, can mean ‘prosperity comes early’. Lotus seeds, called *lian zi*, promise a family with a continuous lineage” (Peng, 2000, p.22). A brown circular cake, known as *nian gao*, is the cake of the New Year. The significance lies in the character *gao* which sounds the same as the character for ‘high’ (Peng, 2000). A person who eats the cake will succeed to a higher status or enjoy a better life in the New Year (Peng, 2000).

I asked my Taiwanese friends about other traditions or situations where Chinese characters have special use and meaning. Phillip, a Chinese literature major, mentioned signs for the opening of new businesses. In Taiwan when a new business opens you will see lined along the streets large, red, circular signs decorated with flowers set on stands

with golden characters written in the center. Two popular slogans are ‘*sheng yi xing long*’ 生意興隆

which means ‘may your business have many customers’ and ‘*cai yuan kuang jing*’ 財源廣進 meaning ‘a large source of money is coming’. These signs are given by friends who want to bring good luck to the new proprietors. These circular signs also designate a funeral, but the color changes to white or yellow, the color signifying death in Chinese culture. When I asked my friend Phillip what characters appeared on these signs he had a difficult time thinking of something. He told me that parents often tell their children not to look, to walk by quickly without paying attention or to close their eyes because it is thought that looking may bring bad luck to a person. The fear of bad luck demonstrates the superstition that accompanies some Chinese beliefs.

After some thought, he remembered ‘*yin rong wan zai*’ 音容宛在 which means ‘the person’s voice and face are alive in your mind’.

When Chinese couples get married the bride and groom are given red envelopes with money inside as gifts and the guests will write special blessings on the envelopes.

One such blessing is *zao sheng gui zi* 早生貴子 . This expression is a wish for the newlyweds to have a baby as soon as possible. Banners are also placed above the door of

the newlywed’s home. The most common character is *xi* 囍 , which represents hope for happiness for the new couple. According to Dr. Hsieh, the character is doubled because the new couple is a pair and they don’t want to be alone so the character is never written in single form because it would mean single or alone.

There are many Chinese characters that sound the same but when written are entirely different. The word *shi*, for example, can mean to be, city, to try, and affair or work and they all are said in the fourth tone and, therefore, have the same sound (Terfloth, C., Kinney, R., Burian, L., Tai, E., Fahey, M., Murphy R., & Eisley, N., 1999). “For this reason, there are many social customs related to the sounds of words (Hsueh & Wu, 1998, p. 242). A major faux pas in Chinese culture would be to give a clock as a gift. The words for ‘to give a clock’ sound the same as the words ‘to give a funeral’, so giving a clock would be indicating that you might want the recipient to die soon (Hsueh & Wu, 1998). If someone were to commit this blunder it would obviously cause a very uncomfortable situation.

The Heart: A Recurring Symbol

Radicals allow a person to find characters in a dictionary. The characters are grouped under their radicals. In A.D. 121 the scholar Xu Shen published an updated and more complete dictionary with a total of 10,516 characters grouped under 540 radicals (Fazzioli, 1987). In 1717, Kang Xi compiled another lexicon containing 40,000

characters arranged under 214 radicals (Fazzioli, 1987). Modern dictionaries have 227 radicals but according to Fazzioli (1987) the official classification “will always be that of the Kang Xi period (p.14).

The radical for heart (*xin*) has two versions,  and a straight up and down version. This radical is truly fascinating and as my Chinese friends tell me it is the most interesting. “The focal point of the body is the heart, where intellect and feeling coexist in indissoluble from” (Fazzioli, 1987, p. 35). The word *xin*, translated as heart “really means both the heart itself, the seat of the emotions, and also the mind, for the ‘heart’ governs all human thought and action” (Aria, 1992, p. 13). “The heart in Chinese, like the heart in English, is not just a part of the body but also a center of feeling” (Sussman, 1994, p.50). These definitions are evident in the range of characters in which the radical *xin* is found. The radical itself is from an original pictograph that was represented by a sketch of the actual shape (Peng, 1999a). The role of this vital organ as the motivation for both good and evil is apparent in the characters that range from love to hate and it has “prompted man to take to heart the ancient saying: “Honey mouth, dagger heart”” (Peng, 1999a, p.68).

Let us first take a look at the character for love, *ai* . This character essentially has three parts. The upper portion consists of the character for ‘breath’, the middle is the heart and below the heart is the character for ‘graceful movement’ (Aria, 1992). Aria’s interpretation of love is inspiration; “It breathes life into the heart and brings grace to the body” (p.56). Likewise, love is “that what gives breath to the heart and inspires gracious motion” (Peng, 1999a). Vaccari and Vaccari (1964) however, present quite a different interpretation of ‘love’. The upper component in the character represents a hand and the line under the hand is an object while the lower portion symbolizes action and a hand as well with the heart in between the two (Vacarri & Vaccari, 1964). The idea behind the combination of these symbols is that “With a hand we get hold of something that appeals to our heart (liking) and we act upon it with affection...” (Vaccari & Vaccari, 1964, p.138-139).

The character *en* , which can mean favor, grace, gratitude, kindness, benevolence, mercy or charity also contains the symbol for heart (Yeh, 2000). These qualities were thought to reside in the heart so having the heart in this character gives a clue as to its meaning (Vaccari & Vaccari, 1964). The pictogram above the heart *yin* , characterizes a person ‘resting upon’ a mat (Aria, 1992). *Yin* came to mean ‘rely upon’ and as Vaccari and Vaccari (1964) note a man depends upon a bed or mat to get rest. So *en* can be seen as a representation of a person relying upon his or her heart to attain favor or grace (Aria, 1992).

Virtue or goodness, *de* , combines several radicals which contribute to the overall meaning. The cross at the top, right side of the character is the radical for ‘ten’ and the rectangle underneath is the radical for eye and beneath that is the radical for ‘one’ which can also mean straight as it is a straight horizontal line (Peng, 1999b). The

heart is then found beneath those three radicals. Together it means straight as tested by ten eyes and therefore, a straight heart (Peng, 1999b). The radical on the left side represents a step or to walk slowly (Fazzioli, 1987). This character is rich in meaning and tells us: “Follow the path of the true heart” (Aria, 1992, p.20). Fazzioli (1987) expresses the meaning of *de* as “The way to virtue and goodness is controlled by the heart and at least ten eyes” (p. 65). *De* is combined with other characters which have meanings related to morality. For instance *de xing* means moral integrity, *de yu* means moral education, and *ping de* is moral character (Peng, 1999b).

Another intriguing character, which incorporates the heart, is *zhi* 志 which means ambition. As Aria (1992) points out, we often think of “ambitious people as having their mind or heart set on their goal’ (p.55). So once again the heart becomes the root of this character. Above the heart the character for ten (*shi*) is found which also connotes completeness. The two dimensions of the cross join the five cardinal directions (east, west, north, south and center) (Peng, 1999a). As a representation for the numeral ten, it signifies “a complete number containing all the other simple numbers of decimal numeration” (Peng, 1999a, p.65). So this character shows the completeness of the number ten and of the cardinal directions. When a line is drawn below *shi* (2nd tone), it becomes *shi* (4th tone) meaning a man of learning or scholar (Yeh, 2000). From the character *zhi*, we can therefore deduce that “Scholars who have set their heart on it complete their studies, and in so doing become complete persons” (Aria, 1992, p. 55).

Ren 忍, defined as endure, bear, tolerate or suffer illustrates the sharp side of a cutlass above a heart, which is enduring its threat of possible harm (Vaccari & Vaccari, 1964). The radical *dao* (knife) is a pictograph showing a handle in the upper part and a curved blade in the lower part (Fazzioli, 1987). As the Chinese saying goes “The character for patience has a knife over the heart” (Aria, 1992, p. 59). Thus, it would be foolish to provoke one’s patience, but the truly patient heart is a solid one that can persevere and endure (Aria, 1992).

Faithfulness and loyalty are words that are considered, by the Chinese, to be “manifestations emanating from the center of the heart” (Vacarri & Vaccari, 1964, p.99).

This gives us the character *zhong* 忠. The top of the character simply means center and the idea came from the shooting of an arrow right into the center of a square target (Peng, 1999a). So it can be surmised that loyalty has a centered heart or “A heart that is in the center is a heart in the right place” (Aria, 1992, p. 60).

Qing 青 denotes blue or green, young or green grass (Keyser, 2002). Green

represents the color of nature (Peng, 1999b). When heart is added it becomes *qing* 情, which means feelings, affection, favor or kindness (Keyser, 2002). “The character stands for those feelings which are pure or natural to the heart of man” (Peng, 1999b, p.98).

Another character *yi* 意 contains two heart radicals. The right side stands for the sound in the heart or mind or intention or thought (Peng, 1999a). The left side has the

additional heart, which implies to think again, giving us the complete meaning for *yi*: to reflect or remember (Keyser, 2002). When the two characters *qing* and *yi* are brought together 情意 we obtain good will or tender regards (Keyser, 2002). The breakdown followed by the building up gives the reader a clear idea or picture of how the meanings come to light.

As can be seen thus far the heart (*xin*) can be found in numerous characters relating to endearing and spiritual human qualities such as love, grace, virtue, ambition, patience, loyalty and good will. However, this significant radical can also be found in such characters as melancholy, anger and hatred. The heart has a powerful presence that can run the gamut of emotions.

Melancholy or *chou* 愁 is rich with meaning. The top left radical is that of *he* 禾 which picture grains still on the stalk and the top right is *huo* 火 which is a clear pictograph meaning fire or fury (Yeh, 2000). “Fire, the symbol of warmth, strength, danger and anger, plays a part in every aspect of our lives, like good and bad luck”

(Fazzioli, 1987, p. 187). The combination of *he* and *huo* actually means *qiu* 秋 (autumn) (Peng, 1999a). In Oriental countries the onset of fall is viewed as the end to the beauty of blooming flowers, green trees and plants and it is the season that brings forth the dreaded winter (Vaccari & Vaccari, 1964). Under these two characters we find the heart. The heart becomes burdened with that sentimental longing which manifests itself in melancholy as the realization that nature cannot jump from summer to winter without autumn. (Peng, 1999a). The melancholy takes hold of one’s heart. “In the fall, when ripened crops are harvested and fire prepares the fields for next year’s yield, the heart grows sad, just as it does in the autumn of life” (Aria, 1992, p. 75).

Nu 怒 is anger, rage or passion. This character incorporates the radical *nu* 女, a woman or female, with the radical *you* 又 (also, again) and underneath is the heart, *xin* (Yeh, 2000). When the two radicals *nu* and *you* are combined to form one meaning, it becomes *nu* 奴, a slave or servant (Yeh, 2000). The radical *nu* 女, is obviously the phonetic radical in this character. In Chinese culture it is very important not to show anger even under the most unfavorable circumstances. To demonstrate any such emotional outbursts would be considered undignified (Vaccari & Vaccari, 1964). “Eastern people think that to get angry is a weakness of the low class, as domestic servants for instance” (Vaccari & Vaccari, 1964, p. 109). This idea that anger shows weakness has existed since ancient times when domestic servants served as slaves (Vaccari & Vaccari, 1964). This cultural belief is very important for a foreigner to know when experiencing Eastern culture. Travel guides, such as the Lonely Planet Taiwan guide, warn and try to educate travelers on how to avoid a major faux pas.

A smile in Asia doesn’t always mean the person is happy. Smiling is a proper response in an embarrassing situation. The waitress who smiles at you after pouring tea all over your lap isn’t laughing at you. The smile is offered as an apology. If you get angry, she may smile more. I can assure

you she doesn't think it's funny. If you jump up and yell, 'What are you smiling at, you idiot! Do you think it's funny?', then you have committed a major social error. Losing your temper is a big no-no. Smile. (Storey, 1994, p. 29)

Westerners will often speak up and are not afraid to complain if something is not up to standard but in Chinese culture it is extremely important to remain calm and even pretend nothing is wrong to avoid any confrontation. "Harmonious social relations are greatly stressed in Taiwan" (Storey, 1994, p. 27). The principle of 'face' is related to this as well. If you show anger, you will lose face or you may cause the other person to lose face. Face

is equivalent to prestige or status (Storey, 1994). To make someone or yourself lose face will hurt a reputation and this can be very embarrassing and could ultimately, irreparably damage a relationship. Perhaps *nu* 怒, can best be summed up in that "it cautions against giving way to anger or passion and becoming slave and handmaid to the dictates of the heart" (Peng, 1999a, 69).

Yuan 怨 is defined as hatred or resentment (Yeh, 2000). This character too, is based on the heart. The top right radical is a phonetic that suggests a turning away from someone hateful (Peng, 1999b). The top left radical *xi* 夕 stands for night and it implies the completeness of the turning away from the hateful person by acting as if it was night instead of day (Peng, 1999b). The cultural significance of not showing anger is again evident as advice is given on how to avert violence by remembering that "An angry fist cannot strike a smiling face" (Peng, 1999b, p. 60). When I read this phrase of counsel I think about how opposite Western and Eastern cultures can be because in Western cultures if someone would smile in the face of anger it would be taken as smugness and further provoke an even angrier reaction. It is vital for us to understand each other's cultures so as to prevent serious misunderstandings and to gain mutual respect.

Conclusion

Chinese characters can be viewed as just a written language, one form of communication, but an appreciation of beauty, art, meaning and culture transpires upon an in depth examination of these characters. "Each character has a gestalt quality to make it more visually memorable" (Ascion, 2002, p.11). The pictures and ideas that can be drawn out from these characters provide a symbol of the history and culture of the Chinese people. To study the characters at this level, finding the symbolism, the pictures and how various combinations form different meanings may prove valuable for the novice. Although it is impossible to take this approach with every character, I found that learning the symbolism found in so many of the characters really helped me to recall them more easily. I also felt eager to learn more as I recognized different parts of the characters and wondered how they fit together and what they meant. I also agree with Zhao (as cited by Jun, 1999) who says, "learning Chinese characters is a good method to reach the heart of Chinese culture" (p. 11). Upon researching this essay, I experienced that learning the symbolism of the characters actually enhanced my memory recall, and

acted as a type of mnemonic that fostered a higher level of interest.

The Chinese script is unique as it is in itself an art form “which seeks to make each word like a picture, a work of art with aesthetic qualities, that are comparable to the rhythm in poetry that conveys memorability” (Acsion, 2002, p.2). What I feel is most important about studying a language is perhaps best summed up by Keyser (2002) who gives a fine example through the Chinese characters for crisis or *weiji* 危机. Wei is danger and ji is opportunity. “A crisis presents a moment of opportunity as well as great danger. A language reflects the understanding that culture has of itself, and influences how people in that culture think” (Keyser, 2002, p. 5).

References

Acsion. (2002, May, 8). Writing systems and their reforms: Chinese logographic writing system [online]. Available: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/index.htm> (2002, May 14).

Ager, S. (1998). Omniglot: A guide to writing systems. [online]. Available: <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/chinese.htm> (2002, May 26).

Aria, B. (2001). The nature of the Chinese character. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Aria, B., & Gon, R. (1992). The spirit of the Chinese character. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Associated Press. (1998, March, 29). Ancient writings: China's past, inscribed in bone [online]. Available: <http://more.abcnews.go.com/sections/science/dailynews/writing0329.htmlb> (2002, May 24).

Bendheim, F. (2000, Dec.). Some words are worth a thousand pictures. [online]. Available: <http://www.bellhowell.infolearning.com/proquest/> (2002, May 26).

Chan, L., & Nunes, T. (1998). Children's understanding of the formal and functional characteristics of written Chinese. Applied Psycholinguistics, 19, 115-131.

China-inc. (2000). Chinese language [online]. Available: <http://www.china-inc.com/education/language/> (2002, May 26).

Crystal, D. (1987). The Cambridge encyclopedia of language, pp. 200-201.

DeFrancis, J. (1984). The Chinese language. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

- Evelyn, I. (2000). *Origins of writing and aesthetics in China* [online]. Available: http://www.usu.edu/anthro/origins_of_writing/chinese_calligraphy/ (2002, May, 24).
- Fazzioli, E. (1987). *Understanding Chinese characters*. London: William Collins Sons & Co.
- Feibao, D. (1998a). *Oracle Inscriptions* [online]. Available: <http://www.chinavista.com/experience/oracle/oracle.html> (2002, May 24).
- Feibao, D. (1998b). *Origin of the Chinese script* [online]. Available: <http://www.chinavista.com/experience/hanzi/hanzi.html> (2002, May 24).
- Feldman, L., & Siok, W. (1999). Semantic Radicals Contribute to the Visual Identification of Chinese Characters. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 40, 559-576.
- Fergusson, A. (1997). *Lesson 1* [online]. Available: <http://www.zenancestors.com/> (2002, May 24).
- Galambos, I. (2000). *Origins of Chinese writing* [online]. Available: http://www.logoi.com/notes/chinese_origins.html (2002, May 24).
- Geocities. (2002). *Chinese festivals: Chun Jie* [online]. Available: <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Parc/1486/festival/festival.html> (2002, May 24).
- Guanghui, X. (1996, Oct.). *Introduction to the Chinese script* [online]. Available: <http://faculty.virginia.edu/cll/chinese/introduction.html> (2002, May 24).
- Hoff, G., & Petrucelli, L. (2000, Aug.). Different strokes: *The Chinese art of writing*. [online]. Available: <http://www.bellhowell.infolearning.com/proquest/> (2002, May 26).
- H.S.U. (2002). *The evolution of Chinese characters* [online]. Available: <http://www.humboldt.edu/~clic/evolun.htm> (2002, May 26).
- Hsueh, R., & Wu, W. (1998). *Chinese traditions and festivals*. New Mexico: BIGI International USA.
- Kanji. (1999, June). *Classification* [online]. Available: <http://www2.gol.com/users/jpc/Japan/Kanji/classification.htm> (2002, May 26).
- Karlgren, B. (1923). *Sound and symbol in Chinese*. Oxford University Press.
- Keyser, C. (2002). *Language: The Chinese language* [online]. Available: C:\Documents and Settings\aa\Desktop\Linguistics\LanguageThe Chinese Language.htm (2002, May 26).

- Lang, C. (2002, April, 9). *The Chinese writing system*. [online]. Available: <http://cjvlang.com/Writing/writchin.html> (2002, May 15).
- Light, T. (1982). *Focus on asian studies* 1(3), pp. 18-23.
- Liu, J. (1999, Feb., 4). *New approaches make learning Chinese easier*. [online]. Available: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb> (2002, May 24).
- Lo, L. (1996). *Chinese: The earliest Chinese writing* [online]. Available: <http://www.ancientscripts.com/chinese.html> (2002, May 24).
- McNair, A. (1999, Aug.). *Two Chinese treatises on calligraphy*. [online]. Available: <http://www.bellhowell.infolearning.com/proquest/> (2002, May 26).
- Peng, T.H. (1999a). *Fun with Chinese characters: The Straits Times collection, 1*. Singapore: Press Ace Pte.
- Peng, T.H. (1999b). *Fun with Chinese characters: The Straits Times collection, 3*. Singapore: Press Ace Pte.
- Peng, T.H. (2000). *Chinese festivals*. Singapore: Press Ace Pte.
- Sussman, J. (1994). *I can read that*. San Francisco: China Books & Periodicals, Inc.
- Reid, D. (1998). *Taiwan*. APA Publications GmbH & Co. Verlag KG, Singapore.
- ROC yearbook. (2001a, May). *Folk prints* [online]. Available: <http://www.gio.gov.tw/info/culture/26-3.html> (2002, May 15).
- ROC yearbook. (2001b, May). *Language: Linguistic features of the Chinese language family* [online]. Available: <http://www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/5-gp/yearbook/chpt03.htm> (2002, May 14).
- ROC yearbook. (2001c, May). *Written Language* [online]. Available: <http://www.gio.gov.tw/info/culture/cultur14.html> (2002, May 24).
- Storey, R. (1994). *Taiwan*. Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.
- Terfloth, C., Kinney, R., Burian, L., Tai, E., Fahey, M., Murphy R., & Easley, N. (1999). *Practical audio-visual Chinese*. China: Beijing University Press.
- U of Oregon. (1999, Aug., 4). Orthography: Chinese characters [online]. Available: <http://logos.uoregon.edu/explore/orthography/> (2002, May 26).
- Vaccari, O., & Vaccari, E. (1964). *Pictorial Chinese-Japanese characters*. Japan: Kasai Publishing & Printing Co.

Wood, F. (2001). *Chinese characters: Mysterious in origin and magical in meaning* [online]. Available: <http://www.fathom.com/feature/121782> (2002, May 24).

Yeh, T. (2000). *Pinyin*. Taipei: The Far East Book Co.

Zhang, L. (1991). *Practical Chinese conversation*. Taipei, Taiwan: Caves Books, Ltd.

Zhang, Y. (2001, November, 15). *Play on words* [online]. Available: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/star/2001/1115/pr22-1.html> (2002, May 15).