Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

+ radical 130: 朋 chēng intestines (radical 130 = flesh);
+ radical 85: 丿 tōng soup (radical 85 = water);
+ radicals 85&86: 丿 tàng to scald (radical 86 = fire);
+ radical 64: 丿 yáng to raise (radical 64 = the hand);
+ radical 75: 丿 yáng the poplar tree (radical 75 = tree).

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

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

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

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

77  chăng  場(場) a place where people gather.

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

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

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

+ 130: 肠(腸) chăng intestines.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The character zhōng (centre) is one of the simple characters which beginners must learn at an early stage. But it is also one of the very useful phonetics, since every compound character in which it appears is also pronounced zhong or chong, sometimes with a change of tone. The great advantage with this phonetic is that one can turn immediately to the appropriate pages in the alphabetical-pinyin dictionary without having to resort to the cumbersome and time-consuming traditional method: determining under which radical the character is likely to be listed (not always an easy task), and then finding it in the tables according to the number of strokes it is made up of.

This phonetic is key character No. 910 in the Dictionary and the entry includes five other commonly used compound characters, all having this pronunciation, which otherwise one would have had to find under five different radicals. It is notable also that this phonetic is even more useful in reading the simplified forms of the characters, since in the simplification process it has been used to replace three different forms of the corresponding phonetics in the traditional characters.

However, not all phonetics are as helpful and reliable as zhōng. With some phonetics the pronunciation of particular characters can vary and this list differs from the usual dictionary, and aims to be particularly useful to the student, by grouping these variations in the entry for the key character which uses the phonetic common to them all. Thus entry No. 540 has the key character: qián (money), and lists three further compound characters with this phonetic, of which one is pronounced qián, whereas the other two have the pronunciations qīn and xiān. The pinyin for these two characters is underlined here, as it is in the Dictionary, to show an unexpected variation from the pronunciation of the phonetic in the key character (the difference between tones, and between the aspirated and unaspirated versions of the same sound, are not considered variations in this sense).

In using this Dictionary, which lists the most useful Chinese phonetics and the relevant cross-references, it is suggested that the student, on meeting an unfamiliar character, should pay particular attention to the phonetic element and note those phonetics which occur most frequently. I have found that this not only makes it easier to track down a character in the Dictionary but also helps to fix the character in the memory.

Terms and abbreviations used in the Dictionary

alt.form alternative form.

basic that element in a character to which a radical (or radicals) is added to form a compound character. It frequently gives an indication of the way the character is pronounced.


combination ‘used in combination’ indicates that the character conveys a given sense only when used in combination with other characters.

compound character any character consisting of a basic element to which a radical (or radicals) has been added.

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the Dictionary: this Dictionary of 943 key characters plus cross-references.

D.f.: distinguish from.

key character: those characters numbered 1 to 943 making up the Dictionary.


No. xxx: refers to the key character with this number in the Dictionary.

phonetic: that element of a character which gives an indication of the way it is pronounced.

pinyin: the conventional system for the representation of the sounds of Chinese characters in the Roman alphabet.

a plus (+) sign preceding a number indicates the radical to be added to form a particular compound character, the number used being that assigned to it in the traditional list (see pp. xiv–xv and Appendix B). If the plus sign is preceded by (T), this indicates that the radical is to be added to the phonetic of the T form of the key character.

a radical: one of the 214 modern conventionalised versions of the original Chinese pictographs, under which characters are ordered in the dictionaries (see pp. xiv–xv and Appendix B).

a simple character: consists of one basic shape without any additional elements.

S form: indicates the simplified form of the character.

T form: indicates the traditional (unsimplified) form of the character.

tones: see footnote (7) of the Introduction.

usage number: a figure indicating the frequency of use of a particular Chinese character, given to it in the frequency count by Liu Yuan (see p. 190).

a useful character: a character which fits into the frequency of use criteria given in Appendix A.

variant pronunciation: an unexpected variation from the basic phonetic shown in the key character. In the Dictionary the pinyin for these pronunciations is underlined.

×2, ×3: indicates the number of times of the repeated use of the same character.