

## 十二

I discovered one symbol's  
not always a word  
that having no alphabet  
wasn't absurd  
every stroke of the brush  
was placed with precision  
each line, dot, and hook  
was there for a reason



## Chapter 12 - Let's Get Radical

Many years ago, when I was still teaching Chinese in Tulsa, I mentioned to Cristy that half-way through the year, some of my kids were still having problems with radicals. She then asked me, "What's a radical?" To which I responded, "You surely remember the 'tree' radical, the 'word' radical, the 'hand' radical and the 'three drops of water' radicals in Chinese characters, don't you? After showing her several characters with these radicals. Cristy then responded, "I don't remember learning about radicals, but I think learning them would have really helped me remember characters."

The Chinese word for "radical" is "部首 bùshǒu." In traditional Chinese, there are 214 radicals. In their simplified forms, that number has been reduced to 189. Radicals are components or parts of characters. Some radicals can function on their own as "stand alone" characters, and sometimes, the character form is different from its radical form.

Here are examples of three Chinese characters which come from pictographs (characters which were originally pictures of what they represent.) Only about 10% of all Chinese characters fall into this category. All three of the following 'stand-alone' characters also function as radicals. These three characters remain unchanged in their simplified and traditional forms:

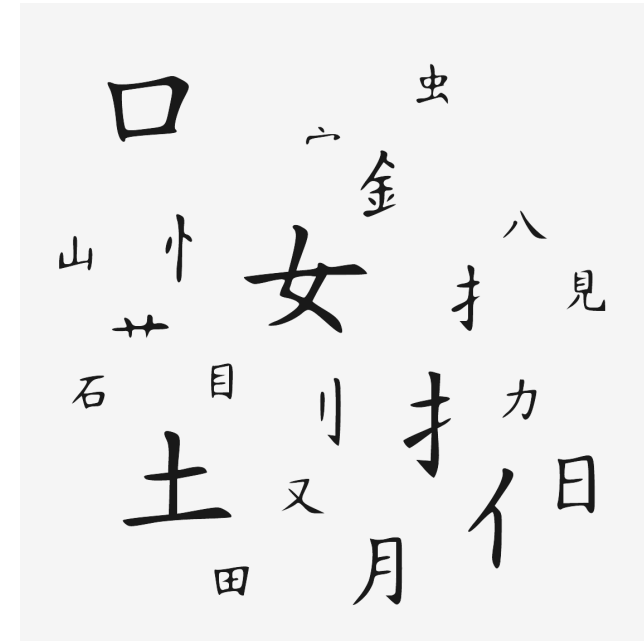
- The character for "female" is 女 nǚ. It is an ancient pictograph representing a woman kneeling.
- The character for "tree" or "wood" is 木 mù. One can easily see how this pictograph represents a tree.
- The character for "mouth" or "opening" is 口 kǒu. Again, a pretty obvious picture.

A few Chinese pictographs changed the way they were written when Chinese characters were simplified in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The traditional character for "horse" is 馬 mǎ. The simplified form is 马 mǎ. Both traditional and simplified retain their forms when used as radicals. (e.g. mā 媽, 妈).

- Many characters change their forms when they go from being a character to being a radical. The character for "hand" is 手 shǒu in both traditional and simplified forms. When hand is used as a radical, it looks like 扌 in both traditional and simplified forms.
- The character for "person" is 人 rén. When "person" is used as a radical, it looks like 亻 in both traditional and simplified forms.

- The character for the word, “word” in both simplified and traditional characters is 言 yán. The radical form of the word, “word” in traditional form is exactly the same as the character. However in its simplified form, the radical looks like this 讠.

Different Forms of Chinese Script								
	Oracle Bone	Greater Seal	Lesser Seal	Clerical	Running	Cursive	Standard	Modern Simplified
Human	𠤎	𠤎	𠤎	人	人	人	人	人
Woman	𡗗	𡗗	𡗗	女	女	女	女	女
Ear	𦊮	𦊮	𦊮	耳	耳	耳	耳	耳
Horse	𠂇	𠂇	𠂇	馬	馬	馬	馬	马
Fish	𩺰	𩺰	𩺰	魚	魚	魚	魚	鱼
Mountain	𠵓	𠵓	𠵓	山	山	山	山	山
Day, Sun	日	日	日	日	日	日	日	日
Month, Moon	月	月	月	月	月	月	月	月
Rain	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨	雨
Cloud	云	云	云	雲	雲	雲	雲	云



So, why should you be curious about radicals? The short answer is that knowing radicals makes learning to recognize, remember, and write Chinese characters easier. If, when you see the word for “believe” 信 xìn, you immediately see it as being formed of two radicals (讠 + 言) instead of 9 strokes, it becomes easier to remember. It’s easier to decipher the traditional character for “thank” (謝) xiè if you recognize its three radicals (言 + 身 + 寸), than it is to break it into 17 strokes. It’s a little like remembering a word in syllables instead of by its spelling. I’ll never forget Kurt Vonnegut’s made up word from “The Sirens of Titan” - “chronosynclastic Infundibulum” When I tried to spell the word, I couldn’t, but I could remember how to say the word. It was then easy for me to figure out the ‘correct’ spelling. In Chinese, if you can remember the main radical, then you can look up the character. After you learn the proper stroke order for writing down radicals, it makes it easier for you to copy characters that arouse your curiosity.

Here are a few common radicals to look for wherever you see written Chinese.

1. 刂 = knife
2. 氵 = water
3. 土 = earth
4. 子 = son
5. 宀 = roof
6. 心 or 忄 = heart
7. 戈 = spear
8. 日 = sun or day
9. 月 = moon or month
10. 火 = fire
11. 竹 or 艹 = bamboo
12. 艹 = grass
13. 辶 = walk

A 他	B 說	C 明
D 是	E 做	F 談
G 謝	H 春	I 仁

There are thousands of Chinese characters in the Chinese language. Characters are different than words because they are not made up of letters. They do, however, contain "radicals." See if you can group these 9 characters into 3 groups by the radicals they have in common.

Group 1:

Group 2:

Group 3: