
The Image Iconicity in the Chinese Language

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1. Introduction

The nature of arbitrariness and iconicity has been a heated topic for debate among the Chinese linguists and semioticians in the past 20 years. Due to the fact that modern Chinese linguistic scholarship has been strongly influenced by Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, the dominant view in China was once marked by arbitrariness. Yet, with the development of cognitive linguistics, today the scale has tilted toward iconicity. Since most of the papers in favour of arbitrariness have focused on Saussure's view of sign as the dualistic relation between "signifier" and "signified", that is, "sound-image" and "concept", and almost remained the same in content in their argument, the present paper will mainly deal with iconicity studies in the Chinese language in China as more and more articles have been emerging in this field and helped deepen our understanding of the ontology and phylogeny of the Chinese language.

Seeing that both sides have acknowledged the role of iconicity at the syntactic level and the textual level, this paper, to save space and time, will not deal with sequence iconicity, distance iconicity, quantity iconicity, space iconicity, temporal iconicity, markedness iconicity, etc., and will confine itself to the image iconicity, that is, sound iconicity and graph iconicity. In doing so, I will start with a brief review of concepts and views held by the Chinese philosophers and etymologists, past and present.

2. A historical-theoretical review

Opposite to the principle of arbitrariness that has constituted the mainstream with regard to the relation between sound pattern and concept in the 20th century both in and outside China, the principle of iconicity was, on the contrary, more highly valued and studied in the history of Chinese philosophy and linguistic scholarship (Xu Guozhang, 1988).

1. The Pre-Qin period

Iconicity has always been the chief mode for the Chinese people in sign formation. The above photo is a piece of stone inscription dated back to the New Stone Age (5800B.C. to 4700B.C.). It is about the "God of Sun", with the figure in the middle (imitation of human beings), 23 lines around a circle over the head (representing the sun and sunlight), and many spots around his waist and legs (like the planets around the sun).

The "image-based analogy" of sign was found in *The Book of Changes*, which was said to be completed in Zhou dynasty (1066B.C. – 256B.C.). *The Book of Changes* mainly discussed the meaning of "Bā Guà"(the eight diagrams), consisting of an arrangement of single and divided lines in eight groups of three lines each as specified. Besides this, it gave us examples of interpreting a character by its synonym, such as, "乾" (*qián*)¹ means "健"

¹ The italicized romanized letters represent the Chinese Pinyin.

(*jiàn*, healthy), “坤” (*kūn*) means “顺” (*shùn*, act in submission to) (Note: also compare the similarities in the VC structures for each pair. Admittedly, there is a sense of speculation in this book, yet it is quoted and valued for its contribution to the study of signs and the relevant term “analogy and inference.” (Zhang Xiaoguang, 2003; Zhang Xue, 2007). *The Book of Changes* also writes: “Baoxi was the king of the country. He looked above observing the astronomy of the heaven and bent his body observing the law of the earth; he observed the features of birds and animals in harmony with the earth. He started from those objects which were near his body and extended further to those in the distance ... so as to describe the states of myriads of objects.” In this sense, his words sound like the views of embodiment and experientialism as discussed by Lakoff and his colleagues.

Next to this classic, we come to Gongsun Long (?320B.C.-?250.C.)’s well-known thesis: “the white horse is not horse”. This ancient philosopher argued that we should make a difference between the generic name “horse” and the specific name “the white horse”, that is to say, naming is not decoded arbitrarily. Accountability is based on different perspectives.

The “sound with meaning” phenomena were also reported at this period. When asked by a king about the meaning of “政” “ (zhèng, governing)”, Confucius explained that it means “正 “ (zhèng, upright) . From this, we can see that the two words “政” and “正 “ share the same sound *zhèng*, share the same form of “正 “, and consequently are close to each other in meaning.

2.2 The Han period

Although the concept of *Liù Shū*, Six Scripts first appeared in the book *Zhōu Lǐ* (*The Zhou Ritual*) in the pre-Qin period, it was first annotated by Zhen Xuan of East Han period. It was a book about the creation of Chinese characters. The six scripts are as follows (Baidu Baike, 2009; Liang Dongmei, 1998).

象形 (*xiàngxíng*, pictographic character) : e.g. “山” (*shān*, mountain), “日” (*rì*, sun), “月” (*yuè*, moon).

会意 (*huìyì*, associative compound character): e.g. the character “信” (*xìn*, belief) suggests the speech (言) of man (人); “林” (*lín*, forest) suggests the repeated occurrences of “木” (*mù*, tree/wood) and “木” meaning more than one tree.

转注 (*zhuǎnzhù*, mutually explanatory character): e.g. “老” (*lǎo*, old age) and “考” (*kǎo*, long life, aged) have similar meaning as shown by the similarity in their pronunciation and writing.

处事 (*chǔshì*, self-explanatory): e.g. “上” (*shàng*, on) ; “下” (*xià*, under). Their meanings are expressed by the position of “人” (*rén*, person) in relation to the line.

假借 (*jiǎjiè*, phonetic loan character): e.g. “求” (*qiú*, for); “求” (*qiú*, entreat) . The second meaning “entreat” is borrowed from the first one.

谐声/形声 (*xiéshēng/xíngshēng*, pictophonetic): e.g. “江” (*jiāng*, river), “河” (*hé*, river), each character has one element expressing the (generic) meaning of “water”, another element expressing the sound.

Since then it has been agreed that mutually explanatory characters were derived from the carving of signs on tortoise shells and other materials, associate compound characters helped understand the original meaning of some characters, mutually explanatory characters revealed how ancient Chinese created synonyms, phonetic loan character showed the

creation of one character from another character, and pictophonetic characters formed a small part at the very beginning (20% in late *jiǎgúwén* – inscription on tortoise shells), but became widely used in forming new words (around 80% of the Chinese characters). So far as the written Chinese is concerned, the pictographic character forms the basis of the other 5 categories,

This tradition of *Liù Shū* was later extensively studied in Xu Shen's *Shuō Wén Jiě Zì* (*Annotations of Etymology*), written at East Han Period. Xu Shen used the term “亦声” (*Yì shēng*, a form shared by both sound and meaning). As we know, the Chinese picto-phonetic characters usually consist of two elements, one indicating meaning and the other sound. For instance, the character “江” (*jiāng*, river) has 2 elements, the left element carries the meaning of “water”, the right element carried the sound ending in “āng”. Xu Shen's “*yì shēng*” is to point out that sometimes the sound element still carries meaning. The character “酣” (*hān*, drink to one's heart's content) is a case in point, its left element suggesting “wine” and its right element indicating both the sound and the meaning of “pleasure”. In all, the ye-sound characters, specified and non-specified, amount to 950 characters, 10% of the total characters reported by Xu Shen's dictionary (Huang Yuhong, 1995). According to Duan Yuchai's *Shuō Wén Jiě Zì Zhù* (*Annotations of Words and Characters*), Xu's theoretical thrust can be summarized as “sound comes from meaning, meaning is realized in sound, and sound leads to the form/graph. If the learners want to recognize characters, he should observe the form so as to know its sound, and observe the sound so as to get its meaning.” This shows form, sound, and meaning are closely connected (Ying Xuefeng, 2006a).

Shortly later than Xu Shen, Liu Xi's book *Shí Míng* (*The Interpretation of Names*) was known to the academic world. This is a book discussing the meaning of a character from the perspective of sound. Liu Xi was right in explaining that the meaning of the character “浍” (*huì*, a ditch) derives partly from the left element's meaning of water, and partly from the sound element “会” (*huì*), a place where furrows meet. The book has been criticized for its subjectivity, but still praised for its description of the pronunciation of Chinese characters during the Han dynasty as well as the pronunciation of various dialects.

The same is true for Liu Xie's (?465 - ?520) *Wén Xīn Diāo Lóng* (*The Literary Mind and Dragon Carving*). Although a treatise in literary criticism, the book touched upon the view that pictographic writing co-exists with nature and that heaven and earth are concepts formed by human cognition of the objective world. According to Xu Guozhang (1988), Liu's linguistic theory goes like this:

The objective world ↓
Human conceptual processing (human perception) ↓
Language (speech is the reflection of mind) ↓
Writing (writing comes from speech)

In Liu's work, one can also find the categorization of signs into iconic signs, echoic signs, and emotive signs.

2.3 The Song period

During the Song Dynasty (960 A.D.-1279 A.D.), Wang Songmei was reported in Shen Kuo's book *Mèngxī Bǐ Tán?* (*Dream Pool Essays*) to have developed “右文说” (*Yòu Wén Shuō*, On the Right Element Principle). Before Wang, it had been widely accepted that the left element of a character gives meaning and the right element the sound. Wang Challenged

this view by arguing that the meaning of a Chinese character also comes from its right element, that is to say, many Chinese characters express their categorical meaning from their left elements (or radicals) and specific meaning as well as their pronunciation from their right elements. For instance, a category related to “wood” has its left element as “木” (*mù*, wood), a character related to “hill” has its left element as “山” (*shān*, hill), etc. . When it comes to meaning on the right, this can be illustrated by “戔” (*jiān*, small), so a small quantity of water is called “浅” (*qiǎn*, shallow), a small piece of gold is called “钱” (*qián*, money), the disappearing sun, and therefore the remnant, is called “残” (*cán*, incomplete), a small shell is called “贱” (*jiàn*, cheap), a small piece of paper is called “笺” (*jiān*). All these characters get their specific meaning from the right element “戔”, which ends with the sound *-an* (Ying Xuefeng, 2006).

Apart from Wang, Dai Tong was also known for his “Principle of Decoding Meaning from Sound”. Dai said, “the written language derives from the sound,” “The existence of the sound results in the form of written language, thus meaning and sound co-exist and do not derive from the written language.” “The written language is the icon of the sound; and the sound is the expression of human spirit. With this spirit we have the sound...without the language the sound is not to be realized.” (Dang Huaixing, 1992). Dai also explained the phenomenon of a character can taking several forms. This is a matter of transference of one sound to another when they are close to each other by different language users. Dai was also correct in talking about phonetic loan, which is only a matter of sound borrowing and has no relevance to its form. This especially occurs in expressing the functional words when it is difficult to find their icons.

The Song period was also marked by Zhen Qiao’s *Liù Shū Lǜè* (*Sketch of the Six Scripts*). In this book, Zhen was acknowledged for his two great achievements. Theoretically he confirmed the importance of *Six Scripts* in etymological scholarship, including the role of pictographic characters and rules concerning the development of Chinese characters, features of self-explanatory characters, pictographic characters, compound characters, and pictophonetic characters. Practically, Zhen was not confined to Xu Shen’s framework. He worked out concrete rules, suggested new explanations and revised some of Xu Shen’s explanatory errors (Zhang Biao, 1997)

2.4 The Qing period

The etymological research in the Qing period (1644-1911A.D.) was represented by scholars such as Gu Yanwu, Jiang Yong, Duan Yuchai, Wang Niansun, Kong Guangshen, Jiang Yougao, etc. Generally speaking, these scholars managed to develop quite a few practical analytical methods, such as, exploring the meaning of loan characters from their sounds, determining the literal meaning of characters so as to explain their extended meanings, determining the word meaning from sentences.

Among the above scholars, Wang Niansun pointed out the meaning of two-sound compounds is based on their sounds. Duan Yucai noticed that the sound “犹” (*yóu*, irresolute) has many 2-sound forms, such as “犹豫” (*yóuyú*), “犹与” (*yóuyú*), “尤豫” (*yóuyú*), all expressing the meaning of hesitancy. With regard to

the origin of language, Zhang Taiyan clearly mentioned that “Language by no means comes out of void. The reason for us to call a horse as *ma*, an ox as *niú*, is not done by free will or presumption. ...Why do we call a magpie as *juè*? It makes sounds like *juèjuè*. Why do we call a sparrow as *què*? Its sound is *quèquè*. Why do we call a crow as *yā*? It makes sounds like *yāyā*. Why do we call a wild goose as *yàn*? It makes sounds as *àn àn*. All this shows that they are called according to the sounds they make. Here, Zhang did not agree with the view of arbitrariness but sided with the view of iconicity.”

2.5 From 1949 to the present

For this period, I would like to mention 2 points. First, the scholar who did most of the research concerning “音近义通” (*yīn jìn yì tōng*, meaning can be decoded from the closeness of sounds) is Wang Li, who put forward the term “同源词” (*tóng yuán cí*, words with the same etymology) for this phenomenon in the Chinese language. For instance, a young dog is called “狗” (*gǒu*, puppy), a young bear or tiger is written as “𧆳” (*gǒu*) but keeps the same pronunciation and a young horse is written as “驹” (colt) but sounds like *jū*. Based on this principle, Wang Li compiled the *Dictionary of Characters with the Same Etymology* (Lin Yan, 2006).

Second, quite a few scholars have started to question and challenge the principle of arbitrariness in the past 20 years. Those arbitrariness supporters in China have often quoted the view of Xunzi (? – 238B.C.), a pre-Qin philosopher because of his principle of “约定俗成” (*yuēdìng sùchéng*, sanctioned by popular usage), that is, rules come only after the arbitrary practice of the language users. However, this long-standing theoretical thrust was reinterpreted by the late Xu Guozhang (1988) and Wang Yin (2006). Both Xu and Wang argued that there is a misreading of Xunzi’s quoted words. The first two words “约定” (*yuēdìng*, sanctioning) involves the problem of “how to sanction” and the last two words “俗成” (*sùchéng*, popular usage) involves “what we mean by popular usage”. Whether sanctioning or popular usage presuppose the role of convention, agreed upon by language users and society, and consequently social accountability, because only those which are accountable will be first choices for language users to reach consensus. If every one attempts to speak in his or her own way, that is, arbitrarily, there will be no understanding and communication. In contrast, any language user would try their best to associate the concept with the relevant image, especially the sound image at the very beginning.

At this point, Wang Yin (2006) further noticed that there should be 3 sentences in all with regard to the quotes from Xunzi’s saying. The arbitrariness scholars only quoted 4 characters from the first two sentences. If we put the meaning of the three sentences together, the textual meaning will be like this: “(1) As there is no fixed appropriateness for naming, it has to resort to consensus, so what is sanctioned by popular usage is appropriate, and what differs from popular usage is inappropriate. (2) Naming is by no means factual. It becomes factual only when it is sanctioned, that is, what is sanctioned by popular usage is factual. (3) Naming can be good. A good naming is simple and easy to understand.” This shows the complete underlying

meaning of the three sentences. Some people have ignored this third sentence, which underlies the principle of motivation or accountability. On the one hand, Xunzi saw the existence of the phenomenon of being “sanctioned by popular usage” in language; on the other hand, he emphasized the importance of social accountability so that the language users can communicate with each other through an appropriate name.

In addition to theoretical exploration, most papers deal with practical analysis. It is true that it would be difficult for people, both arbitrariness supporters and iconicity supporters, to find out what had been happening in the early days of how primitive men started to create language or signs, we could still get some cues from analyzing the language we are using today, especially the Chinese language. Section 3 will deal with this matter, the crux of which is to prove the feasibility of the image iconicity

3. Image iconicity

3.1 Pictophonetic iconicity

In discussing sign as a natural connection between sound image and concept, Saussure acknowledged the existence of onomatopoeia and exclamation in language, but he did not delve into this matter. In contrast, quite a few Chinese researchers have provided more and more evidences.

3.1.1 Onomatopoeic iconicity

Onomatopoeic iconicity can be found in great numbers in the Chinese language. Apart from examples such as “汪汪” (*wāng wāng*) of a dog, “咪咪” (*mīmī*) of a cat, “嗡嗡” (*wēngwēng*) of a bee, “哞哞” (*mōumōu*) of a cow, etc., one can find more Chinese characters representing the natural sounds (Lin Yan, 2006; Dong Weiguang, 1997; Wu Xiaohua, 2006). For instance, for sounds produced by things striking with each other, stop consonants are often used, such as “嘣” (*bēng*), “噠” (*dēng*), “滴” (*dī*), “咚” (*dōng*), “哒” (*dá*), “嘎” (*gǎ*), “咣” (*guāng*), “啪” (*pā*), “嘭” (*pēng*), “通” (*tōng*), etc.

One can also find the compounding of onomatopoeic characters to express the complexity of sounds, either by repetition or by the use of similar sounds, such as: “吧吧” (*bābā*), “吧嗒” (*bādā*), “吧唧” (*bājī*), “哧哧” (*bìbì*), “嚓嚓” (*cācā*), “嘀嗒” (*dídá*), “叮咚” (*dīngdōng*) “叮当” (*dīngdāng*), “咕咚” (*gūdōng*), “咕咚” (*gūdōng*), “轰隆” (*hōnglōng*), “呼呼” (*hūhu*), “呼拉” (*hūlā*), “哧吧” (*kābā*), “哧嚓” (*kāchā*), “噼啪” (*pīpā*), “扑哧” (*pūchā*), “扑嗤” (*pūchī*), “扑扑” (*pūpū*), “扑通” (*pūtōng*), “飒飒” (*sàsà*), “瑟瑟” (*sèsè*), “沙拉” (*shālā*), “刷拉” (*shuālā*), “唰唰/刷刷” (*shuāshuā*), “吱吱” (*zīzī*), “嗖嗖” (*sōusōu*), “簌簌” (*sùsù*), “索落” (*suǒluò*) “簌簌” (*sǒu*), 索索 (*suǒsuǒ*), etc..

3.1.2 Phonaesthetic iconicity

Saussure did not say much about the phonaesthetic iconicity of language. In fact, this category plays a very important role in the Chinese language.

So far as the vowel sound is concerned, it is well recognized in Chinese that the degree of openness of vowels reflects the meaning of many characters. If the mouth is wide open, such as *-a*, it expresses something which is wide, or large, or high, or loud, especially when one is in high spirits, as shown in the following pairs of characters. Against this, one can also find those sounds bearing the vowel *-i* and *-e*, express the basic meaning of smallness,

lowness, baseness, etc., when one wants to express the opposite meaning. The sounds with -o and -u stand in the middle(Gu Zhengkun, 1995; Du Wenli, 1996).

Table 1

Yang (Masculine)	Yin (Feminine)	Yang (Masculine)	Yin (Feminine)
长 (<i>cháng</i> , long)	短(<i>duǎn</i> , short)	大 (<i>dà</i> , large)	小 (<i>xiǎo</i> , small)
开 (<i>kāi</i> , open)	关(<i>guān</i> , close)	高 (<i>gāo</i> , high)	矮 (<i>ǎi</i> , low)/低(<i>dī</i> , low)
上 (<i>shàng</i> , above)	下 (<i>xià</i> , below)	响 (<i>xiǎng</i> , loud)	轻 (<i>qīng</i> , low)
笑 (<i>xiào</i> , laugh)	哭(<i>kū</i> , cry)	深 (<i>shēn</i> , deep)	浅 (<i>qiǎn</i> , shallow)

Obviously, this kind of distinction between two opposite meanings is based on naturalness. It is psychologically natural and physiologically feasible for people to adjust the opening of their mouths.

Then, what about those concepts which are abstract and which are difficult to describe physically? There are good reasons for us to say that our forefathers could still apply this principle of pictophonetic iconicity to the description of mental ideas or abstract ideas. They used vowels with wide opening to mean those concepts which are true, good, primary, male, strong, active, and those sounds with narrow opening to mean the opposite. See the following example.

Table 2

Yang (Masculine)	Yin (Feminine)	Yang (Masculine)	Yin (Feminine)
爱 (<i>ài</i> , love)	恨 (<i>hèn</i> , hate)	褒 (<i>bāo</i> , praise)	贬(<i>biǎn</i> , depreciate)
白 (<i>bái</i> , white)	黑 (<i>hēi</i> , black)	饱 (<i>bǎo</i> , full)	饿 (<i>è</i> , hungry)
粗 (<i>cū</i> , coarse)	细 (<i>xì</i> , small)	旦 (<i>dàn</i> , morning)	夕 (<i>xī</i> , evening)
东 (<i>dōng</i> , east)	西 (<i>xī</i> , west)	动 (<i>dòng</i> , stirring)	静 (<i>jìng</i> , tranquil)
多 (<i>duō</i> , many)	少 (<i>shǎo</i> , little)	夫 (<i>fū</i> , husband)	妻 (<i>qī</i> , wife)
刚 (<i>gāng</i> hard)	柔 (<i>róu</i> , soft)	攻 (<i>gōng</i> , attack)	守 (<i>shǒu</i> , defend)
公 (<i>gōng</i> , public)	私 (<i>sī</i> , personal)	善 (<i>shàn</i> , good)	恶 (<i>è</i> , evil)
来 (<i>lái</i> , come)	回 (<i>huí</i> , return)	进 (<i>jìn</i> , advance)	退 (<i>tuī</i> , retreat)
近 (<i>jìn</i> , near)	远(<i>yuǎn</i> , distance)	良 (<i>liáng</i> , fine)	莠 (<i>yòu</i> , vicious)
男 (<i>nán</i> , man)	女(<i>nǚ</i> , woman)	强 (<i>qiáng</i> , strong)	弱 (<i>ruò</i> , weak)
巧 (<i>qiǎo</i> , skillful)	拙(<i>zhuó</i> , awkward)	同 (<i>tóng</i> , same)	异 (<i>yì</i> , different)
头 (<i>tóu</i> , head)	尾(<i>wěi</i> , tail)	雄 (<i>xióng</i> , male)	雌 (<i>cí</i> , female)
勇 (<i>yǒng</i> , brave)	怯 (<i>qiè</i> , timid)	友(<i>yǒu</i> , friend)	敌(<i>dí</i> , enemy)
有 (<i>yǒu</i> , have)	无 (<i>wú</i> , nil)	真 (<i>zhēn</i> , true)	伪 (<i>wěi</i> , false)
忠 (<i>zhōng</i> , loyal)	奸 (<i>jiān</i> , wicked)	好 (<i>hǎo</i> , good)	坏 (<i>huài</i> , bad)

It is also noticed that those sounds with -ang ending usually express the meaning of something which is strong, wide, primary, long, fragrant, etc., such as 昂 (*áng*, in high spirits), 盎 (*àng*, abundant), 棒 (*bàng*, excellent), 昌 (*chāng*, prosperous), 长(*cháng*, long), 常(*cháng*, constant), 敞 (*chǎng*, wide open), 畅(*chàng*, unimpeded), 创 (*chuàng*, start), 芳 (*fāng*,

fragrant), 放 (*fàng*, open), 刚 (*gāng*, strong), 纲 (*gāng*, the key part of something), 吭 (*hàng*, throat), 况 (*kuàng*, expansive), 沆 (*hàng*, a vast expanse of water), 皇 (*huáng*, emperor), 光 (*guāng*, light), 广 (*guǎng*, broad), 奖 (*jiǎng*, reward), 芒 (*máng*, bright), 强 (*qiáng*, strong), 壮 (*zhuàng*, healthy), 洋 (*yáng*,) 扬 (*yáng*, loud), 糖 (*táng*, sugar), 堂 (*táng*, the big room of a house), etc. In opposition to this tendency, those sounds ending in -ing usually express the meaning of smallness, narrowness, lightness, coldness, or slenderness, for instance, 兵 (*bīng*, soldier), 冰 (*bīng*, ice), 轻 (*qīng*, lightness), 钉 (*dīng*, nail), 叮 (*dīng*, sting), 茎 (*jīng*, narrow and long stem), 零 (*líng*, withered), 囹 (*líng*, jail), 冷 (*lěng*, cool), 冥 (*míng*, dark), 暝 (*míng*, sunset), 瞑 (*míng*, close), 轻 (*qīng*, light), 倾 (*qīng*, bend), 顷 (*qīng*, a little while), 罄 (*qìng*, use up), etc. (Dong Weiguang, 1997; Ying Xuefen, 2006)

There is another factor which motivates language user to express differences in meaning, that is, the choice of tone. There are four tones in modern Chinese language, that is Tone 1: high and level tone marked by the sign “ˉ”, Tone 2: rising tone, marked by the sign “ˊ”, Tone 3: falling-rising tone, marked by the sign “ˋ”, and Tone 4: falling tone, marked by the sign “ˋ”. Compare the tones used in each pair in connection with difference in meaning of the two characters concerned.

Table 3

放 (<i>fàng</i> , let go)	收 (<i>shōu</i> , restrain)	教 (<i>jiào</i> , teach)	学 (<i>xué</i> , learn)
宽 (<i>kuān</i> , broad)	窄 (<i>zhǎi</i> , narrow)	热 (<i>rè</i> , hot)	冷 (<i>lěng</i> , cold)
入 (<i>rù</i> , come into)	出 (<i>chū</i> , go out)	生 (<i>shēng</i> , be born)	死 (<i>sǐ</i> , die)
师 (<i>shī</i> , teacher)	徒 (<i>tú</i> , apprentice)	山 (<i>shān</i> , hill)	谷 (<i>gǔ</i> , valley)
问 (<i>wèn</i> , ask)	答 (<i>dá</i> , answer)	显 (<i>xiǎn</i> , expose)	隐 (<i>yǐn</i> , hide)
硬 (<i>yìng</i> , stiff)	软 (<i>rǎn</i> , soft)	真 (<i>zhēn</i> , true)	伪 (<i>wěi</i> , false)
正 (<i>zhèng</i> , obverse)	反 (<i>fǎn</i> , reverse)		

The above examples have shown that, those characters with the positive meaning are usually expressed by tone 1 and tone 4, whereas those with negative or relatively secondary meaning are expressed by tone 2 and tone 3.

Now, let's come to the choice of consonants which will also reveal what sort of meaning is to be expressed by some of the characters. As reported by Dong Weiguang (1997), Lin Yan (2006), Ying Xuefen (2006), we came to know the role of consonants in expressing some specific meaning:

--When appearing in the initial position, the consonant “x” is sometimes related to speaking loud in a laughing manner, such as 嘻 (*xī*, giggling), 喜 (*xǐ*, delighted), 戏 (*xì*, play), 笑 (*xiào*, smile), 欣 (*xīn*, happy), 噱 (*xué*, laugh), 喧 (*xuān*, speak loudly).

--Some characters beginning with the consonant “h” sometimes represent the meaning of loud cry, such as, 哈 (*hā*, the sound of laughing), 咳/嗨 (*hāi*, calling somebody), 喊 (*hǎn*, loud call), 鼾 (*hān*, snoring), 吭 (*háng*, heartily), 号 (*háo*, yell), 嚎 (*háo*, cry aloud), 喝 (*hē*, shout loudly), 呵 (*hē*, the sound of laughing), 嗬 (*hē*, expressing surprise), 嘿 (*hēi*, showing

exclamation), 哼(*hēng*, groan), 哄(*hōng*, roar), 轰(*hōng*, imitating the great bang of thunder or shelling), 吼(*hǒu*, howl), 呼(*hū*, cry out), 哗(*huā*, imitating the sound of flowing water; clamour), 话(*huà*, talk), 欢(*huān*, loud cheer), 唤(*huàn*, call out), 诙(*huī*, crack jokes).

--Some characters beginning with the consonant “w” have negative meaning or non-existence, such as, 无(*wú*, nothing), 勿(*wú*, do not), 毋(*wú*, not), 完(*wán*, finish), 亡(*wáng*, die), 忘(*wàng*, forget), 罔(*wǎng*, no), 惘(*wǎng*, feel frustrated), 伪(*wěi*, false), 未(*wèi*, not).

--Some characters beginning with the consonant “m” suggest obscurity, such as, 霾(*mài*, haze), 盲(*máng*, blind), 茫(*máng*, in the dark), 瞢(*mào*, dizzy), 昧(*mèi*, have hazy notions about), 蒙(*méng*, hazy), 梦(*mèng*, fancy), 懵(*měng*, muddled), 朦(*méng*, obscure), 迷(*mí*, be confused), 谜(*mì*, riddle), 眯(*mī*, slightly shut one’s eyes), 冥(*míng*, dark), 瞑(*míng*, dark), 暮(*mù*, dusk).

Sometimes, this set of words also suggest non-existence or smallness, such as, 靡(*mǐ*, not have), 渺(*miǎo*, tiny), 藐(*miǎo*, small), 蔑(*miè*, nothing), 泯(*mǐn*, vanish), 末(*mò*, end), 莫(*mò*, not), 没(*mò*, till the end), 歿(*mò*, die), 墓(*mù*, tomb).

-- Some characters beginning with the consonant “f” suggest negation, such as, 反(*fǎn*, reverse), 犯(*fàn*, violate), 非(*fēi*, not), 匪(*fěi*, not), 诽(*fěi*, speak ill of somebody), 菲(*fēi*, unworthy), 费(*fèi*, spend), 废(*fèi*, stop), 坟(*fén*, mound), 焚(*fén*, destroy by fire), 否(*fǒu*, not), 弗(*fú*, not).

If we delve into characters with other consonants, one can make further discovery concerning the relation between sound and meaning.

3.2 Pictographic iconicity

The above discussion has already proved that pictophonetic iconicity has played a very important role in developing the Chinese language. This is all the more true for us to find the role of pictographic iconicity in transforming the spoken form to the written form.

To start with, we need first to have a look of the following two pictures

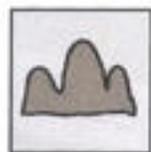


Figure 2 hill



Figure 3 bow

The two figures have shown there is likeness between the Chinese characters “山” (*shān*, hill) and “弓” (*gōng*, bow) and objects in the real world respectively. This can account for many words such as 日(*rì*, sun), 月(*yuè*, moon), 天(*tiān*, sky), 人(*rén*, man), 女(*nǚ*, woman), 大(*dà*, big), 火(*huǒ*, fire), 水(*shuǐ*, water), 目(*mù*, eye), 田(*tián*, farmland), 竹(*zhú*, bamboo), 羽(*yǔ*, feather), 雨(*yǔ*, rain), etc.

These basic signs are then widely used as an element carrying the generic meaning of a compound character. Look at the following sets of examples:

--Characters such as 号 (*háo*, yell), 叼 (*diāo*, hold in the mouth), 叫 (*jiào*, cry), 吐 (*tù*, vomit), 吓 (*xià*, threaten), 唬 (*hǔ*, intimidate), 呼 (*hū*, exhale), 吸 (*xī*, inhale), 咬 (*yǎo*, bite), 吞 (*tūn*, swallow), all have “口” (*kǒu*, mouth) as one of their elements, or radical, that is, they are all related to the activity of mouth, whether human or non-human..

--Characters such as 松 (*sōng*, pine tree), 杉 (*shān*, fir tree), 杨 (*yáng*, poplar tree), 柳 (*liǔ*, willow tree), 李 (*lǐ*, plum tree), 床 (*chuáng*, bed), etc. all have a generic element “木” to show that the meaning is related to a plant. In the same vein, characters such as 椅 (*yǐ*, chair), 桌 (*zhuō*, table), 柜 (*guì*, cupboard), 械 (*xiè*, tool), 棍 (*gùn*, rod), 棒 (*bàng*, stick), 扛 (*káng*, carry on the shoulder), 抬 (*tái*, raise), 朽 (*xiǔ*, rotten), 枯 (*kū*, withered), 荣 (*róng*, flourish), etc. are related to a piece of furniture or tool made of wood, or the state of the plant or wood.

--Characters such as 闩 (*shuān*, door bolt), 闭 (*bì*, close), 闯 (*chuǎng*, dash), 闱 (*wéi*, a side gate of an imperial palace), 间 (*jiān*, room), 闷 (*mèn*, shut oneself indoors), etc. have the generic element 门 (*mén*, door) on the two sides and thus all express the meanings are related to the door.

Based on the above understanding of the relation between meaning and shape, the Chinese characters can be classified into 189 or so categories and serve as the generic elements of characters.

3.3 Pictophonetic-graphic iconicity

As mentioned before, the traditional view of the Chinese linguistic scholarship held that a compound character in Chinese has two elements, the left element expressing meaning and the right element sound. However, section 2.3 has shown that it was Wang Songmei of the Song period who first systematically reported that the right element not only shows the character's pronunciation, but also its meaning, the specific meaning.

Just like Wang's classic example of “戈” (*jiān*, small), “浅” (*qiǎn*, shallow), “钱” (*qián*, money), “残” (*cán*, incomplete), “贱” (*jiàn*, cheap), and 笺 (*jiān*, small piece of paper), getting their specific meaning of “smallness” from the right element “戈”, we can also analyze the element 茎 (*jīng*, narrow and long stem) whose upper part only gives the generic meaning of “plant” or “grass”. The specific meaning of “narrow and long stem” is only to be decoded from the right or lower element. For instance, 胫 (*jìng*, narrow and long small leg), 径 (*jìng*, narrow and low path), 颈 (*jìng*, neck), 经 (*jīng*, narrow and long thread), 涇 (*jīng*, narrow and long stream) (Gu Zhengkun, 1995). More examples are shown as follows:

--叉 (*chā*, separate), 汊 (*chà*, tributary), 杈 (*chà*, trunk), 衩 (*chà*, underpants).

--垂 (*chuí*, hang down), 捶 (*chuí*, beat with a stick or fist), 槌 (*chuí*, stick), 锤 (*chuí*, beat with a hammer)

--低 (*dī*, low), 诋 (*dǐ*, slander), 底 (*dǐ*, bottom), 砥 (*dǐ*, root of a tree), 骶 (*dǐ*, lower part of the tail bone).

--框 (*kuāng*, door frame), 眶 (*kuàng*, socket)

--胧(*lóng*, dim), 聋(*lóng*, deaf), 矚(*lóng*, dusky), 籠(*lóng*, general/ sweeping).

4. Concluding remarks

To bring my paper to a close, I would like to summarize the following points:

First, from the discussion in section 2 and section 3, it has shown that the image iconicity, whether sound image or graph image, plays a very important role in the development of the Chinese language. To speak more exactly, the Chinese scholars, ancient and contemporary, have highly valued the study of iconicity.

Second, Saussure should be praised for his prediction of the birth of a new discipline, semiology, and had initiated the study of language as signs. However, limited by his period and his research goal, he restricted himself to the study of the relation between concept and sound pattern (Saussure, p.67). In contrast, most linguists today have acknowledged that there are 3 levels of language, semantics, lexicogrammar, and phonology/graphology. Language as sign should be studied at all the three levels. In this regard, Saussure's principle of arbitrariness or sound pattern-concept duality can exert only a very limited role. It cannot help us very much as it would be difficult for us to prove or disprove the occurrence of arbitrariness, in spite of the fact that we can find more examples to show the functioning of iconicity at various levels.

Third, Saussure talked about his first principle that the sign is arbitrary in different ways(pp.66-69). On one occasion, he said "No one disputes the fact that linguistic signs are arbitrary" (p.68); on another occasion, he said the word *arbitrary* "must not be taken to imply that a signal depends on the free choice of the speaker." If the choice is not free, then there must be some principles or guidance to justify choices of language users. Immediately following this view, Saussure argued that "the individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in a linguist community." Here, Saussure didn't bother to further explain how the sign had been established but he declared openly that "the signal is unmotivated". Consequently, Saussure's arbitrariness equals unmotivatedness. This is against the cognitive processes of human beings. Without motivation or social justification, how can one defend or explain one's proposal of signs? When a sign was going to be established, it always presupposed that one proposed signifier was better than another proposed signifier, otherwise it could never be a sign. It is true that we don't know what happened at the very beginning among our forefathers. One thing is clear, with iconicity, we can try our best to explore and discover some of the cues, but with arbitrariness one just sits there, one doesn't have to do anything, and one can never get the problem solved. At this point, Saussure didn't give much attention to non-European languages, such as the Chinese language. It gives one the impression that Saussure's theory is somewhat Euro-centered as he did not take into account all the languages in the world in general, and the Chinese language in particular. For another thing, Saussure said that "onomatopoeic and exclamatory words are rather marginal phenomena,...." From the findings of the Chinese language, Saussure didn't mention phonaesthetic iconicity and didn't see that they are by no means marginal in the Chinese language, to say nothing of the picto-graphic characters.

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