

Chinese Radicals

A radical is part of a Chinese character under which that character is listed in a Chinese dictionary.

A scholar named Xu Shen in the 2nd century AD first selected a few hundred recurring shapes in thousands of Chinese characters. He then wrote a dictionary by grouping Chinese characters under each shape.

Sixteen hundred years later in the year 1716 AD, the Qing Dynasty emperor Kang Xi commissioned a dictionary with over 47,000 Chinese characters. In this Kang Xi dictionary, there are 214 recurring shapes under which the characters are grouped. He called these recurring shapes 部首. 部 means 'section' and 首 means 'header'. Thus 部首 is translated as 'radical' or 'heading of a category'.

Some (but not all) of the radicals are complete characters in their own right. If you recognize the shape and meaning of a radical, it might give a hint of the meaning and pronunciation of the new character you are seeing for the first time.

Some radicals have more than one form:

For example, the radical for 人(*person*) comes in two forms:

人 亻

Under the first form 人, the following characters are examples:

人 person 令 order 会 meeting 众 crowd

Under the second form 亻, the following characters are examples:

他 he 伙 mate 伴 companion 你
you

The radical for 水 (water) also comes in two forms:

水 氵

Under the first form 水, the following characters are examples:

永 forever 汞 mercury 尿 urine 泉 spring

Under the form 氵

汁 juice 池 well 汗 sweat 江 river 汤 soup
海 sea 洋 ocean 浴 bathe