



INTRIGUING

CHINESE CHARACTERS 1



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YH MEW



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS



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Preface

The objective of this series is to provide a link between Chinese language and culture, so that learners will not only know the meanings of the characters, or the common phrases in which they appear, but also the cultural context of the characters. It is hoped that the series will motivate learners to take a keen interest in this language.

This series contains the most common 128 Chinese characters that will help both interested students and foreign learners to understand the Chinese language and mind. Although they are all 'radicals' 部首, the term has been deliberately avoided because it is rather technical. Instead, the term 'component' 偏旁 has been chosen in its place.

Most of the 128 characters can be used on their own to form phrases. A small number of them can only be used in word formation and almost never on their own.

The ancient characters are largely pictograms 象形, or picture-words, and are listed according to their simplified form 简体 in this series. The evolution of these characters can be seen through their different scripts over more than 3,000 years, namely 甲 (骨文) (oracle-bone script, the earliest known Chinese writing), 金 (文) (bronze script), 篆 (体) (seal script), 隶 (书) (official script in the Han dynasty), and modern-day regular script 楷 (书). The oracle-bone and bronze scripts invariably explain the original meanings of the Chinese characters concerned. Occasionally, it is necessary to mention the conventional characters 繁体 for elaboration.

The panels in each unit explain the word origin, the phrases in which the character appears, its use as a component in word formation and, where applicable, its cultural significance.

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八 bā (2 strokes)

甲

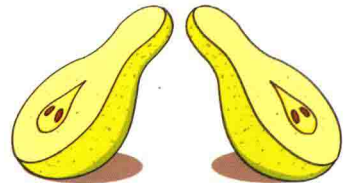
金

篆

隶

楷

The ancient character for 八, meaning 'eight', depicts two curved strokes in opposite directions. Its original meaning was 'to separate' or 'to divide'.



八 now means 'eight' and can be used in phrases, for example 八面 (bā miàn, 'eight sides') and 八月 (bā yuè, 'August'). In some phrases it also means 'lots of', as in 四面八方 (sì miàn bā fāng, 'in all directions') and 八成 (bā chéng, 'in all probability').



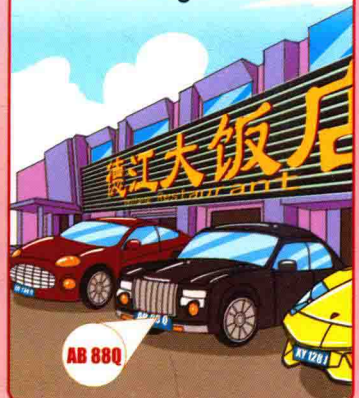
四面八方

八 can be used as a component in word formation, for example 分 (fēn, 'to divide'). In some cases, 八 is inverted and becomes 丷, as in 半 (bàn, 'half'). These words still retain the original meaning of 'separation'.



分

The number 八 ('eight') is an auspicious number in Chinese belief, because it sounds like 发 (fā), which means 'prosperous'. So car plates with the number, whether it is 8 or 128, for example, are generally very popular and cost a great deal.



Idioms and phrases

八拜之交 bā bài zhī jiāo

sworn brothers

八辈子 bā bèi zi

literally 'eight lifetimes', meaning 'a long time'

八卦新闻 bā guà xīn wén

gossipy news

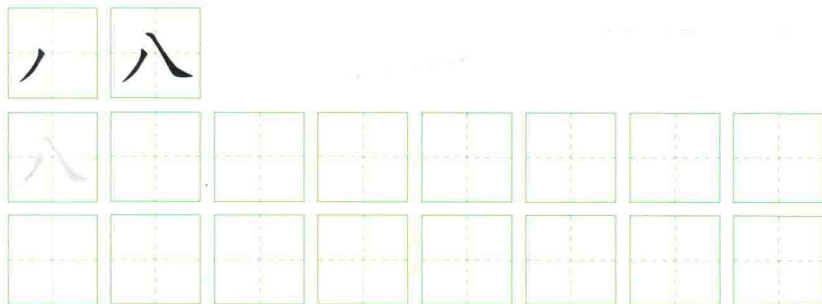
八字 bā zì

the year, month, day and hour of one's birth, which is supposed to have an influence on one's life and fortune

八字没一撇 bā zì méi yī piě

The word 撇 in Chinese penmanship refers to the left stroke 丿, which is the first of the two strokes in the word 八. The expression 八字没一撇 means that you have not even started taking the first step.

Try it!



白 *bái* (5 strokes)



甲



金



篆



隶

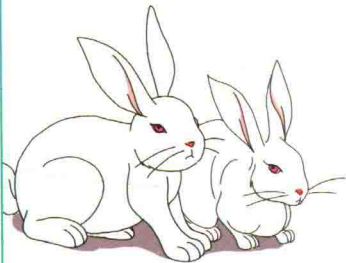


楷

The word 白 means 'white' or 'bright', amongst other meanings. Its pictogram depicts a grain of rice, which is generally white in colour.

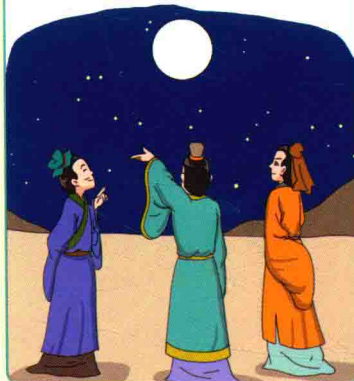


The word 白 is often used in phrases to mean 'white' or 'bright', for example 白天 (*bái tiān*, 'morning'), 白发 (*bái fà*, 'white hair') and 白兔 (*bái tù*, 'white rabbit'). It also means 'wasted', for example 白费 (*bái fèi*).



白兔

白 can also be used as a component in word formation, in different positions, often expressing the meaning of 'white' or 'clear', for example 泉 (*quán*, 'spring'), 皎 (*jiǎo*, 'white and bright') and 皓 (*hào*, 'white').



皎

In Chinese culture, red is generally preferred to white. The colour red represents happiness and good luck while white is the colour of mourning.



Idioms and phrases

白菜 **bái cài**

Chinese cabbage

白费力气 **bái fèi lì qì**

one has wasted one's strength and effort

白酒 **bái jiǔ**

This generally refers to the traditional Chinese wine made from sorghum or other cereals. It can also refer to white wine made from grapes.

白开水 **bái kāi shuǐ**

plain water for drinking

白茫茫 **bái máng máng**

(of fog or snow) a large area of whiteness

白色 **bái sè**

white colour

白事 **bái shì**

literally 'white matters', referring mainly to matters about funerals

白头偕老 **bái tóu xié lǎo**

an expression used to wish that a couple will be happily married till the end of their lives

白云 **bái yún**

white clouds

Try it!

丶	亅	白	白	白			
白							



(3 strokes)



甲



篆



隶



楷

The pictogram of the character 家 (jiā, 'house') represents 宀 (mián, 'house'). 宀 is always used as a component, never on its own. It is placed at the top of the word that contains it.



The word 安 (ān, 'safe') is made up of two parts. The top part 宀 depicts a house and the bottom part 女 (nǚ) means 'woman'. The word 安 therefore means 'a woman in a house', which was viewed as the safest place for her in ancient times.



安

Likewise, the character 灾 appears in the word 灾 (zāi, 'disaster'). Although 灾 contains the fire component 火 (huǒ), meaning a house on fire, its meaning is extended to refer to all types of man-made and natural disasters.



灾

The word 宗 (zōng, 'praying to the ancestors') contains the house symbol 宀 on top and the word 示 (shì, 'praying') below, meaning to pray in a house. Praying to the ancestors may also take place in a temple, where the ancestral tablets are kept.



宗

(2 strokes)



甲



金



篆

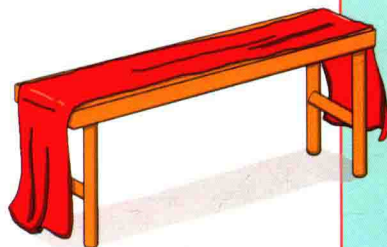


隶

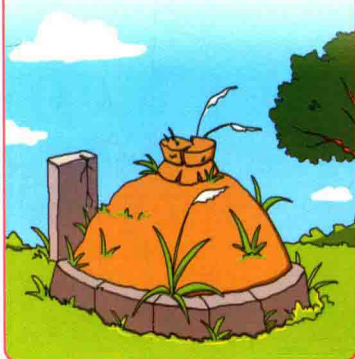


楷

The pictogram of the character 冂 resembles a piece of material used for covering things. It therefore conveys the meaning 'to cover' or 'to hide' or 'in the dark'.



The character can only be used in word formation, not on its own. Words that contain this component generally keep its original meaning, for example 冢 (zhǒng, 'grave') and 冤 (yuān, 'victimized' - since the facts are hidden).



冢

Since a hat covers the head, the word 冠 (guān), an old word for 'hat', also has the component 冂 on the top.



冠

The word 冥 (míng, 'dark') bears the 冂 component. The Chinese believed that when people died, they would go to the nether world 冥府 (míng fǔ).



冥府

贝 bèi (4 strokes)



甲



金



篆



隶



楷

贝 is the simplified form of the conventional character 貝. The pictogram looks like a cowrie (a type of seashell). In ancient China cowries were rare and therefore much valued. Since only the rich could afford to own them, they came to be associated with wealth. Later the cowrie even became one of the earliest forms of money.



贝 can be used in phrases, though there are not many in which it appears. The most common phrase is 贝壳 (bèi ké, 'seashell').

贝 is used mostly as a component in word formation, mainly on the left of a word. Most words with this component are related to 'treasure' or 'money', for example 财 (cái, 'wealth'), 账 (zhàng, 'accounts'), 购 (gòu, 'buy') and 货 (huò, 'goods').



购

Try it!

