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多音多义字 汉英字典

Chinese-English
Dictionary of
Polyphonic
Characters



华语教学出版社
Sinolingua

CHINESE- ENGLISH DICTIONARY OF POLYPHONIC CHARACTERS

多音多义字汉英字典

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INTRODUCTION

This dictionary is designed to provide students of modern standard Chinese with essential information on polyphonic characters.

The term “polyphonic character” is used here to refer to a Chinese character that has more than one reading or pronunciation, each with its particular associated meaning and/or area of usage. A typical example is the character 重. Depending on the context, this character is read either as zhòng, in which case it means “heavy, important”, or as chóng, in which case it means “to repeat; again; layers”. For example,

- zhòng : 很重 hěn zhòng (very) heavy
 重量 zhòngliàng weight
 重视 zhòngshì to regard as important
- chóng : 重新 chóngxīn again, anew, afresh
 重叠 chóngdié piled layer on layer

Another common example is 没. This character is read either as méi, signifying a negative, or as mò, meaning to sink; to disappear; for example:

méi : 没有钱 méiyǒu qián to have no money

mò : 沉没 chénmò to sink, drown

These relationships can be represented graphically as follows:

重	{	zhòng — heavy, important
		chóng — to repeat; again; layers
没	{	méi — not
		mò — to sink; to disappear

This situation contrasts with the simplest, ideal case, in which a given written character is associated with a single reading or pronunciation and with a single meaning, as in the following example:

高 — gāo — tall, high

The Chinese term for a character exhibiting this associated ambivalence in the sound and meaning dimensions is 多音多义字 duōyīn duōyì zì, “multi-sound multi-meaning character”, or, more loosely, 破音字 pòyīn zì, “split-sound character”. A convenient English equivalent is “polyphonic character”, or simply “polyphone”.

As can be discovered by consulting a character dictionary, polyphonic characters account for about five per cent of all Chinese

characters. However, their importance is much greater than that figure would suggest, because they include some of the most commonly used characters in the language; for example, 还, 没, 好, 长, 少, 得, 的, 了 are all polyphones.

The phenomenon of polyphony adds considerably to the difficulty of mastering written Chinese. In the case of a polyphonic character, the student not only has to learn the two (or more) different readings, but also must learn to recognise which of them is required in each particular situation. To provide assistance in coping with such difficulties is the principal aim of the present dictionary.

The problems posed by polyphony in Chinese have long been recognised, and consequently many dictionaries of polyphonic characters have been compiled. However, almost all such dictionaries are monolingual and designed for use by the Chinese themselves. Chinese-English dictionaries of polyphonic characters are rare. The present one is, as far as the compilers are aware, the first such bilingual dictionary based on the simplified characters and providing full information on pronunciation and usage in the written form of the modern standard Chinese language (普通话 pǔtōnghuà).

The simplification of the characters, together with certain other aspects of the language reforms that were implemented in the 1960s and '70s, had many repercussions on the phenomenon of polyphony. The reforms eliminated some former cases of polyphony (e.g., 徵, 乾); and they also, paradoxically, brought some new cases of polyphony into existence (e.g., 干, 斗). All such recent developments have been taken into account in compiling the present

dictionary, in order to provide a completely up-to-date guide to usage with respect to polyphony in modern standard Chinese.

Despite the care taken in its preparation, this dictionary will no doubt be found to be marred by errors, omissions, and other defects. The compilers will welcome any comments from readers in this regard and will seek to take them into account when preparing future editions.

DESIGN AND USE OF THE DICTIONARY

1. Reference standard and criteria for inclusion

On questions of pronunciation and orthographic usage in modern standard Chinese, one of the most widely accepted standard references is the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* 现代汉语词典 [*Modern Chinese Dictionary*] (Beijing: Commercial Press, revised edition 1996). The present dictionary follows that standard closely in all matters relating to polyphony, while differing from it substantially as regards specific content and arrangement (e.g., criteria for inclusion, layout of entries, example phrases and sentences, and provision of English renderings).

For the present purpose a character is recognised as a polyphone, and therefore as eligible to be considered for inclusion in this dictionary, if, according to the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian*, the following two conditions are satisfied:

- a) the character has two (or more) readings, *and*
- b) each of those readings has its own distinctive associated range of meaning and/or area of usage.

On these criteria, the characters 重 and 没, cited above, clearly qualify as polyphones.

On the other hand, the character 谁, despite having two read-

ings, *shéi* and *shuí*, does not qualify. This is because these two readings do not correspond to any distinction in meaning or usage; whichever of the two readings one uses, the meaning remains "who?". The phonetic ambivalence of 誰 is a case of free variation rather than of polyphony. To qualify it as a polyphone, a character's two readings must be associated with different meanings, or at least with different areas of usage. This situation can be clarified by citing parallel examples from English. Free variation is seen in the word *economic*, pronounced either [i:kə'nomik] or [ɛkə'nomik] with no distinction in meaning. Polyphony is seen in *read*, pronounced either [ri:d] (present tense) or [red] (past tense); also in *sow*, pronounced either [sou] "to plant" or [sau] "adult female pig".

There are a few borderline cases. An example is the character 血. It has the two readings *xiě* and *xuè*, both of which mean "blood". But despite this identity in meaning, the two readings are not freely interchangeable; the speaker/reader has little freedom to choose between them. The reading *xiě* is the appropriate one in 一滴血 *yì dī xiě* "a drop of blood", 流血 *liú xiě* "to bleed", and 血淋淋 *xiě lín lín* "dripping with blood". The reading *xuè* is required in 血球 *xuè qiú* "blood corpuscles", 血统 *xuè tǒng* "a blood lineage", and 血汗 *xuè hàn* "blood and sweat" (signifying "hard toil"). Generally, *xiě* is used in more straightforward, colloquial, non-technical words and contexts, while *xuè* is used in more formal, technical words and contexts, and in cases where the reference is figurative or poetic. This is, therefore, not a case of free variation; although the two readings of 血 have the same meaning, they corre-

spond to different areas of usage. Consequently, 卐 does qualify as a polyphone.

Rather different is the case of the character 一, which is read yì, yí, or yī, all with the same meaning ("one, unity, single"). As with 卐, the speaker or reader does not have free choice among the possible readings. However, in this case the choice is determined by purely phonological factors: the character is pronounced yì before a following tone 4, yí before tone 1, 2, or 3, and yī before a pause. Knowledge of this simple rule is all that is needed to ensure the correct pronunciation. Consequently, the character 一 is not regarded as a polyphone. Similar remarks apply for 不, whose two readings, bù and bú, are similarly determined by the phonological context.

Not all of the polyphones attested in modern standard Chinese are included in the present dictionary. Some are judged to be too rare, specialised, or archaic to deserve inclusion in a dictionary having a mainly practical objective. An example is the character 镐. It satisfies the primary defining criteria: when read gǎo, it refers to a kind of hoe or pickaxe; read hào, it is the name of the first capital of the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century B.C.). This character is nevertheless excluded from the dictionary on the grounds that the latter reading, hào, is too rare and specialised. Although 镐 is indeed a polyphone according to *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian*, it fails to meet the further criterion of practical usefulness.

A polyphonic character may also be excluded if either of its readings is limited to a regional dialect or to non-standard speech

that lacks wide currency, or if one of its two readings is exclusively classical or literary and therefore unfamiliar to most Chinese native speakers. An example of the latter situation is the character 噱, read both xué ("a joke") and jué ("to laugh"). The second reading/meaning is limited to literary usage, and that suffices to disqualify the character from inclusion.

On the other hand, even though one of the readings of a polyphonic character is exclusively dialect or exclusively literary, that character may still qualify for inclusion if the reading in question is sufficiently well known. For example, the character 约, normally read yuē, also has the dialect reading yāo when the meaning is "to weigh". The latter pronunciation is widely enough known and used to justify this character's inclusion in the dictionary. Again, the character 蛇, in addition to its usual reading shé ("snake"), has a second, literary reading yí. This literary reading is fairly well known because of its occurrence in a fixed four-character expression (成语 chéngyǔ), namely: 虚与委蛇 xūyǔ-wēiyí, meaning "to treat courteously but without sincerity". This justifies the character's inclusion in the dictionary.

Such judgements admittedly involve an element of arbitrariness, but this is largely unavoidable. Most dictionary compilers face the same problem of striking a balance between the competing ideals of comprehensiveness and practical usefulness. As a result of applying the above principles, the present dictionary contains a total of 386 polyphonic characters.

2. Format of the entries

Each of the dictionary entries conforms to a standard format, whose principal features are illustrated in the following example:

堡	bǎo bǔ pù
bǎo	a fortress, walled village 堡垒 bǎolěi a fortress, bastion 堡垒 bǎozhài a fort, camp
bǔ	[a component of certain place-names] 堡子 bǔzi <dial.> a town or village surrounded by an earth wall; a village 吴堡 Wúbǔ a place in Shaanxi Province
pù	[a component of certain place-names] 马家堡 Mǎjiāpù a town in Hebei Province

The entry heading (in larger type) consists of the polyphonic character in question, in this case 堡, followed by its two (or more) readings, in this case bǎo, bǔ and pù. The reading judged to be the more familiar, common, or useful is listed first; in this case the relatively well-known bǎo precedes the rarer bǔ and pù. (Less clear-cut cases are discussed below.)

The remainder of the entry then treats the different readings in turn. For each reading (repeated as a subheading at the left), the relevant information is presented in two sections. The first section sets out the meaning(s) associated with the reading — in the case of bǎo, “a fortress, walled village”. The second section presents a

selection of “compounds”, or multi-character words, in which the character has the reading/meaning in question—in this case the words 堡垒 *bǎolěi* and 堡垒 *bǎozhài*. Such words are listed in alphabetical order of their *pinyin* spelling. For clarity, the two languages are printed in different fonts. While English is in regular roman font, *pinyin* transcription of Chinese is in sans serif font, with the readings of the polyphonic character in bold.

The following is an example of a more complicated entry:

都 *dōu dū*

dōu ① all, altogether: 他们都走了。Tāmen *dōu* zǒu le.

They have all left.// 他都知道。Tā *dōu* zhīdao. He knows it all.// 都是你，我们才误了火车。Dōu shì nǐ, wǒmen cái wù le huǒchē. It's all because of you that we missed the train.

② even: 他待她比亲爹都好。Tā dài tā bǐ qīn diē *dōu* hǎo. He treats her even better than her own father.

③ already: 都十点了，你还不走。Dōu shí diǎn le, nǐ hái bù zǒu. It's already ten o'clock and you still haven't left.

dū ① a capital city

② a large city

③ [a surname]

都市 *dūshì* a metropolis

首都 *shǒudū* a national capital

Here, each reading of the head character, 都, represents three more or less distinct meanings, distinguished by the use of circled numbers. The sequence in which these meanings are listed under each reading has no particular significance; nor does it have any bearing on the sequence of the compounds that follow, these being simply in alphabetical order.

For the first reading, dōu, each of the three meanings is provided with one or more illustrative sentences. These are designed to illustrate how 都, when read dōu, can serve as a single-character word in a phrase or sentence. Such example phrases or sentences (in a variety of written styles ranging from colloquial to formal) are provided for any words, other than nouns and adjectives, for which clarification of usage seems called for. They are provided not only for single-character words (as in the above sample entry) but often for compounds as well. As the entry shows, such illustrative material is preceded by a colon; and where two or more examples are given, they are separated from each other by the sign “//”.

In some cases, one of the readings of a polyphonic character is attested only in a compound, which makes it pointless (or even impossible) to assign a corresponding meaning to the character alone. An example is the character 卜 when read bo: this is found only in the word luóbo, “radish”. In such cases the dictionary entry shows the reading followed directly by the compound in question, thus:

bo 萝卜 luóbo the radish

Some entries include a section headed *Polyphonic compound*. A typical example of a polyphonic compound is the combination 重犯. Here both readings of the character 重 are possible, so that the combination represents two different words, namely zhòngfàn "a person guilty of a serious crime" and chóngfàn "to repeat a crime or mistake". Normally the ambiguity of a polyphonic character is resolved as soon as one recognises the compound in which it occurs. However, in a polyphonic compound the ambiguity remains and can be resolved only by examining the wider context. For this reason, polyphonic compounds are usually provided with illustrative phrases or sentences.

3. Further notational conventions

Except in the cases of 一 and 不, the *pinyin* transcriptions show underlying forms. It is assumed the reader will apply the familiar rules relating to a succession of third-tone syllables, and to suffixation of 儿 *ér*. Thus, 我得去 is transcribed as Wǒ děi qù, which is to be read as Wó děi qù; and 一点儿 appears as yìdiǎnr, to be read as yìdiǎr.

Where an alternative reading is allowable (i.e., where there is phonetic free variation), this is indicated in parentheses; for example,

暖和 nuǎnhé (or -huo)

Alternative character forms are similarly noted. For example, the entry for 扁 gives the second meaning under the reading biǎn thus:

② (= 匾) a horizontal name-plate

This signifies that 扁 may be replaced by 匾 in cases where it is read biǎn and means “a horizontal name-plate”.

A meaning is often specified by giving a series of two or more near-synonyms separated by commas; e.g., “to exhaust, use up”. A meaning’s area of application is sometimes clarified by extra words in parentheses; e.g., “to raise (livestock)” and “(of earth, skin, etc.) cracked in a tortoise-shell pattern”.

Occasionally, slightly divergent but closely related meanings are given within a single definition, separated by a semicolon; examples are “from; since” and “foul smelling; undesirable, unwelcome”.

The sign “ = ” leads from a literal meaning to its corresponding figurative or extended meaning; e.g., “blood and sweat = hard toil”. The second meaning is a figurative extension of the first.

As noted above, a circled number marks the beginning of a new and distinct meaning definition, thus:

① to take part in

② to consult

A colon indicates that what follows is an illustration of what precedes; for example:

to pour boiling water on: 冲茶 chōng chá to brew tea

Words in square brackets explain the function of a character or compound, usually in terms of linguistic categories, rather than defining its meaning. For example, “[a surname]” signifies that the character in question can serve as a surname, rather than having the