

Teaching Chinese Characters with Etymology

by Hsiao-chih Chang

- Knowing how characters are formed or created would make students better understand the characters and more interested to learn them.
- Thus make learning characters more easily.
- Gaining relevant cultural knowledge that is related to the characters.

Teaching Methods

- Instructor's introduction on *liushu* 六書 theory but focusing only on first four categories—pictographic 象形, self-explanatory 指事, associative compound 会意, and picto-phonetic compound 形声 (There will be 2 examples for each category in this presentation).
- Student pair work analyzing some common characters.
- Student individual presentation on certain common characters.
- Occasional quiz analysis of certain common characters.

Pictographic 象形字


● 井 井



About 井

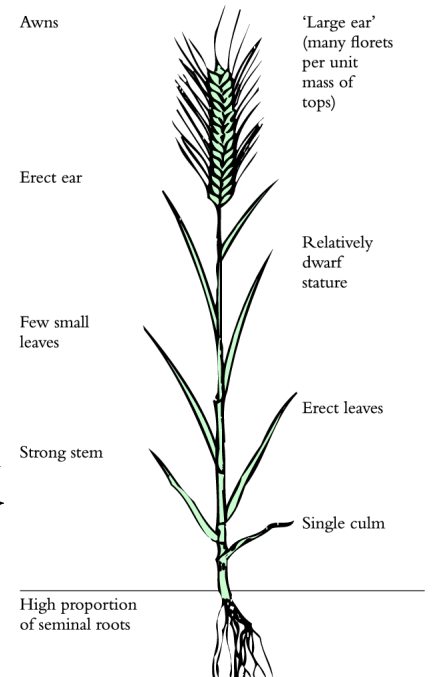
- The 井 character may not look like a water well that people are more familiar with today or even ones found from ancient times.
- China is considered to be the first culture to construct water wells.
- The oldest water well in the world found so far is from the *Hemudu* Culture 河姆渡文化 (5000-3000BC) . The wooden structured well does appear to be similar to 井.

Pictographic-2

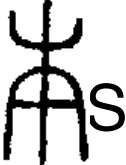
● 来 (來)  B


- Evidence shows wheat was introduced to the Loess Plateau around 5000 years ago. (甘肃省民乐县 1985)

麥 “wheat” and 來 “come” used to be the same character, this is why the oracle bone script of 來 looks like wheat.



Self-explanatory 指事字

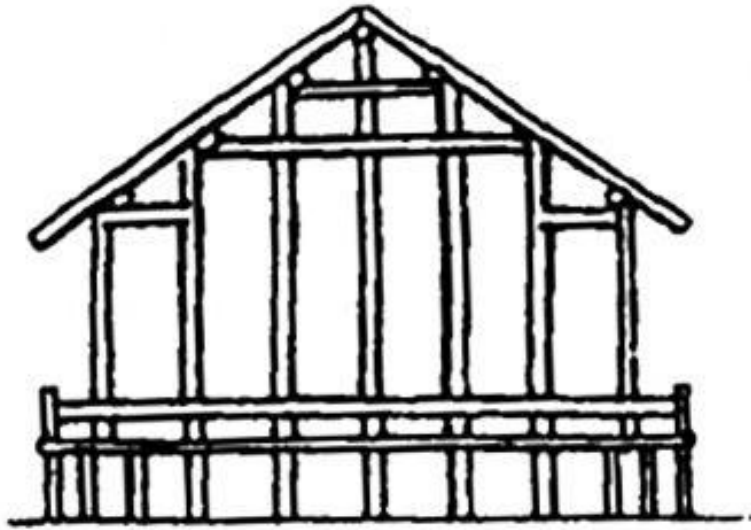
● 本  root of a tree

● 末  treetop

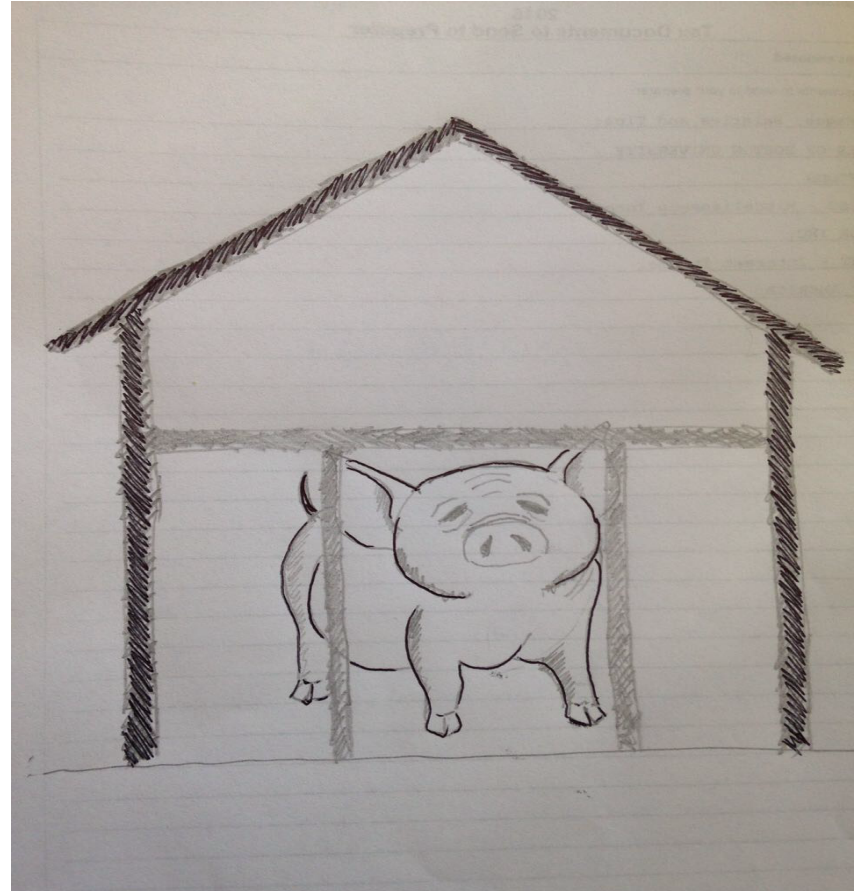
- 木 + 一 (一 shows the part of 木 “tree” that is referred to)

Associative Compound 会意字

● 家  从宀从豕会意



河姆渡遗址干栏式住居



About 家

- 宀 means house; 豕 “pig” represents livestock.
- Generally, it is hard to imagine why pigs/domestic animals are under the roof of 家.
- *Hemudu* Culture’s long, stilt houses answered the question: people used to live on the upper level while the livestock were kept below, thus people and domestic animals were living under the same roof, showing the importance of livestock.

Associative Compound-2

● 蚕 (𧈧) 从天从虫会意

- Silkworm is the only insect being domesticated by human. This domestication took place in China over 5000 years ago—a gift from God/Mother Nature.

Picto-phonetic Compound 形声字

• 锻炼 (鍛煉)

- 从金段声；从火束声
- Extend to mean “to do exercises”



Picto-phonetic Compound-2

- 琢磨 从玉豕声；从石麻声
- Extend to mean “to ponder”

