Chinese Characters

An Ideographic Approach, Volume 1

D Rajeev

The subsequent volumes of this book may be downloaded from ChineseIdeographs.com
Understanding the Chinese Language

Evolving with any civilization or a group of humans is a shared consciousness of concepts whose meaning is readily perceived by those belonging to the group. The manifested form of these concepts carry with them the characteristic of that group – the unique process of evolution the collective consciousness of theirs underwent. Hence, the manifested form of concepts, be they beauty, goodness or strength, differ from civilization to civilization.

Language is a layer of symbols over such a collective consciousness. Mechanisms in this shared human psyche ascribe to concepts in it sound-symbols – sound forms capable of evoking in the consciousness the concepts they represent – the words of a spoken language. Spoken forms tend to quickly deviate from a state of symbolic purity, in which each word is a distinct sound-symbol for a concept. By phonetic decay, for instance – words spoken in quick succession coalesce together to form new words.

A phonetic script, being merely a system of transcribing the spoken form, is incapable of preserving the symbolic purity of language. As the spoken form deviates, the written form deviates as well.

Chinese, on the other hand, has a script that is, in itself, symbolic in nature – its visual form directly evokes in the consciousness the meaning it symbolizes, the concept over which it forms a symbolic layer. Such a system of writing ties the language tightly with the collective consciousness, preserves the symbolic purity of language, and increases its potency as a mechanism of exchanging thought. The evolution of the language becomes directly driven by the evolution of the collective consciousness.

Visual Symbolism

Symbolic forms having layers of meaning, any interpretation of a character’s visual form can only serve as a guide to understanding it. The accurate meaning it represents has to be perceived consciously – through direct and objective experience of the meaning its visual form evokes. Layers of meaning can be consciously
uncovered, the symbol conveying a deeper meaning at each level.

The meaning conveyed by a symbol depends on the context in which it occurs. The hand, appearing in its reduced form 扌, in the characters 打 (dǎ, hit), 按 (àn, press), 採 (cǎi, gather), etc., symbolize action. The same symbol in 拜 (bài, to honor) shows two hands brought together in a gesture of respect. The role the component plays in 拿 (ná, take) is slightly different – in it, 手 (shǒu) 'hand' is modified with 合 (hé) 'combine' to symbolize the fingers closing together to take something.

Just as a character is more than the sum of its parts, a phrase carries meaning beyond the individual meaning of its parts – that is, how a character lends to the meaning of a phrase depends on the context in which it occurs. The form 才, in itself, symbolizes talent, ability, activity, etc., in a purely abstract manner, depicting an active principle, symbolized by a vertical line, breaking through a hindrance. The same form, when modified by the character 剛 (gāng, firm), in 剛才, conveys the meaning ‘just now’ – the energy associated with the active principle, symbolized by 才, being firm 剛, strongly manifesting, when it has just acted.

Figure 1. The ancient form of 才, depicting an active principle, symbolized by a vertical line, breaking through a hindrance – talent, ability, etc.

Sound symbolism and phonetic components

The sound-forms of Chinese characters evoke in the mind of the listener the concept or the meaning it symbolizes. The sound 空, as it is intoned in Chinese, with a high level tone, produces a sound similar to one created when an empty vessel is hit, evoking in the mind a feeling of emptiness and conveying, symbolically, the meaning of the character – empty, hollow, a space, etc. The sound 安 (ān), evoking a sense of tranquil stillness, conveys the character’s meaning – quiet, still, peaceful. Sound symbolism of this nature exists in all Chinese characters and meditating on the sound form of a character can help fully understand its
meaning, and, conversely, to accurately understand its intoned form.

Chinese characters are intoned in one of five different tones which make their sound form symbolic to a greater degree – allowing the meaning to evolve from the movement of intoned sound as well.

- **First tone**, (陰平, literal meaning: yin level) – a steady, high sound as in 空(kōng).
- **Second tone**, (陽平, literal meaning: yang level) – sound rises from mid-level to high as in 人(rén).
- **Third tone** (上聲, literal meaning: up tone) – the pitch falls a little and then rises as in 好(hǎo).
- **Fourth tone**, falling tone (去聲, literal meaning: leaving tone) – as in 任(rèn), where the pitch descends sharply from high to low.
- **Fifth tone or zeroth tone** (輕聲, literal meaning: light tone), - intoned with a neutral sound as in 的(de).

Figure 2. In the ancient form of 在, 才(cái) combines with 土 (tǔ) 'land' to form 在(zài). The place 土 where the activity 才is happening – at, in, on.

A component of a character is called *phonetic* if its pronunciation hints at the pronunciation of the character – as 才(cái) does in 在(zài). A phonetic component lends to the symbolism of the character through its sound-form. Not all characters have a phonetic component, and, in the majority of cases, the phonetic component is signific as a visual form as well.
How to use this book

Chinese, contrary to popular belief, is the simplest language to learn. It has no complex grammar, the words are simple ideograms, each carrying an inherent visual logic which makes its meaning apparent from its written form, and the symbolic sound-forms allow for the pronunciation to be easily internalized. This completely obviates the need for rote memorization often needed when mastering the vocabulary of a new language.

If taught scientifically, the student can pick up a vocabulary of over 3000 characters, enough to read most newspapers with a reasonable level of comprehension, in two to three months time.

The focus of this book is to help you recognize the 100 most frequent Chinese characters, and, in the process, leave you with a better appreciation of the symbolic nature of the script, and an understanding of how it may be leveraged as a learning tool.

Learning to write Chinese requires focused effort and practice, and is beyond the scope of this book. The author is of the opinion that learning to write is best postponed till the student has had a reasonable level of familiarity with the language. Chinese can easily be input in a word editor, through tools such as Microsoft’s IME for Chinese, by entering in English the pronunciation of the character.

Organization of each page

On each page is given a character, its ancient forms, its pronunciation and an explanation of how the ideogram symbolizes its meaning.

The ancient forms

The three boxes on the right show the ancient forms of the character.

The top-most box shows how the character was written around 1800 B.C. – 1100 B.C. Samples of writing from this era have come down to us through engravings on tortoise shells and ox scapulas used during divination ceremonies. Parallel rows of holes would be bored in the bone, the question would be raised to the oracle, and a heated bronze rod applied at each hole. From the crack patterns formed on the shell by heat, the oracle’s answer would be divined. Both the question and the
answer would later be engraved on reverse side the bone used. For this reason, writing of this era is often referred to as “the oracle bone script.”

The box in the middle-right of the page carries samples of the character as written around 1100 B.C. – 200 B.C. Samples of this writing, referred to as “the bronze script,” reached us through thousands of bronze vessels and articles with inscriptions of major events.

At the bottom-right are given samples of seal script writing dating from around 200 B.C to 200 A.D.

While the surface forms of characters have undergone considerable evolution, the idea behind them, what the characters symbolize, has, for most part, remained the same.

Some changes in forms reflect enriched thought; others are the result of corruptions that set in over time. A major of set of corruptions occurred when a tyrant ordered a burning of all manuscripts in early 3rd century B.C. A standardization of the script followed shortly, ironically, under supervision of the minister who had instigated the king to burn the manuscripts. Attempts at rectification in the later centuries, the most ambitious among which was the etymological dictionary ‘Shuo Wen’ of 2nd century A.D., were partly successful. Archeological data, a lot of which emerged in the 20th century, presented here among the bronze script and oracle bone script forms, enable us to see how the characters were originally formed. Seal script forms include characters which followed the standardization of 3rd century B.C. In this book the seal script forms presented are carefully chosen – and the corrupted variants are avoided, unless they serve a pedagogical purpose.

An interesting account of the language’s evolution can be found in Karlgren’s “Sound and Symbol in Chinese.”

**Studying a character**

The reader is urged to actively engage himself in the learning process. When learning a character, start by reading its ideographic interpretation. Then, explore the ancient forms given, paying attention to how the ideographic interpretation applies to the ancient forms, and how the visual form evolved with time. Actively analyzing this would be sufficient to imprint the character in your memory. When learning, there is little need to try to memorize the modern written form – it
would be sufficient to develop an understanding of how the form symbolizes its meaning, and of how it evolved.

Each character can allow for different ideographic interpretations, so actively explore the ancient forms, and try to come up with your own interpretations.

The sound of Chinese characters are symbolic. That is, the sound evokes in the mind the meaning suggested by the character. This symbolic quality can be leveraged to effortlessly learn the pronunciation of the characters: Intone each character, repeatedly, with a clam mind, till you develop an intuitive feel for how the sound form brings out the character’s meaning. Attempt to consciously perceive the sense conveyed by the sound. Correlate the meaning you perceive evolving from the sound form, with the meaning evolving from the visual form. When the same character has multiple pronunciations, they are symbolic layers over two closely related concepts symbolized by the visual form.

The pronunciation of each character is given in Pinyin, a system for writing Chinese characters in the Roman alphabet. The reader who is not familiar with the system is urged to avail any one of the several free multimedia resources available online, or interact with a Chinese speaker to understand tones and the pinyin system.

A system of color codes is used in the book to help you remember the tones. Characters in the first tone, a high metallic tone, are shown in a metallic silver color. For the second tone, the color of fire, yellow-orange is used - the sound rises in it as flames do. Third tone characters are shown in green, the color of plants, of wood – as the sound bends, as wood does, in the third tone. For the fourth tone, a falling tone, a heavy, deep shade of blue is used. The fifth tone or the neutral tone is colorless. Visualizing the characters in their corresponding tone-color, as you learn them, would help retain the tone in memory.

Different characters having the same pinyin phoneticization often differ subtly in the way they are actually pronounced, in factors such as the stress given to a particular sound. The same character when carrying different shades of meanings are intoned in ways that slightly differ to bring out the meaning through intoned sound. The reader will develop a natural intuition for the right way to pronounce the characters, and of the role played by the tones, as he progresses in study, through the method outlined here.
Recommended resources

The electronic dictionary *Wenlin* is one of the best available resources for a student of Chinese and is highly recommended.

Essential for internalizing a vocabulary is seeing the words used in various contexts. Once the reader has gained a basic vocabulary, he is encouraged to start reading Chinese texts with Wenlin’s mouse-over translation facility.

For an introduction to the language and an outline of grammar, the book “Teach Yourself Chinese” published by McGraw Hill is recommended.

To learn to write Chinese characters, Johan Björkstén’s "Learn to Write Chinese Characters" is recommended, together with Wenlin’s *Stroke Box tool*, which animates the stroke order of each character.
Sun, day.

An active energy source, represented by a dot  ⋅ , manifesting in space  ○ . The ancient form of the character resembles the Egyptian hieroglyph for the sun:  ☀ (pronounced ra).

The evolution from  ○ to  ☉ could have been influenced by the introduction of the brush as a writing tool, which made lines easier to draw than circles.
One, single, whole, symbol for the number ‘1’.

A symbolic representation of unity, one. According to the Shuo Wen, — symbolizes the primordial unity from which emerged the Heaven, the Earth and the myriad of things, and hence the meaning ‘whole.’

The Shuo Wen is a traditional etymological dictionary written in the 2nd century A.D. The earliest extant copy of the work is from 987 A.D.
The number 2.

ー repeated twice, symbolizing the number 2.

The number of Earth（地之數）, according to the Shuo Wen.
Three.

— repeated three times, symbolizing the number 3.

The Way of Heaven, Earth and Man (天地人之道), according to the Shuo Wen.
White, plain, clear.

The ancient form was the picture of a silkworm cocoon - clear, plain and white in color. The character for silk fabric 帛(bó) was once written 宓 with 巾(jīn, the picture of a cloth) underneath 甲, a silkworm cocoon. In today’s writing, 甲 is abstracted to 白.

A reinterpretation, based on the modern form, is that the character shows a ray emerging from the rising sun 日, suggesting the meanings plain, clear, etc.

Note: The form 巾(jīn, 巾, 亻巾) is said to derive from the image of a kind of cloth worn by men in ancient China as a pendant waist ornament.

“佩巾也從門 | 象系也凡巾之屬皆從巾” – Shuo Wen
Spoon, ladle.

Picture of a spoon and something contained (indicated by the 丶).

Measure words are classifiers used to define the measure of a noun as in: a drop of honey, twenty grains of rice, three pieces of cake, four spoons of water. In Chinese wherever a noun is preceded by a number or a demonstrative, a measure word comes in between. 勺 is a measure word indicating a capacity of one centiliter.
A grammatical particle similar to ‘s in English.

To make plain 白 a relationship of subordination- as in a ladle and something contained 勺. The construct ‘A 的’ carries the meaning ‘having the property A’. This sense evolves from a different interpretation of the same form: to give focus to or make apparent 白 the contained property of something 勺. In some older forms, the component on the left is not 白 but 日(rì, sun), and the character conveyed the sense ‘to shine light on what is contained.’
Stop, halt, detain.

A foot, not moving, conveying the sense: stop, halt, stay, restrain, etc.

The precise meaning conveyed by 止, when occurring as a component in other characters, depends on the context. It often represents an action associated with the foot – standing, movement, etc.
Upright, correct, precisely, to rectify.

A superior force, the heavens (represented in the modern form as — and in certain ancient forms through the symbol for above —), acting to restrain 止 (or put a stop 止 to) unrighteous elements. In ancient writing, heaven was symbolized as the extent of space — above man 正.

— (above) and 正 (heaven) are explained in greater detail in the pages that follow.

Alternate interpretation: To stop 止, precisely at the boundary —, without entering a forbidden region — upright, correct.
Dawn, early, sometime ago.

The vertical line represents the skies, the heavens (of yang, active nature), and the horizontal line the earth (of yin, passive nature). The ideograph shows the sun breaking through the horizon, where the skies cross the earth 十.
Certainly, for sure, right, true, is, the verb ‘to be.’

To stand 止 facing the rising sun 早, witnessing things being brought to light – certainty, reality, is. The feeling evoked when one witnesses the sun emerging out of the horizon, bringing reality to light.

Note: An ancient variant of the character is: 从日, 从正, 會意. What was 正 controlled at 日 sun’s light... truthfulness, reality, existence" --Wieger.

Shuo Wen, describing the character for sun 日, says: “實也。太陽之精不虧。从口一。象形。 凡日之屬皆从日。” "True, real, actual. The energy of the sun does not wane... Pictorial representation.”
No, not.

According to the traditional dictionary Shuo Wen, 不 is the picture of a bird soaring, with the skies indicated by the horizontal line — above. A bird soaring in the skies, which cannot be brought down (鳥飛上翔不下来也从一一猶天也象形). By extension, something not present, or a concept which cannot be captured. In certain seal script and bronze script forms, the symbol 亅, the ancient form for the character ‘above,’ can be seen. An alternate interpretation, based on the oracle bone script forms, is that the ideogram shows an uprooted plant, conveying the sense ‘to root out, to negate a notion.’
子

Child, son, offspring, person.

Picture of an infant with the head and body visible, the legs are covered by swaddling clothes.
When pronounced *le*, the character indicates a new situation or a completed action. Pronounced *liǎo*, it means to *comprehend, be able to, to tie up and finish*, etc.

Picture of an infant in swaddling clothes. *Le* and *liǎo* are sounds made by an infant. The picture of the new born infant is symbolic of a new situation, ‘that what has come to birth.’ *Liǎo* carries the sense *to give birth to, to create*, and, by extension, *be able to*. When a concept takes form or is *given birth to* in one’s mind, one comprehends.
A person, human, a man.

A man bowing, seen from the side. 人 is often reduced to 四 when occurring as a component. Man “embodies the nature of heaven and earth; is most precious (天地之性最貴者),” says the Shuo Wen.

In some ancient forms such as 歳, the man is shown bowing to the heavens, symbolizing how humans should be – conforming to the principles of heavens.
Hand.

The picture of a hand with five fingers. As a component, 手 is abbreviated to 扌 and often signifies action. The precise sense conveyed depends on the context in which the symbol occurs.
A weapon, a kind of halberd used in ancient China.

The picture of a halberd.
I, me, the self.

A hand holding a halberd, asserting the self – I, me.
Talent, potential, faculty, gift, only then.

The character abstracts the notion of an active principle, symbolized a vertical line, breaking through a hindrance – potential, the ability to do work, faculty. In the construct A才B, the character conveys the sense ‘only then.’ B occurs only when A acts, when the active principle associated with A makes a breakthrough.

When occurring before a stative verb, 才 conveys the sense ‘better than’ – breaking-through the state indicated, and, hence, ‘better than.’

**Note:** The Shuo Wen interprets the character as a sprout that has just broken through the ground. “艸木之初也。从丨上貫一，將生枝葉。一，地也。凡才之屬皆从才。 徐鍇曰：上一，初生歧枝也。下一，地也” – Shuo Wen
Soil, earth, clay, land, crude.

A mound of potter’s clay – earth, soil, clay, land, and, by extension, crude, unsophisticated, native. As a component, 土 signifies *locale*, *place*, etc., the precise sense depending on context.
At, in, on, be, indicating an action in progress.

The place of activity; where the activity is happening – at, in, on. A state (symbol interpreted as a place in time) with activity in progress.

Note that (cái) is both phonetic and signific in this character.
Again, both, and, furthermore, in addition, on the other hand.

Picture of a hand with three fingers shown. 又 abstracts the idea ‘also in hand is’ – furthermore, in addition.
Meat, flesh, muscle.

Picture of a strip of meat.
Have, there is.

A strip of meat held in the hand – have, there is. Symbol used to represent the idea in possession of.
Also, too, as well, either.

The picture of a container, a receptacle, conveying the sense to include, contain, etc. From the notion of inclusion evolves the meanings also, as well, etc.

In classical Chinese 也 was used as a delimiter at the end of a sentence or a clause.
He. The third person pronoun. In classical Chinese, the same character was used for *he*, *she*, and *it*. The single sound tā is still used for ‘he’ 他, ‘she’ 她, and ‘it’ 它.

From 亻 (rén, a person) and 也 (yě, also) – another person.
Mouth, a gate, an entrance. A measure word for mouthfuls, wells, etc.

Pictorial representation of an opening or a mouth.
Offend, interfere, attack, invade, trunk, stem.

The picture of a *trunk* or a tree *stem* used as a battering ram – hence the meanings *offend, attack*. 
Above, over, top, previous.

The ancient form of the character comprised of a short line above a longer fundamental line. This form is retained as a component in modern characters, and represents the heavens, the notion above, etc.

The meaning ‘previous’ may be understood by thinking of time as a flowing river. What occurred ‘higher’ in its course, then, is what occurred in the past.
Acrid, bitter, suffering.

Picture of an upside down man underneath the ancient form of 上 (representing the heavens). A man is in suffering when his will runs contrary to that of the Heavens.

屰 (nì), ə ə ə, the picture of an upside down man, has the meanings opposition, reverse, not in alignment with (不順也). The character will be explained in further detail later on.
Words, speech, language.

Individual will or intent (symbolized here by 辛) expressed through words 口 (the mouth).

Chinese philosophy held that man must follow Heaven; that any individual intent could be against the Will of the Heavens. Hence, 辛 was chosen to represent the individual will or intent.
Xíng: Movement, to go, to travel, functioning, acceptable.

Picture of a crossroad, indicating movement. A thing that moves is functioning, and, hence, is acceptable.

Háng: A line, a row, a course. 行業(hang yè): trade, profession.
Component suggesting the meanings *move, go, path, journey, movement, etc.* 步 now only occurs as a component in characters and no single syllable word currently exists.

Often reduced to 步 in modern writing, the component indicates a path taken, a journey, movement, etc. – the meanings which are conveyed through the image of a foot taking a path (note that the oracle bone form of the character was composed of 止 inside 行).
This, here.

Words 言 referring to something met on a path 这 – here, this.
Zhōng: Center, middle, interior. Zhòng: Hit a target, attain, be hit by, on the dot.

A rod, ornate in certain ancient forms, passing through the exact center of a ring.
Immense, big, vast, great.

Heaven, Man and Earth form a trinity in Chinese philosophy. Heaven is Immense, The Earth is Immense, Man is equally Immense (天大地大人亦大), says the Shuo Wen. This is said to be the rationale in choosing the human image to symbolize ‘immense’.

As a mnemonic: A man with arms outstretched to say “big”.
Come, arrive, bring, crop up.

Picture of an awned wheat plant. Grains were believed to come from the Heavens - brought down from the Heavens through farming. Hence the meanings *come, bring, crop up*, etc.
huò 或

Perhaps, probably, maybe, either.. or.

Stability is achieved through adherence to virtuous ways and a territory 固 merely guarded through walls — and weapons 戈 is bound to be unstable. Hence the association of the symbol to the meanings — probably, perhaps, maybe, or.
**Surround.** Not to be confused with □(kǒu, 'mouth'). □(wéi) appears only as a component.

The meaning is suggested by the form— to surround, encompass.
 Obstinate, firm.

古 is phonetic and carries the sense ‘established.’ Something established 古, further fenced 回 (wéi, 'surround'), and not subject to change: obstinate, firm, assuredly.
Ten.

In Chinese cosmology, the universe is thought to be ten-directional. The symbol 十, in an abstract manner, represents all directions. The ancient form 十 has a disc representing expanse in all directions other than the above and the below which are symbolized by the vertical line. It being difficult to carve out a disc-shaped form on bone surfaces could explain why the oracle bone script characters show merely a vertical line.
Ancient, age-old.

From 十 (shí, ten) over 口 (kǒu, mouth). That which has passed through ten 十 mouths 口 - a tradition dating back ten generations.

Note:“故也。从十、口(卩)。識前言者也。凡古之屬皆从古。
臣鉉等曰：十口所傳是前言也。” – Shuo Wen
Obstinate, firm.

`古` is phonetic and carries the sense ‘established.’ Something established 古, further fenced 囗 (wéi, surround), not subject to change: obstinate, firm, assuredly.
Bamboo.

Two twigs of bamboo. As a component, 竹 is often abstracted to 和 symbolizes things made of bamboo, ‘to count,’ etc. The meaning ‘to count’ derives from that twigs were used during the earliest periods to keep count, and later abacuses made of bamboo were used for the purpose.
A measure word.

固 gù is phonetic and also conveys the meaning ‘a unit’. 個 gè is the measure word used with 人 rén. 一個人: a person. 這個人: this person. The word ‘個人’ carries the meaning individual, personal – meanings which directly evolve from the sense carried by 固.

A closely related form is 箇 (gè) which functions as a non-specific measure word - the number 竹 of individual units 固.
To, until, to the point of, arrive, reaching up to, extremely.

The image of a bird that, “bending up its wings, darts straight towards the earth.” 鳥飛從高下至地也從一- 猶地也象形( A bird flying from a height downwards, 一 represents the ground), says the Shuo Wen.

Alternate interpretation: Picture of an arrow that is just about to hit its target on the ground – to, reaching up to. The arrow being at an extremity of its trajectory: extremely, most.
Knife, sword, blade.

Picture of a knife. As a component, 刀 is often written 刂, with the blade-side facing the other component. The meaning conveyed by the component depends on context - often being to cut. In some cases, the sense conveyed is a quality associated with the knife blade - precision, accuracy, etc.
To, towards, reach, up until.

到 (dào) modified by 到 (dāo). 到 adds a sense of precision (reach to a target); through the imagery of a saber pointing in a direction, conveys the sense “toward;” and is phonetic as well.
Eight.

The form abstracts the idea of division, and, as a component, signifies ‘dispersal, division,’ etc. Chosen to represent ‘eight’ as the number allows for multiple divisions into two.

The symbols for even numbers up to ten bear a degree of symmetry and their forms suggest their divisibility. The even numbers were considered to be of yin nature and the odd numbers of yang nature.
Joyous, Exchange.

八 (bā) symbolizing the dispersal of 氣 (qi, breath/ vital energy) during speech, when words emerge from a human 口 mouth. During speech the exchange of ideas occur and good words can dispel 八 sadness, bringing joy – hence the two meanings. 兌 is also the name of the trigram ☸ (Joyous, Lake).

Trigrams or the Ba Gua are eight ancient symbols which symbolize patterns of change in nature. Each Gua is composed of three lines – either broken (of yin nature) or unbroken (of yang nature).
Speech, talk, say.

Words 言 exchanging 兌 ideas.
Opening, door, gate.

Picture of a double leaved door.
Suffix indicating plural for pronouns and human nouns.

From 亻 (rén) 'person' and 门 (mén) phonetic. The two leaves of a door 门 convey the sense ‘not singular, more than one.’ The character could also have symbolized two or more people 亻 speaking at a door 门.
Elephant, form, appearance, shape.

The picture of an elephant. An elephant having a conspicuous form, the symbol was chosen to represent a manifested form, and, by extension, appearance, shape, image, etc.
Wèi: Stand for, support, on account of, for. Wéi: Govern, guide towards, take to, become, by, guided by, acting as.

Picture of a hand guiding an elephant. The elephant symbolizes manifested phenomenon and the hand the cause guiding it – hence: for, on account of, because of, acting as, by, guide to, govern, etc. The sound “wei” resembles the trumpet of an elephant. Added before a stative verb to form an adjective and before an adjective as an intensifier – 爲 (wéi), in such a grammatical construct, conveys the meaning ‘acting as’ - the adjective is a hand that guides the energy of a noun - symbolized here by the elephant. Now the same character is also written ‘為,’ with the hand omitted.
Grain.

A rice plant upon which is depicted a pendant ripe ear with grains.
And, with, harmony.

Grain 禾 is consumed by the mouth 口. There being a harmonious relationship between 口 and 禾, the character symbolizes togetherness, harmony, etc.
Enter.

Picture of roots entering the ground.
A final used as a full stop, equivalent to a ‘there now, that is done.’

“從入八, 會意。八者氣之分也。” The voice is drawn in 入(rù) and the reserve of breathing 八, at the end of a phrase. The movement of breath when saying 尔(ěr).

“詞之必然也從入八八象氣之分散兒” - Shuo Wen.
Thou.

The character had the meaning “symmetry, harmony of proportions,” according to Wieger. He explains the symbol as a “balance loaded equally on both sides. On the top 尔 is phonetic.” If Wieger’s interpretation is correct, the modern meaning may have evolved from the extended sense ‘one’s counterpart - thou.’

The bronze script forms show a fine silk garment spread out on a loom. 細 are the gaps between the threads through which light is shining. An ancient meaning of the character was - resplendent, elegant, fine, majestic. The character was later borrowed to symbolize ‘thou.’
You.

From 亻(人 rén) 'person.'

你(nǐ) is considered a colloquial version of 尔 (ěr, thou) and 尔(ěr) could once have played a phonetic role in the character.

尔 could also be indicative of the movement of sound, of breath, involved when saying nǐ to convey the meaning ‘you.’
Earth, land, field, place, ground.

From 土 (tǔ) 'earth' and 也 (yě) symbolizing the yin (feminine) nature of earth.
 Emit, emerge.

The ideograph shows a foot stepping out of an enclosure.
Head, leader, chief.

Picture of a head, with hair seen on top.
道

Way, path, doctrine, reason.

A path taken by the mind – way, path, doctrine, principle.
A Chinese inch; measure.

Originally represented distance between the place on the wrist where the pulse is felt (indicated by the line in the seal script forms) and the palm. Occurring as component, it conveys different meanings: to measure, restraint, etc.

Remember that the meaning conveyed by a word depends on the context in which it occurs. 寸草[寸:inch, measure 草:grass] means ‘a straw; a tiny bit’ and 寸 there acts as an adverb conveying the meaning ‘tiny, small, a little.’ 分寸: Proper restraint.

Another explanation is that the character shows the hand held with the last two fingers folded. Holding the palm such was considered an expression of restraint in ancient China.
Time, period.

That which is measured 寸 by the movement 止 of the sun 日 – time. A measure 寸 of where the sun 日 is standing 止.

Note: The ancient forms, in fact, had 之, the image of a foot stepping forth from a line 止 – which, together with the image of the sun 日, gives forth the sense ‘in movement.’ Thus, a measure of the sun’s movement. 之( 止, 止, 止) is explained in greater detail later on in this volume.
**千**  
千

*qiān*

**Thousand.**

From 十 and 人. Ten human lifetimes – a *thousand* years.
Year.

The modern form is composed of 禾 (hé, grain) over 千 (qiān, thousand) – a thousand grains, a harvest, and, by extension, a year. Older forms show a man harvesting grains by hand.
Shellfish, cowrie, money.

Picture of a cowrie. Cowries were used as currency in ancient China.
Dé: Get, reach, achieve. Děi: Should. De: A grammatical particle carrying a sense similar to *reach, attain*.

A hand reaching for a cowrie. In later forms彳 (the left half of 行, signifying a process, a path taken) was added. The meanings *achieve, take, reach* and *need* are directly suggested by this ideograph. 得 (děi, must, should) evolved as an extension of the meanings *get, need*, etc., money being regarded a necessity.

**Note:** When 得(děi) symbolizes ‘*should*’, the symbol of the cowrie conveys the sense “*that which is to be achieved.*”
The second of The Ten Heavenly Stems.

"Germination; it represents the germ that strives to get out." - Wieger.

The Ten Heavenly Stems and The Twelve Terrestrial Branches together form a cyclic calendrical system spanning 60 years. In this system, the symbols used to represent the time periods are thought to carry the nature of the cosmic phenomenon manifesting on earth during those periods. In the oracle bones, the date on which the oracle was consulted was written in this system. The system is still used in China.
Fault, outstanding.

乙，a germ emerging, and above it is a hand attempting to restrain its growth. A man acting against principles that make him conform is either transcending them (is outstanding) or is committing a fault.
京

Capital of a country.

The picture of a tower, an administrative building.
Just, simply, right away.

From 尤 and 京. Suggests natural, spontaneous emergence 尤—simply, right away, exactly. The form 京 (a tall, rising structure) indicates the nature of growth of the idea, of the energy associated with it – rising, spontaneously emerging.
Women, female.

Picture of a woman.
要

要

Want, need, seek, ask for, required.

A maiden, and two hands seeking her alliance – conveying the sense want, seek, ask for.
Beneath, go down, next (that which follows).

The ancient form had a short line *underneath* a longer fundamental line and was the reverse of 上, the ancient symbol for 上 (above). The modern form is 上 reversed.
Using, so as to, in order to.

“用也。从反已。賈侍中說：已，意已實也。象形，” according to the Shuo Wen. From 巳(sì, 賈, the picture of an embryo or fetus) turned upside down. An embryo or a fetus coming to birth - taking on a solid, substantial form. Hence value, use. In later forms the image of a person receiving the fetus as it is being born was added on the right. ‘So as to’ and ‘in order to’ are extensions of the sense ‘an object’s substantial use, for a particular purpose.’

The character 已(yǐ, finish/already) evolved from the same ancient form 巳. 已(yǐ, already): that which has already taken form.

"This very ancient character is supposed to represent the exhalation of the breath, the virtue that emanates from any object, its action, its use. By extension, use till exhaustion, to terminate...”- Wieger
Living, life, existence, give birth.

Picture of a growing plant – life, existence.
Field, a farmland.

The picture of a furrowed field.

The vertical and crosswise lines could also be representative of the yin and yang energies, which interact to make the field fertile.
Once, in the past.

The produce of the fields 田 divided 八 and consumed 口 - an action that occurred in the past.

Note: Later, by the time of Shuo Wen, the character came to be interpreted as from: dispersal 八, and speech 曰(曰: 曰). Expansion and dispersal of breath as words emerge from the mouth. Words already spoken. The田 got corrupted to 曰 and was interpreted as a phonetic component. “詞之舒也，从八从曰，圆聲。”— Shuo Wen. The ancient forms more accurately convey the meaning.
Three distinct elements coming together in harmonious order – assemblage, union, order, to combine.

No single syllable word currently exists. Symbol occurs as a component in other characters.
Meet, can, able, understand, come together, a gathering.

The produce of a field 均 brought together for consumption (indicated by a mouth 口 and something contained). To meet, assemble, gather, an occasion.

When concepts gather together coherently, one comprehends. Hence the extended meaning to understand. Likewise, to be able to do something is to be able to get one’s faculties to work together in harmony.

Note: Certain ancient forms of the character, such as 會 do not have 均 but show food laid out, as during a banquet – to meet over food. The ancient form of 甘 (gān, tasty) was 甘. A seal script form, of the character, given in the Shuo Wen, has not 口 but 言 (the ancient form of 言 (yuē, say), image of words emerging from a mouth.) To meet 會 in a region 均 for discussion, for exchanging ideas. The characters 會 and 言 (yuē) will be explained in detail later on and the reader may ignore such details at this stage of learning.
Self, oneself, from, since.

Picture of a nose. Breath, and, by extension, the self. Lindqvist notes that in China one points to the nose to indicate oneself.

“Starting point, the origin, beginning, evolution; the nose being, according to Chinese embryology, the starting point of bodily evolution.“ - Wieger
One who, -er.

A substance being burnt in a vessel, fumes emerging from it are shown on top. The vapors released were thought to carry the nature of the substance being burnt. ‘A 者’ - having the nature A. By extension, ‘-er’, the one who.

‘Zhe’ is the sound of burning. Compare with 煮 (zhǔ, cook).
Grass, straw.

Originally, a picture of growing plants 艸. 早, showing the rising sun, was later added - short plants, of the same height as the rising sun.

As a component, 艸 is abbreviated to 草 and denotes plants, herbs, etc.
Zhe – Indicating continued progress of something. Zháo – Touch, come into contact with, feel, be affected by, catch fire, burn. Zhù – Manifest.

Herbs ** being burnt 者 – a process which makes their essence manifest. By extension: to come into contact with or perceive the nature of something.
Go, leave, depart.

Picture of a person leaving an enclosure.
之

’s. Similar to 的. A classical pronoun - *it*.

The ancient forms show a feet 止 stepping forth from a line 一. “B 之” – stepping forth from or emerging from ‘B’ – hence B’s.

一 (yī, one) also conveys the sense “whole“ from which emerges 止 a part. 止 (zhǐ) is phonetic as well. An alternate ancient form of the character is 止. The Shuo Wen interprets the character as a plant emerging from the ground.
Pass, go by, undergo a process.

過 (guò) indicates a process. 过 (guō) is phonetic. In the bronze-script writing, the picture of a foot crossing a bamboo bridge is shown, depicting the idea to pass over, pass by.

冎 (guǎ) is the picture of a skeleton, with the skull and shoulder bones shown. 骨 (guō) is explained by Wieger as "A defect in the conformation of the bones 冎 of the mouth 口; a wry mouth..." Here it could symbolize an awry skeleton; to go through a process is to experience things in one’s bones.
The picture of a roof.

→ occurs as a component in characters, and indicates a roof, a covering, etc.
Pig, boar, hog.

"Boar, hog. The head is replaced by a line; on the left side, the belly and the paws; on the right side, the back and the tail; 畷也。象。頭, 足, 而後有尾。It has many compounds, e.g. 逐 zhú, to drive or push out pigs, to expel in general" – Wieger.
Family, household, domesticated.

The roof 宀 underneath which domesticated animals 家 (shǐ, pig) are kept – a place of shelter and, by extension, family, household. etc. In China, pigs are associated with fertility and prosperity.

Chalfant gives an early form of the character which shows a man, a woman, and a child underneath a roof 家.
Study, learn.

爻 (yáo) – the solid and broken lines that form the eight trigrams or the Ba Gua which symbolize patterns of change in nature. The symbol of "mutual action and reaction," according to Wieger.

學 shows a child studying in a house, grasping the nature of change (indicated by the two hands around爻).
Correct, proper, adjust, as regards.

The component on the left shows plants growing in a vase and on the right is a hand taking care of them – adjust, treat, something that has been made proper (hence correct, right, etc.), and, by a different interpretation of the same form, as regards – that which is being taken care of.
A component symbolizing *breath*, *exclamation*, *sigh*, *hiccup*, *difficulty in breathing*.

The ideograph shows the flow of the vital energy (气, qi) or breath, hindered by a barrier ( indicated by the —): an exclamation, a hiccup. Energy flowing up ↗ and reaching a barrier —.

**Note:** The precise sense conveyed by the symbol, when occurring as a component, depends on the context. In some characters, it merely symbolizes an expansion of energy and the ‘—’ above symbolizes the expanding surface.

“气欲舒出。↗上礙於—也。丐，古文以爲亏字，又以爲巧字。凡丐之屬皆从丐。”

— Shuo Wen
Can, may, a possibility, be worth.

From 矻 and 口. Spoken words 口, a phrase, an idea, reaching a hindrance (indicated by 一) where its movement is checked. Suggesting the idea is a possibility, but whether it passes, is to be determined. A possibility – can, may.

The same form allows for another interpretation with 矻 indicating ‘capable of reaching to a target’ – be worth.

An alternate explanation is that 可 indicates an exclamation 矻 of approbation – can, may, be worth. When occurring as a component, 可 symbolizes an exclamation.
Village, neighborhood, home town, half kilometer.

From 田 (tián, field) and 土 (tǔ, earth) – the place 土 where the fields 田 are – a village. Places 土 within the expanse of a field 田 – a neighborhood, a region.

“Village of 25 or 50 families; place of residence; (the length of the side of the said village) length measure of about 600 meters” - Karlgren.
Clothing, clothes, garment, a coating.

The picture of a garment. When occurring is a component, 衣 is sometimes reduced to 衾.
Inside, interior, internal.

A region 里 within a covering 衣.
Small, tiny, insignificant.

Picture of silk cocoons with threads. As a component, it is often written as 么.
Walk slowly.

The traditional explanation is that it is the picture of a person 人 and ＼ suggesting restrained, slow movement, the legs tied. To walk slowly. The ancient form seems to have been that of a foot turned backwards, suggesting hindered, slow movement. Analysis of ancient forms suggests that the form 夾 evolved from the image of an upturned foot and, then, was later reinterpreted.

In dictionaries based on the Kang Xi system, the component 夾 (suī, walk slowly) is distinguished from 休 (zhī, restrained movement) for the purpose of organizing characters, though both forms are interpreted as depicting a man whose movement is restrained, and convey a very similar meaning. As a component, both forms are generally written 夾. In Kang Xi based dictionaries, when 夾 occurs on top of a character, it is interpreted as the radical 夹 (zhī) and, at the bottom, as 夹 (suī).
After, later, offspring.

Movement 彳 (chì, the left half of 行) 么 in a file (indicated by a silk thread 幺). That which follows, comes later in a sequence.

A character used in place of 後 is 后 (hòu). The convention dates back to at least the time of the “Book of Rites,” a Confucian classic. 后 also carries the meaning “empress” and shows a queen (seen in profile on the left) issuing commands 口: 陛, 𠄺. The empress’ position follows that of the emperor. A bronze script form of the character shows a woman giving birth - offspring, descendant, posterior, later in a sequence.
Small, little.

A tiny portion 八 divided out of an object | that is already small by its nature.
Hemp.

The character shows two bundles of hemp hanging in a shack 广.
Suffix for interrogatives and adverbs - as in 甚麼 (what) and 那麼 (then).

From 麻 má phonetic and 幺 (yāo, small). A thin 幺 bundle 麻 – indicating the particle’s use in creating a small phrase. An archaic meaning of the character is tiny.
Heart, mind, feeling.

The picture of a heart. Reduced to 心 when occurring as a component on the left of the character. As a component, 心 often symbolizes the human mind.
Evening, sunset.

Picture of a crescent moon.
Many, much, more, more than required, too much.

From two 夕 – many, more than needed, multiplicity.
Heaven, sky, day.

The extent of space (天) above man: Heavens, sky. “[The heavens are] so high, there is nothing above,” says the Shou Wen.

An alternate interpretation is that the character shows a divine being, as tall as the skies.

Note: 大 (dà), immense, according to the Shuo Wen, symbolizes the plane of Man (天大地大人亦大). Heavens are the planes of existence above man, according to Chinese traditions.
And, furthermore.

Picture of a beard – an *extension* of the face. Hence the meanings ‘*and*’, ‘*furthermore*.’
Can, be able, capable.

A bear holding meat in its mouth – indicative of capability.
Good.

A mother 女 taking care of her child 子 – an expression of goodness. In the fourth tone (hào), the character means ‘to like,’ ‘be fond of.’

The image of a mother playing with a child conveys the sense “all is well” – a meaning the character often conveys in usage.

好好 hǎohào: An adverb meaning in perfectly good condition, to one’s content, with all one’s heart, etc.
City, town.

The ancient forms show a person bowing to commands issued. A city is where people live in conformance to commands issued by the ruler. When the symbol ‘阝’ occurs as a component on the right side of characters, it is from ‘邑’ abbreviated and conveys the notion of conformance.

Another explanation is that the component on top derives from ‘囗’ (wéi, an enclosure) depicting the city walls. The character shows people kneeling within the city walls – living in conformance to its laws. City walls might as well be symbolic of a mechanism that ensures conformance.
All, even, already.

Those who 来 come under rule of the capital city 邑 – all. Or, those who 者 live within the city 邑 – all its inhabitants.

Pronounced ‘dū’ the character means capital, metropolis.

According to the Shuo Wen, the character originally referred to a temple for royal ancestors. In the “Rites of Zhou,” an ancient work, 都 is an administrative unit of 500 villages. The meaning “already” evolves from that 都 referred to lands which had already been brought under administrative control – as opposed to the barbarian lands.
Fire.

Fire with flames rising. 火 is often abbreviated to 火, when occurring at the bottom of a character, as in 煮 (zhǔ, cook).
Dog.

The picture of a dog. As a component, the character is reduced to 犬, and symbolizes animal in general. In 猫( māo, cat) the component derives from 獸(zhì, a beast/ a feline); in 猪(zhū, pig), 犬 symbolizes a 畜(shì, pig).
So, right, like that. 虽然: although; 忽然: suddenly; 當然: of course; 自然 nature.

The spontaneous change dog 犬 meat 肉 undergoes when exposed to fire - natural, like that.
Water.

The picture of flowing water. The ancient forms resemble the trigram 坎 (kǎn) ☽ (water). As a component, 水 is often reduced to 氵, and referred to as the 三點水 or the ‘three-dot water.’
méi 没
mò 没

Méi: Not.

When pronounced mò, the character means to sink, drown, submerge, disappear.

The character shows a hand dropping something in water 氵. The object disappears in a whirl 回. To disappear, sink, be no more.

Note: Here 回 shows an abyss of water, according to the Shuo Wen. “回, 深水也.” "To dive, while 回 turning on one's self, in order to 図 get something under water, the head being below; 人水有所取也。from 図在回下。會意。By extension, to disappear, to be no more." -- Wieger.
Now, present.

The character conveys the notion of presence.

△, through the assemblage of three lines, indicates where the past, present and future meet – now. And the form ← indicates the presence of an object at that instance. The oracle bone script forms may be interpreted as the instance of time ← where the past, present and future meet.

Alternate interpretation: Present ← under the roof △- here, now.
Side, square, method. As an adverb: then, just then.

A boat docking with another, on its side. The boats’ heads are shown in the pictograph. Some ancient forms show the image of a boat docking at a jetty. Yet others derive from the image of boats tied together to form a square or rectangular pontoon – with a boat which forms a side of such a pontoon, given prominence in the pictograph. The various symbols are now abstracted to the same form ‘方’.

The adverbial usage - then, just then - derives from the sense ‘to meet with’ - something met or encountered – note how the imagery of a boat docking with a harbor conveys the sense. 方知: Discover. The meaning method, prescription follows from that a particular procedure, a method, was to be followed when boats dock with one another or at a harbor, to ensure safety.

“併船也。象舟舟省、総頭形。凡方之屬皆从方。” – Shuo Wen
From, out of, by, to.

方, the picture of a pontoon, symbolizes a source, a carrier; 人 indicates a wave of energy emerging, and  are the objects carried along with it.
A character with meaning similar to 於. From, out of, emerging from.

Shows 氣 qi emerging from a source and expanding upwards. The horizontal lines 一 indicate uniform, level expansion. The form 亏 which gives forth the meaning “expansion” is closely related to this form and symbolizes an upward expansion of energy.

“於也。象气之舒亏。从亏从一。一者，其气平之也。凡亏之属皆从亏。今變隷作于。” – Shuo Wen
A fetus.

"The figure of an embryo, a fetus...In the maternal womb, the child is 己 or 包; at birth, 六 or 児; when swaddled, 子; when it begins to walk, 兒" – Wieger.
Go, walk.

Picture of a person walking briskly, swinging his arms. As a component, it indicates the meanings to walk, move, a process underway, etc. - meanings that are conveyed through the imagery of a person on a journey.
Rise, start, raise, build.

A process 走 in its infancy 已 – starting, rising.

The same character is often written 起 with 已(si) replaced by 己(jǐ, self) which is of phonetic significance.

Shows movement 辶 in a circle, within in a region 衣, under a watchful eye 目 – return, repayment. Continued movement within a region – still, yet.

睘 (huán, timid), in the modern form, is phonetic. The meaning of 睘 (timid) is conveyed through the picture of an eye seeing through a veil 眼, 眯. Note that the ancient form of 睘 (huán) carried the picture of a hand, as opposed to the feet in ancient forms of 返.
Divide, separate, distinguish, a part.

Picture of a sword or a knife 刀 dividing 八 or separating something.
Component meaning *beat, hit, etc.*.

A hand holding a weapon. Indicates an action that involves use of force.
A bow, bend.

Picture of a Chinese bow, with its handle in the middle.
 Sends out, emit, develop, expand.

發 (bò), an ideograph showing two feet 足, means “move forward, advance.” The bottom half of the character shows a bow 弓 shooting 矢 out arrows.
Fourth of the 10 Heavenly Stems, fourth in a series.

Picture of a nail. Now nail is written as 钉 (dīng) with 金 (jīn, metal) added. The ancient forms show the head of a nail, as seen from above.
Complete, finish, accomplish.

A handled instrument 戊 driving in a nail 丁 – a work completed. Chéng is the sound made when a nail is driven into a wooden surface.

戊(wù, the 5th of the Heavenly Stems) was the picture of a kind of weapon: 戈戈戈戈. Its modern form derives from 戈 modified.
A matter, affair, event, work, an occupation, a task.

A hand holding a pen writing what is said 口. The work of an officer includes recording major events. 事 (shì, event), 史 (shǐ, history), and 吏 (lì, official) share the same ancient form.
A bird with a short tail. Symbol occurs as a component in other characters, no single syllable word currently exists.

Picture of a short tailed bird.
Single, alone, a measure word for animals and birds, one of a pair.

A *single* bird held in the hand. Compare with 雙 (shuāng, double).
Only, merely.

According to the Shuo Wen, 只 derives from 口 (kǒu, mouth) and 八 representing the qi 氣 or vital breath drawing downwards (氣下引之形). The expansion of energy here being simple in nature, comes the extended meaning merely, only, etc.

The visual form of 只 abstracts the nature of movement of thought when the concept merely is perceived by the mind, and also the movement of sound when 只 (zhī) is intoned.
Flee, perish.

亡 represents a region – the vertical line representing the skies, the horizontal the earth, and where they meet being the horizon. 亡, originally written 入, suggests the meaning ‘to enter 入 and disappear into the horizon’. Hence the meanings perish, flee, etc.

As a component, it conveys the meanings, disappear, fade away, etc.
Abrupt, sudden, unexpected.

The modern form derives from 乍 and 一. Attempting to flee 乍, but unexpectedly hindered by a barrier 一.
Do, make, work.

A man working to overcome a hindrance encountered work, to do.
Towards, to, face.

A window facing a particular direction.
Esteem, honor, value, noble, lofty.

The ridge pole on the roof of a house, which dispels the wind – lofty, superior, high, noble.
Dāng: serve as, be equal, be just as. Dàng: proper, appropriate, regard as.

From 尚 (shàng, lofty) and 田 (field) – the sense conveyed is value, worth, of the same value as, to attribute a similar value to.

Within a particular field 田, in terms of value 尚.
Tree, wood, timber.

Picture of a tree with the branches, trunk and roots shown.
Eye, look.
The picture of an eye, turned sideways.
Appearance, mutual, each other.

An eye observing a tree. The character conveys the notion of reciprocity: the object and the eye interacting to make vision possible.
To think, to consider, suppose, hope, would like to.

To reflect 相 in the mind 心.
Kàn: See, look at, watch, read.

An eye with a hand held above it as when observing something. “One shades the eyes in order to see better, cutting off the rays of the sun, and gathering the light,” says the Shuo Wen.

Pronounced kān, the character means look after, tend, keep under surveillance.
Civilized, cultured, literary, literature, writing.

A man with a tattoo on his chest – cultured, civilized. The symbol conveys the sense *civilized* when occurring as a component.
Nothingness, not have, without.

From 亡 and 舞 the picture of a dancer. The myriad of things 舞 ceasing to exist 亡 – nothingness. Dance is written 舞(wǔ), with two feet underneath, to indicate movement. In ancient writing, the symbol 舞, by itself, represented nothingness. An idea which seems rooted in the Daoist thought that the myriad of phenomenon, all that exists, is nothingness.

Note: The Shuo Wen says 舞 has a meaning similar to myriad; the character 豐(fēng, abundant) is used to describe 舞. Symbol shows a thick forest, according to the Shuo Wen. From 大 immense; and 廿(niàn, twenty, symbol made of two 十(ten)s) combined with 木 tree on each side. A thick forest; by extension, abundant, myriad, etc.
Open, start, begin.

Two hands (reduced to 卍) removing the bolt — of a door — to open.
Foretell, predict, to divine, consult an oracle.

Divination was done by exposing tortoise shells to heat and reading the cracks formed. § shows the shape of the cracks that appear on the shell.
Use, employ, apply.

A divination 卜 that has hit the mark 中. Of use, that which can be employed for a purpose.

“可施行也從卜從中” – Shuo Wen.
**zhǔ**

**Lord, master, main.**

A lamp with a flame giving light. That which guides, *principal, main.*
Be like, following, in accordance with.

It’s the nature of a woman 女 to follow directions given 口 – by her father when she is young, and by her husband after marriage. Hence the meanings ‘to follow’, ‘in accordance with,’ etc.
Boat, ship.
The picture of a boat.
Front, forward, former, preceding.

A boat on water, moving forward —front, forward, advance. The ‘止’ in front of ‘舟’ suggests forward movement.

Alternate explanation: A person standing with his leg on the prow of a boat that is moving forward.

The sense “in front of,” in the context of flow of time, is before, former, previous, etc.
Half a kilogram, an axe.

Earliest forms were the picture of an axe-head. By bronze script writing, the symbol showed an axe working on a surface. Some interpret as an abstract form indicating the movement of the axe head when chopping wood.

The image of an axe chopping wood (斫木也象形凡斤之屬皆從斤), according to the Shuo Wen.

The symbol is also used to represent a weight approximately equal to that of an axe-head.
That which, by, place, office.

Shows an axe 斤 carving a door 戶 – ‘that which is doing the work’ (as the axe 斤 is in this symbolic instance), by, etc. ‘Suǒ’ is the sound of the axe swing. The meaning ‘place’ derives from the sense ‘an abode 戶, carved out 斤,’ and the sense ‘office’ from ‘the place where work is being done.’
**Basis, origin, volume, root, stem.**

The foundation, indicated by 一 in seal script forms, of a tree 木 – basis, root, stem. More ancient forms depict a tree with the roots and the lower trunk prominently shown.
See, catch sight of, view, opinion.

A person with a big eye observing something – to see, view, etc.
Jade, gems, beautiful.

Rings of jade on a stand. The dot in the modern form symbolizes a round stone of jade and serves to distinguish the character from 王 (wáng, king). When 王 occurs as a component, as in 现, it usually derives from 玉 (yù, jade).
Manifest, appear, display.

From 玉 (yù, jade) and 見 (jiàn, see) – the luster of a gem 玉, conspicuously manifesting itself to the eye 見.
A silk thread.

Picture of fine threads of silk, twisted at the end. As a component, it is written 紘 and indicates ordering, logic, reason, connection, etc. The modern character for silk 絲(sī) from 紘 doubled.
Ninth of the ten heavenly stems.

The picture of a carry pole with a weight attached to each end. Hence, as a component, it conveys the meaning to shoulder, to bear; as in 任 (rèn, serve in a position).

A character which has come to be written the same as 王 is 臥 (tīng, a person 人 seated on the ground 土). 臥 occurs as a component in 呈, 聽, etc.
工

Work.

Picture of a tool used for pounding or a carpenter’s square. By extension: work.
Underground water courses.

Underground streams of water 川, of great importance in Chinese geomancy. ‘水脈也從川在一下一地也.’ The — above shows the ground. The 穴 were thought to flow perpetually, and unbroken.

Below川 is not 力(gōng, work) but the ancient form of 甲 (rén, 9th of the 10 heavenly stems), conveying the sense ‘to hold up.’
Scripture, classics, manage, pass through, longitude, channels in Chinese medicine, constant.

The fundamental sense is unbroken, continuous flow 經. 經 conveys logic, ordering, reason, principles, etc., when the character represents a classic or a scripture – a work from which emerges an a never ending flow or principles 經. With other meanings such as channels, longitude, constant, 經 serves to convey the sense a line, a connection, a continuous, unbroken channel, and so on.
頁

A page in a book, a sheet of paper.

Picture of a man with a prominent head. The original meaning was ‘head’. The character was later borrowed for the meaning ‘a leaf of a book.’
Head, chief, main, leading, top/end of something.

From 頭 (dòu, a vessel) and 頭 (yè, head).
Public, collective.

The \( \triangle (sī) \) in the modern form is the picture of a cocoon \( \bigcirc \). \( \text{八} \) shows division. To divide \( \text{八} \) or dispel a thing’s cocooned nature— to make public.

Ancient forms show a region \( \square \) divided \( \text{八} \) – public.
Same, similar, concord, harmony.

An orifice and a lid that fits—similar, same, concordance. The modern form may be interpreted as an orifice □ and a lid □ which go together as one —.
An ancient type of spoon; a component indicating transformation or change.

When occurring as a component, 發 conveys various meanings, it being a modern abstraction for a range of symbols. In some characters, it is the picture of a spoon, in others it is a man turning around, etc. 發 traditionally had the meaning “a man turning around (從反人).”

The character 變 (huà) means “change” and is traditionally interpreted as the picture of a man overturned. Wieger cites the Shuo Wen when he explains the character as a man “tumbled head over heels(從倒人)”. “The primitive sense,” Wieger says, was “to die.” 倒人為變, 死也. Some ancient forms of the character seem to show the picture of a man seated in meditation (larından), transforming himself. Others show an upside down man, person who has “turned around,” completely changed. In modern writing, when 變 occurs as a component, it is often reduced to 發.
Hair, feather, down, wool.

The picture of a feather.
Old, venerable, of long standing, always.

The hair 毛 changing 白 color: old. Or, the hair 毛 turning 白 grey.

老 is also used to convey the meaning “always,” which evolves as an extension of the sense “of long standing.”

“考也。七十曰老。从人、毛、匕。言须髮变白也。凡老之属皆从老。” A 70 year old is referred to as 老, according to the Shuo Wen.
From, follow, obey, attend to, join.

A man following another on a journey – to follow, to move along with (“隨行也”), to dedicate oneself to, to yield to, to comply with. ‘從 A’ also evokes the sense following A, from A, etc.

“隨行也。從走、從，從亦聲。” – Shuo Wen

Note: 从 is often used as a convenient substitute for 従. 从 is described by the Shuo Wen as “相聽也。從二人。”
Strength, force.

The picture of a strongly muscled arm exerting itself – strength, force.
East.

“從日在木中.” The rising sun 日 seen through the trees 木.
Heavy, weighty, important.

From 亻 (tǐng, a person seated at a place) and 東 (dōng, east). The eastern side was considered the place of honor at a court and the important people were always seated on the east. Heavy, weighty, etc. are extensions of this sense.

Wieger points out an old [seal script] variant of the character which resembles a weighing machine, with weights piled on each other:
Move.

Force applied 力 on something of weight 重 – move.
Two, both, 50 grams.

Picture of a balance with equal weights on each arm.
Cháng: long. Zhāng: grow, increase, a chief.

The ancient forms show a person with long hair.
An arrow.

Picture of an arrow.
知

Know, realize, sense.

Words 口 like arrows 矢. To speak as if to hit the mark.