The Rhetorical Use of Chinese Logograms

Tse, Yiu Kay. The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract: Though the Chinese logograms have tended to be considered as logo-phonograms instead, the logographic nature of Chinese characters is still remarkable when compared with any typical phonetic writing system. This paper discusses on the rhetorical use of Chinese logograms with a variety of examples, showing how the logographic quality of Chinese characters is applied in enhancing the expressive power of the language through making use of the form, assembling and dissembling the components, and combining identical components of characters.

1 Introduction

Chinese characters have been traditionally classified into four types in formation by etymology: the pictograms 象形, ideograms 指事, radical-radical compounds 會意 and radical-phonetic compounds 形聲. In ancient Chinese scripts, the form of the characters, be they words or morphemes, is integrally connected with the meaning. For example, the pictogram “貝 (贝)” mimics the shape of a shell, the ideogram “上 (上)” visualizes the abstract concept of a higher position, the radical-radical compound “休 (休)” evokes the image and hence the meaning of a person leaning against a tree, and the radical-phonetic compound “江 (江)” denotes semantic affiliation with water on account of its picto-radical. All these have well demonstrated the logographic quality of Chinese characters. The theory has nonetheless been deemed to be less absolute in the past two decades, which may be represented, for instance, by the revision made by Hu, Yushu in his book Xiandai Hanyu:

In modern times, the picto-radicals of radical-phonetic compounds, which make up the bulk of Chinese characters, still denote the semantic affiliation of the characters to a certain extent although the logographic quality has largely weakened following the evolution of character forms to give rise to the clerical and regular scripts. 到了現代，經過隷變和楷化的漢字儘管大大減弱了字形表意的直觀程度，但是佔漢字極大比重的形聲字的形旁仍然在表示字義的類屬方面起著一定的作用。(Hu, 1987, pp. 187-188)
In modern times, following the evolution of character forms to give rise to the clerical and regular scripts, the logographic quality of Chinese characters has largely weakened although the picto-radicals of radical-phonetic compounds that make up the bulk of Chinese characters still denote the semantic affiliation of the characters to a certain extent. 達到了現代,經過隸變和楷化的漢字已經大大減弱了字形表意的直觀程度,雖然佔漢字極大比重的形聲字的形旁似乎在表示字義的類屬方面起著一定的作用。(Hu, 1995, p. 152)

Although the semantically visualizing property of the four types of characters has reduced to a great extent, and that characters of the fourth type, in which the phonetic component hints at the pronunciation, constitute the vast majority of Chinese characters, the logographic nature of Chinese characters as a whole is still comparatively distinctive among writing systems around the world. Specifically, the rhetorical use of Chinese logograms is worth studying to show how the logographic quality of Chinese characters can be applied to enhance the expressive power of the Chinese language through making use of the form, assembling and dissembling the components, and combining identical components of characters.

2 Making Use of the Form

The form of Chinese characters can be used to visualize a certain meaning. To start with, there are borrowings from the English alphabet, such as using the letter “Y” to figure a fork in a road, “S” to figure a crooked road or the shape of a female body, “M” to figure a forehead shaped by hair growth, and “V” to figure a sudden plunge to and an immediate rebound from the bottom point. Similarly, certain Chinese characters can perform the same function. Common examples include using the character “國” to figure the shape of a person’s face (“國字臉”), the character “丁” to figure how one’s feet are placed (“丁字腳”) or the shape of a path (“丁字路”), and the character “工” to figure the layout of a room (“工字房”). Below is an example cited from a piece of prose “Achang and the Classic of Mountains and Seas” written by Lu, Xun:

Comes summer and she would again spread out her arms and legs like the character “da” when she sleeps, leaving me little room to turn over in the bed... In the middle of the night when I wake up from the heat, the bed would still be filled up by that same character “da”, with even an arm on my neck. 一到夏天，睡覺時她又伸開

The character “大” in Lu’s description is terse, vivid and amusing, and has demonstrated the writer’s rhetorical skill in achieving a remarkable pictorial effect in describing how the woman (Achang) behaves in her sleep.

In addition to visual effect, the logographic quality of Chinese characters can have a further role to play in producing metaphorical or extended meanings. For instance, the character “十” can be used not only to figurate a crossroads (“十字路口”), but also to mean at a loss as to which way to go (“standing at the shi-shaped crossroads 站在十字路口”). More examples can be quoted to show how such associations can be taken advantage of. Below is a newspaper advertisement placed by an insurance company:

(Hong Kong Economic Times, 2005-09-27, p. A15)
Impressively filled up with characters denoting all kinds of diseases, illnesses and sicknesses, the advertisement effectively raises the reader’s alert and drives home the importance of taking out insurance by making use of the eye-catching and distinctive radical “疒” to connect the colloquial jingle of “No matter sick or not sick, you have at least a rebate to take 無論 sick 唔 sick, 至少有回贈拎” with the concept of disease.

The rhetorical use of Chinese logograms can further be seen in the creation of non-existent characters or attaching non-standardized meanings to the characters. The picture below shows a demonstration against the police’s unwarranted monitoring of internet uploading and sharing. The character “警” has been restructured to form the non-standardized character “囧”, in which the additional “口” (mouth) is meant to refer to the police’s double standard and irresponsible statements as elaborated in the banner bearing the slogan (“Double Standard 雙重標準 and Irresponsible Statements 信口開河”).

(Sing Tao Daily, 2008-02-11, p. A3)

Attaching new meanings to Chinese characters is made all the more easier in the internet world. One significant example is the pictogram “囧”, which is an archaic and uncommon character generally interpreted as a window facing a light source or as brightness by extension. The character was revived in 2008 and has gained popularity rapidly on the web ever since. It is interestingly interpreted as a face with two eyes/ eyebrows and a mouth, and is used to denote expressions or feelings of mope, uneasiness, embarrassment or surprise, as the user thinks fit. Below is an
extract from the entertainment page of a Hong Kong magazine, reporting that an actress has been ridiculed with the nickname “Jiongjiong 囧囧” for her exaggerated facial expression which looks exactly like the character “囧” and the statue in the picture. Here, the pictorial association of the character has lent itself to new interpretations as expressions of emotions as well as actions.

(Eastweek, 2008, Vol.279, pp. B70)

3 Assembling and Dissembling of Components

It is perfectly possible to assemble or dissemble the components in Chinese characters. The ease with which a Chinese character can be reconstructed for reinterpretation is fully demonstrated in character riddles such as “removing the grass as well as the roots 斬草除根” (草→日), “shaking off the tail 甩掉尾巴” (甩→用) and “not a dot to be seen 一點不見” (“、”[a dot] + “不”[not] + “見”[see]→視). The way to take down a character for reinterpretation (“析字” or “拆字”), which is commonly seen in ancient works, has developed into a type of figure of speech. The following examples show not only how flexible it is to restructure Chinese characters, but also how ingenuous it can be to attach new meanings to the restructured characters:

a. “千里草，何青青；十日卜，不得生。”: This is a ballad meant to be a curse on Dong, Zhuo 董卓, who was a warlord in the late Han Dynasty. The name of Dong, Zhuo is concealed but can be revealed by assembling the relevant characters into one character i.e. “干+里+草→董” and “十+日+卜→卓”.

b. “一合酥”: As Chinese is traditionally written vertically, the character “合” can be split into “人一口”, thus altering the meaning from “a box of pastries 一合酥” to “Each takes a bite of the pastries 一人一口酥”.
c. “人曾是僧 人弗能成佛 女卑為婢 女又可為奴”: The two lines of the couplet is not only uniform in format and matching in meaning, but also equally skillful in combining the first two characters to form the last character, i.e. “人+曾→僧”, “人+弗→佛”, “女+卑→婢” and “女+又→奴”.

d. “閒看門中月 思耕心上田”: The couple is an ingenious assembly of characters that gives expression to artistic conception. “閒” and “思” are wonderful combinations of “門+月” and “心+田” respectively, with “中” (middle) and “上” (above) indicating where the second characters should be placed when merged into the first.

e. “何處合成愁？離人心上秋。”: These are two lines from a famous ci-poem by Wu, Wenying of the Song Dynasty. The character “愁” is skillfully used to produce a double meaning. On the one hand, “心上秋”, when interpreted as placing the character “秋” on top of “心”, can serve as the answer to the question raised in the first line about how “愁” comes about. On the other hand, it relates to a person away from home (“離人”) who feels sad when autumn (“秋”) comes to his heart (“心”).

The assembling and dissembling of components in Chinese characters for rhetorical purposes is certainly not confined to classical Chinese works. More recent writers have the same tool at their disposal when trying to produce satirical effects in their literary works by reinventing the interpretations of a character through dissembling its components. Below is an example quoted from an essay “Taming the Language ‘Beast’ ” written by Qin, Mu:

In the old days, soldiers dissatisfied with their superiors who doctored accounts and made empty promises would vent their anger with “While you ‘guan’ with your two mouths eat more by doctoring, we ‘bing’ with our two legs may as well desert our posts”. 舊軍隊中的士兵不滿他們的軍官吃空額和說空話，這樣發洩他們的憤慨道：“你‘官’字兩個口，吃空額；我們‘兵’字兩隻腳，開小差！” (Qin, 2007, Vol. 9, p. 431)

“兵(兵)”, which originally means weapon, is a radical-radical compound in which there are two hands, as pictorially represented in the lower
component, holding an axe represented by the upper component. The deliberate reinterpretation of the original two hands as “two legs”, though incorrect from the etymological point of view, has set the soldiers distinctly apart from the government officials who have been criticized to have “two mouths”, again a reinterpretation by the writer as visually inspired by the character “官”, for declaring doctored accounts and for exploiting the soldiers.

To cite a further example, the technique of dissembling characters is applied in the poster below to call for a ban on logging for environmental protection. The character “木” is a pictogram representing a tree whilst “林” and “森”, with two and three “木” grouped together, are radical-radical compounds denoting woods and forests respectively. By dissembling the character “森” by one component at a time, the gradual loss of trees from prehistoric through historic down to modern times is visually represented. Should the process be left unchecked, this will lead to the death of all trees and hence a grim future for the humankind, aptly represented here by the character “十”, or a cross, which is formed by further trimming the character “木”.


4 Combining Identical Components

Many Chinese characters are formed by repeating the same component. Their meanings, however, are not necessarily connected with their root-components, which are characters in their own right. For example, “圭”, the name of an ancient jade object, has nothing to do with “土” in meaning; nor “孖” (abundance) with “子”; and “喆、勅、図” (variants of “哲”) with “吉”. Other characters such as “从、殻、厮、縊、禂、黒” that are formed by duplicating the same components have been
regarded as the complex forms or variants of the root-components and hence share the same meanings. As for characters made up of three or more of the same components, some are documented to be identical in meaning with their root-components as in the case of “囍” while others like “囍、囍、囍” of which the meanings are no longer known, there is no way to tell if the same is true.

Nevertheless, some of these characters with identical components represent an increase in intensity or number over the root-components and are therefore logographic by nature. One example is “囍”， which means “喜上加喜” (double happiness). Other examples (EBH, 1993; Leng & Wei, 1994) are tabulated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character [1 component] (meaning/one of the meanings)</th>
<th>Character [2 components] (meaning/one of the meanings)</th>
<th>Character [3 components] (meaning/one of the meanings)</th>
<th>Character [4 components] (meaning/one of the meanings)</th>
<th>Character [more than 4 components] (meaning/one of the meanings)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>十 (ten)</td>
<td>什 (twenty)</td>
<td>什 (thirty)</td>
<td>什 (forty)</td>
<td>隹 (same as “囍” [racket])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>口 (mouth)</td>
<td>吡 (same as “囍” [racket])</td>
<td>吡 (voices in synchrony)</td>
<td>吡 (voices in synchrony or racket)</td>
<td>吡 (same as “囍” [racket])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>水 (water)</td>
<td>林 (two waterways or possibly same as “水”)</td>
<td>漟 (a vast expanse of water)</td>
<td>漟 (a vast expanse of water)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>石 (stone)</td>
<td>磚 (sound of two stones hitting one another)</td>
<td>磚 (stones)</td>
<td>磚 (same as “磊”)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The structure of this type of characters speaks of the logographic nature of Chinese characters. In fact, as pointed out by Duan, Yucai of the Qing Dynasty in his annotations on Shuowen Jiezi for the character “晶” (EBH, 1993, p. 638), the same component is often repeated thrice to emphasize size, abundance or intensity. Typical examples can be found in “鑫” (gold in abundance or prosperity), “森” (a lush forest), “淼” (a vast expanse of...
water), “焱” (flames), “垚” (an earth mount), “众” (a congregation), “晶” (numerous), “劦” (to join forces), “晶” (bright), “毳” (a pickpocket [who is said to have an invisible third hand in Chinese]), “毳” (down [the component “毛” is repeated thrice to emphasize fineness and denseness]).

When put to rhetorical use, the visual impact produced by such characters strikes with their artistic and imaginative ingenuity. Let us take a look at this poem “Inscription on the Painting Autumn Mountains in the Moonlight in Archaic Style 题复古秋山对月图” by Zheng, Cai of the Yuan Dynasty:

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天兮月朤朤
山兮水森森兮竹
勢兮墨鱻鱻
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The idea of “archaic” mentioned in the title is visually echoed in the archaic and largely disused forms of the characters adopted in the poem itself. This couplet in the photo below serves as a further example:

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日昍晶通靝
月朋朤鎮乾堃
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(China Folk Culture Villages, Shenzhen, China)
Semantically, the two lines are similar (with both “靝堃” and “乾堃” referring to “天地” [heaven and earth]) and there is nothing unusual. What is so special about them is that the segments “日昍晶” and “月朋朤” are both made up of characters sharing the same component, the number of which increases by one in an ascending order. Despite the flaw that “朋” and “月” are not at all related in meaning, the visual impact is nonetheless paramount.

5 Conclusion

Following the simplification and evolution of character forms to give rise to the clerical and regular scripts, the logographic quality of Chinese characters has largely weakened. What is more, newly created Chinese characters tend to be radical-phonetic compounds. Thus, in terms of number, radical-phonetic compounds now account for so great a proportion that Chinese characters are no longer considered to be logograms but logo-phonograms instead. Nevertheless, the logographic nature of Chinese characters is still remarkable when compared with any typical phonetic writing system.

This paper has demonstrated how Chinese logograms can be employed in a variety of contexts and genres to achieve rhetorical effects through making use of their form, assembling and dissembling components, and combining identical components. This logographic quality has not only contributed to the flexibility and cleverness with which form, structure and meaning of Chinese characters can be linked together but has also enhanced the expressive power of the Chinese language. Calculated manipulations of the form or the meaning of a character based on its form are often possible for fulfilling a particular rhetorical purpose. As described above, the non-existent character “艹” used to lash out at the double standard and irresponsible statements of the police is one example. In another, the reinterpretation of “兵” as to have two legs for deserting one’s post is intended as a contrast with “官” with its two mouths for eating more by doctoring accounts so as to play up the indignation on the part of the exploited soldiers. In such instances, rhetoric is given priority over standardization of characters.

As far as the development of Chinese characters is concerned, too much freedom result in chaos while too much restriction, the loss of vitality. Take “囧” as an example. Although originally an archaic character that has largely fallen into disuse, it is now a buzz word with a new meaning to
the extent of becoming a phenomenon, thanks to wide circulation on the internet and in the electronic media. Some applaud it to be ingenious regeneration. Others deplore it to be uncontainable abuse. Taken as a logogram, “囧” has been given new meanings and is used for describing facial expressions or feelings of being bored, fed up, embarrassed, ashamed and surprised. By extension, it can even be used as a noun to denote a person acting in such a way or the action itself, or even as a verb or an interjection. Following the prevalence of the character, similar characters with new meanings like “商” (囧 wearing a straw hat), “崮” (king of the 囧 kingdom, wearing a crown), “姞” (queen of the 囧 kingdom, wearing a tiara) and “囧z” (a 囧 crouching in frustration) have sprung up. Should this be considered a breakthrough or regression? It is perhaps worth discussing how a proper balance should be struck between the logographic effects of Chinese characters and the need to standardize their form, pronunciation and meaning.

References


