Judgment of Meaningfulness of Chinese Characters by English-Speaking Observers

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Liu and Chuang (1970) obtained measures of meaningfulness for 1,200 Chinese characters from ratings made by literate Chinese. A sample of these characters rated by persons unfamiliar with Chinese showed that the amount of perceptual information conveyed to English-speaking observers correlates with Liu and Chuang's index for Chinese-speaking individuals. For English-speaking observers, meaningfulness appears more closely related to visual form characteristics than is the case for the Chinese reader. Results of the study provide a further hypothesis: that the Chinese language evolved according to a visual "simplicity" principle. Results also suggest that conclusions from some experiments involving Chinese characters as stimuli may be limited by ignorance of the role that visual dimensions play in discrimination of language forms.

Liu and Chuang (1970) report an index of meaningfulness for 1,200 characters rated by Chinese observers, who produced up to four associations for each stimulus within a timed limit of 10 seconds. The basis of such associations are stimulus factors which may be represented at both cognitive and perceptual levels for the person literate in the language. Chinese characters have conceptual, tonal, and visual meanings for the reader but these are lacking for the non-reader.

The present report describes an experiment in which stimuli selected from the Liu and Chuang study were rated by non-reading (English-speaking) observers to provide a degree-of-meaningfulness scale.[1] Whereas Liu and Chuang's observers were able to make associations to both perceptual and semantic aspects of the characters, native English-speaking persons do not have this knowledge available and hence judge meaningfulness visually. The complexity of the Chinese character and its ideographic origins provide distinctive visual features to which the non-reader can attend and frame a judgment.

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Even though the number of associations given by the non-reader is determined by visual dimensions only, it is possible to compare the meaningfulness of the symbols for both readers and non-readers. This is because the term "meaningfulness" is applied not only to the number of associations given to words but also to the number of associations given nonsense *shapes* (Kling and Riggs, 1971). The degree of meaningfulness for the non-reader is dependent upon visual properties of shape termed "complexity" (i.e., the number of sides, symmetry, etc.) rather than upon semantic structure as is the case for words. The process involved is perhaps similar to what happens for ideograms in the hieroglyphic systems (Brainwood, 1948).

An experimental investigation of visual meaning of traditional classical Chinese symbols is also relevant to a report of Rozin, Poritsky, and Sotsky (1971). They appear to have overlooked differences in visual structures of traditional classical Chinese and roman systems when reporting that they were able to teach English-speaking children to read using traditional Chinese characters as intermediaries (Nelson and Ladan, 1976). In so doing they may have misrepresented the nature of reading. Although Rozin and colleagues do make brief reference to perceptual factors operative in reading Chinese, they conclude that phonic differences are responsible for the improvement of reading ability they found. However, the improved performance found in reading English using Chinese symbols as intermediaries could reflect more basic differences in visual processing of Chinese as compared to roman systems than those they alluded to. It is possible that a natural distinctiveness of many Chinese symbols favors easy recognition of traditional classical Chinese as contrasted to roman word forms.

The specific purpose of the study is to determine the extent to which English-speaking participants directly perceive meaningfulness in traditional Chinese characters, and further, the extent to which English-speaking participants attribute degrees of meaningfulness to symbols which have been differentially rated by Chinese-speaking participants. In accordance with the preceding analysis it is hypothesized that the traditional Chinese symbol system contains stimulus materials which will be differentially experienced as "meaningful," conveying ideas or implications for non-Chinese readers on the basis of complexity of shape.

The present study measures *meaningfulness* (dependent variable) of Chinese symbols using a rating scale. A second measure records the average number of responses to a stimulus within a timed limit. This second method for obtaining judgments of meaning is similar to that used by Noble (1952), whose stimuli were verbal materials.

Complexity (independent variable) is defined along two dimensions. The cognitive dimension, termed "simple-compound," was represented by characters selected from Liu and Chuang (1970), where "compound" as contrasted with "simple" characters are composed of several symbols each able to be interpreted as a single (simple) element. More specifically, "simple" characters are defined as those which are composed of single elements of speech, rather than combinations of speech elements. The "compound" level includes those symbols to which two or more ideas are attached (e.g., "elevator-girl"—"girl" and "up and down") or short phrases (e.g., "school house"). Analysis of the second or visual dimension follows Arnoult (1960) and Attneave (1957), in that "visual complexity" relates to a symmetry-asymmetry feature, with asymmetrical figures considered to be more complex than symmetrical figures. Using this method, symmetrical figures convey one-half the visual information provided by asymmetric figures, when characters are matched on other visual dimensions such as number of continuous strokes, number of angles, number of sides and the average number of different angles. Yeh and Liu (1972) seem to define visual complexity of Chinese characters in terms of number of strokes and/or word shape. However, based on translation, their definitions were not clear enough to be used.

If visual dimensions are critical, then it is expected that the symmetrical-asymmetrical dimension of Arnoult and Attneave will be a more significant dimension of meaningfulness than will the simple-compound dimension because the former variable is more closely bound to the visual stimulus than is the culture-bound latter variable. It is hypothesized that asymmetrical Chinese forms will be judged as more complex and thereby judged as being intrinsically less easily encoded than when symmetrical forms are viewed. This prediction is consistent with Garner's (1974) discussion of how information is extracted from "rotated," "reflected," and asymmetric patterns.

Selected Examples from the Fifty Stimuli Employed

	Simple	
	Symmetrical	Asymmetrical
Lowest Level of Meaningfulness (Chinese Observers)	 Heinous	The Chinese Listing Did Not Provide Characters Appropriate For This Cell
Second Lowest Level of Meaningfulness (Chinese Observers)	 A Form of Movement	 Acting; In Place Of
Moderate Level of Meaningfulness (Chinese Observers)	 Moveover	 Method
Second Highest Level of Meaningfulness (Chinese Observers)	 Large	 Old
Highest Level of Meaningfulness (Chinese Observers)	The Chinese Listing Did Not Provide Characters Appropriate For This Cell	 Water; Liquid

Compound	
Symmetrical	**Asymmetrical**
荳 Bean 艹 豆 Grass Bean	蛄 A Form of Harmful Worm 虫 古 Worm Ancient
箕 A Bamboo Utensil ⺮ 其 Bamboo That (As in that person; that thing)	屜 Drawer 尸 彳 世 Corpse Taking a Small Step with the Left Foot Generation
番 Number of Times (As in one time; two times; etc.) 釆 田 Identify Field	紛 Tangled; Confused 糸 分 Small Thread Divide
會 Convention 人 一 曰 People One Speak	娘 Young Girl; Mother 女 良 Feminine Fair
軍 Armed Forces 冖 車 To Cover Vehicle	將 Captain; Future 爿 寸 The Left Half Inch

Symmetrical and asymmetrical symbols were selected from the list of Liu and Chuang by visual inspection. The symbols were chosen to provide maximal differences between the stimulus categories. Simple and compound symbols were selected by an individual fluent in the Chinese language.[2] Symmetrical symbols of compound interpretation were selected from the list of Liu and Chuang so as not to confound the simple-compound with the symmetry-asymmetry variable. Their table provides a number of examples in each of the cells of a 2 x 2 composed of the levels of simple-compound (cognitive content) and the symmetrical-asymmetrical (visual) factors. However, sampling along the symmetrical-asymmetrical dimension is restricted by the predominant number of asymmetrical as compared to symmetrical figures. Apparently this imbalance is not peculiar to the characters Liu and Chuang sampled, but may be found throughout the Chinese language.

Five approximately equal Chinese levels of meaningfulness were produced by dividing the range (0.28 to 3.55) supplied by Liu and Chuang. Three examples of each of the four combinations of simple-compound and symmetrical-asymmetrical forms were selected from each of the five Chinese levels of meaningfulness. These served as stimuli. Replications were matched across the four stimulus categories, within the limitations imposed by the non-availability of matches. Although three matched examples of each combination were originally planned, the two extreme categories of meaningfulness contained an insufficient number of symbols fulfilling the requirements of the other two factors. Thus, a total of ten examples were not available—five from the lowest and five from the highest categories. In the data analysis, these were treated as missing examples. The stimulus characters were drawn on 8 x 10-inch film transparencies by a native Chinese person fluent in the language, and used with a 3M overhead projector.

Thirty English-speaking introductory psychology students unable to speak or read Chinese volunteered to serve as participants. Seated in a partially darkened classroom, they viewed the stimuli (Chinese characters) projected onto a screen via an overhead projector controlled by a Hunter timer (Model 111-C, Series D) set for a 30-second exposure. During 30-second inter-

stimulus intervals, observers rated the stimuli for meaning; first using values along a 0-5 scale, and second by providing verbal associations. The directions follow:

"Please rate each symbol in terms of its meaningfulness on a 0-5 scale, where '0' refers to 'no meaning' and '5' refers to 'greatest possible meaning.' Circle one of the whole numbers from 0 to 5. Then, consider that the degree of meaningfulness of a symbol is reflected: by the degree it resembles an article or an idea. The character may resemble an object, such as a tree or building; *or* the character may resemble an abstraction, such as a piece of music; *or* it may imply its use or origin or association with other things. Please use the second column to describe what articles or ideas each form suggests to you."

All participants were instructed to provide responses for all stimuli on the rating scale and by providing one or more associations for the greater number of characters employed. The 0-5 index of rated meaningfulness was directly interpreted. The second dependent response measure was interpreted following Thorndike and Lorge (1944). Associations values were measured as (1) average number of associations given an item (Method #1) and (2) percentage of *0*'s giving any associations to the item (Method #2). A third measure employed by Thorndike and Lorge did not prove applicable to our task; hence the third measure we used was the *type* of association elicited; i.e., objects, abstractions, origins, or uses.

The index of meaningfulness (0-5) tested three main factors as well as a variable representing matching in terms of the Chinese meaningfulness ratings. An analysis of variance (Table I) applied to these four variables shows the factor of Chinese levels of meaningfulness and the symmetrical-asymmetrical dimension to be significant. With respect to the latter difference, and contrary to the hypothesis, a comparison of means indicates symmetrical symbols convey greater meaning than do asymmetrical symbols (Table II). Garner's (1974) discussion of the pattern "goodness" of "reflected" and "rotated" versus asymmetric forms is consistent with this finding. He reports that R & R forms are superior to asymmetric patterns when simple discrimination and the encoding and generation functions of recognition memory are considered.

TABLE I. The analysis of variance for the three factors: (1) Chinese levels of meaningfulness (derived from Liu and Chuang), (2) Symmetry-asymmetry of form (the visual factor), and (3) Simple-compound content (the cognitive factor). The fourth factor represents variance attributed to replications of matched characters within each level of meaningfulness. Significant interactions are numbered to provide cross-reference with the text.

Source of Variance	*Degrees of Freedom*	*Mean Squares*	*F*
Chinese Levels of Meaningfulness (M)	4	13.9	11.44**
Simple vs. Compound (SC)	1	3.6	1.29
Symmetrical vs. Asymmetrical (SA)	1	41.7	18.46**
Matched replications within levels (r)	2	2.9	2.56
1. M x SA	4	10.8	8.11**
2. M x SC	4	15.3	9.24**
3. M x r	8	6.4	3.78**
4. SC x SA	1	16.8	10.80**
5. SC x r	2	22.0	18.75**
6. SA x r	2	6.3	5.95**
M x SC x SA	4	3.6	2.20
7. M x SC x r	8	6.4	5.04**
8. M x SA x r	8	5.1	3.69**
SC x SA x r	2	1.3	1.23
9. M x SC x SA x r	8	3.9	2.71*

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

These processing components are basic to the task described here.

Differences associated with the simple-compound dimension were not reliable, and differences within levels also did not reach the criterion, indicating homogeneity of symbols within each level.

Nine of the eleven interactions in Table I also proved significant. Although these are of varying degrees of interest, all will be reviewed.

1. The first interaction indicates that it is only the symmetric forms which increase in meaningfulness from Chinese levels of meaningfulness 1 through 4. Inspection of the relationship shows this to be true except where semantic meaning is high: when semantic

TABLE II. Mean ratings of judgements of meaningfulness given by English-speaking observers averaged over all other possible sources of variance for those main factors and interactions noted as statistically significant ($p < .05$) in Table I. Means are omitted which contain the r (replication) factor because the arbitrary choice of ideograms within categories confounds interpretation.

Means for English-speaking observers for each level of meaningfulness: Level 1 represents the category containing the least number of associations provided by the Chinese observers of Liu and Chuang (1970) and Level 5 represents the category of greatest number:

Level 1	*Level 2*	*Level 3*	*Level 4*	*Level 5*
1.95	1.98	2.18	2.34	2.38

Means for English-speaking observers for the visual dimensions of symmetry-asymmetry:

Symmetry	*Asymmetry*
2.32	2.01

Means for English-speaking observers for each level of meaningfulness X symmetry-asymmetry:

	Symmetry	*Asymmetry*
Level 1 (as above)	1.97	1.93
Level 2	2.07	1.90
Level 3	2.23	2.12
Level 4	2.79	1.89
Level 5	2.53	2.22

Means for English observers for each level of meaningfulness X simple-compound:

	Simple	*Compound*
Level 1	2.03	1.86
Level 2	2.12	1.85
Level 3	2.36	1.99
Level 4	2.48	2.20
Level 5	2.06	2.69

Means for English observers for simple-compound X symmetry-asymmetry:

	Symmetry	*Asymmetry*
Simple	2.26	2.15
Compound	2.37	1.87

meaning is high this visual aspect does not relate to cognitive content in any greater degree than does asymmetry of form (Table II).

2. Characters with single meanings for the Chinese convey more meaning than do more cognitively complex characters when selections are made from the four lowest levels of cognitive meaningfulness. At level five (highest degree of meaning as rated by Chinese observers) the opposite is true (Table II). Since symmetry of form has been controlled in the analysis, this result suggests that some undetermined visual dimension was being discriminated by the native English-speaking sample, and moreover that this visual dimension negatively influences meaning for the Chinese as compared to the degree of meaning derived by English-speaking observers.

This result may have relevance for prior ideographic research employing English participants. Visual differences between characters of single as contrasted to multiple meanings likely were operative in Hull's (1920) demonstration of the discriminability of radicals embedded in compound characters, and may also be related to Kuo's (1923) report that English participants could discover the meaning of radicals when combined forms containing the radical were named. Thus the cognitive dimension distinguishing characters of single versus those of multiple concepts may contain important perceptual components that allow differentiation of character types and influence meaning.

3. There is a reliable interaction of replications and cognitive levels; however, plotting the median at each level gives a steady increase in meaningfulness over cognitive levels although the selected matches follow irregular paths. This result combined with the lack of significance found between symbols within each level suggests that stimulus selection was not biased.

4. A comparison of meaningfulness across symbol types shows that symmetrical symbols which are combinations convey greater meaning of concepts than do similar symbols which are of single composition, while the reverse is true when asymmetric symbols are considered (Table II).

5. and 6. The homogeneity of perception within symbol groups was studied and two interactions are found significant. One of these is with a visual dimension and the other with a cognitive

dimension. This suggests that certain symbols within groups of characters were unique with respect to rated meanings. However, since the ideograms were arbitrarily placed into categories the interactions are treated as chance events difficult to interpret ad hoc.

7. and 8. Chinese level of meaningfulness and replications prove significant in three-way interaction with both the visual and cognitive dimensions. As noted, simple characters prove more meaningful visually except at level five where asymmetric are the more meaningful. This reversal of trend also happens in replication three at levels three and four as well as level five. Trends also differ across replications for the visual variable plotted over Chinese levels of meaningfulness. Specifically, replication two shows regularly increasing curves for both symmetric and asymmetric forms while consistent trends are absent in replications one and three.

9. No easy description of the four-way interaction is possible. In general, the tendency is for visual meaning to be least for compound and asymmetric figures but this generalization is consistent only for the three middle Chinese levels of meaningfulness in replications one and two. Graphic presentation of this interaction indicates that visual meaningfulness for English-speaking observers is not precisely related to semantic judgments made by Chinese participants.

Table III shows that the ratings of the English-speaking participants significantly increase as degree of meaningfulness for the Chinese participants increased, the relationship being $r = +.92$; $df = 3$; $p < .05$. These results lend support to the hypothesis that visual differences between ideograms are perceived as differences in meaning. Without doubt, important visual cues to meaning are to be found in the graphic content of Chinese script.

Turning now to the second measure, the results indicate that the number of associations given an item by the English-speaking participants is consistent with data from the 0-5 index when scored by either of two methods. Analysis of method #1 (the average number of associations given an item) indicates that asymmetrical-

TABLE III. The range and arithmetic means of Liu and Chuang's index for the tested Chinese characters compared to the mean values chosen by English-speaking participants from a 0-5 scale where "0" represents "no meaning" and "5" represents "greatest possible meaning." The Chinese and English index means correlate significantly ($r = +.92$, $df=3$; $p<.05$).

X of index of meaningfulness

Chinese-speaking	*English-speaking*
.60 (range: .28-.93)	1.95
1.26 (range: .94-1.58)	1.98
1.91 (range: 1.59-2.23)	2.18
2.66 (range: 2.24-2.88)	2.34
3.22 (range: 2.89-3.55)	2.38

compound and symmetrical-simple symbols provide more associations than do other combinations, but differences do not reach statistical significance. Unfortunately, analyses of these data could not be extended as we hoped because the range of responses is too small (0-2). Analysis of method #2 (the percentage of observers giving a response to the item) shows differences in both the simple-compound and symmetrical-asymmetrical dimensions, both of which prove reliable ($F=4.74$; $df=1/32$; $p<.05$; and $F=9.90$; $df=1/32$; $p<.01$, respectively). Data show that more persons give responses to simple than to compound forms, and to symmetrical than to asymmetrical types. This is consistent with what was found using the 0-5 scale; Vanderplas and Garvin (1959) and Garner (1974) report similar results.

The second method of measuring meaningfulness (via association) correlates $r = +.31$ ($df=48$; $p<.05$) with the Chinese index of meaningfulness, and $r = +.85$ ($df=48$; $p<.01$) with the English-speaking index rated on the 0-5 dimension. The difference between these correlations is significant ($z=4.5$; $p<.01$), consistent with an interpretation of a greater emphasis on visual characteristics by the English-speaking participants.

Analysis of the types of meanings associated by English-speaking people—namely, (1) resemblance to an object, (2) resemblance to an abstraction, and (3) use or origin or association with other things—shows additional factors operating along visual and cognitive dimensions. Characters of single meaning and symmetric

symbols tend to resemble objects while compound characters and asymmetric symbols reflect use or origin or an association with other things. Abstract associations are not reliably related to visual appearance or to level of semantic meaning.

In many psychological experiments Chinese symbols have been treated as "neutral," ambiguous, or nonrepresentational stimuli for English-speaking persons because they lack verbally-defined cognitive components. The present results are inconsistent with this assumption. These indicate a definite relationship between the physical stimulus characteristics of written Chinese and both the particular meanings associated and ratings of meaningfulness given by English-speaking participants. Chinese characters are not "nonsense" forms. The correspondence between Chinese and English indexes affirms that Chinese symbols contain implicit degrees of meaning, and moreover, that the levels of visual meaning produced by the symbols are usually related to identifiable form characteristics.

Gestalt theorists have long emphasized the implicit meanings conveyed by simple forms. Zuzne (1970) also has found that verbal associations to form depend in part upon visual factors. On the basis of studies using non-ideographic stimuli he reports that symmetrical bilateral shapes produce more responses of "animal" and "other biological forms" than do asymmetrical shapes. The similarity in his and the current results raises the question of the extent to which quality of verbal association and level of meaningfulness in studies involving visual shapes rest upon resemblance of the shape to the form of a real object, the use or origin of the object, or associations to other objects.

The conclusion that perceptual aspects contribute to the meaningfulness of Chinese symbols is consistent with Wang's (1973) speculations about the derivation and content of Chinese characters. Wang notes that some of the earliest components of the Chinese language are visually based. He says that the Chinese language expressed a cognitive dimension as a visual sketch in its most rudimentary stage. In the evolved traditional classical style (the current stimuli), pictorial characteristics are less obvious even though quite effectively communicated, as shown. It has been claimed that all writing, including both roman and ideographic

scripts, has evolved from pictographic representation toward simplification, schematization, conventionalization, and thence to abstraction based upon phonics (Kuhn, 1955). The latest reformation of the Chinese language shows a movement toward abstractness which is based, at least in part, upon phonic structure and this is consistent with Kuhn's contentions.

It is also possible to speculate on the probable course of visual abstraction to this point. Analogous to the development of other languages, Chinese may have transformed according to a "simplicity principle." Just as the most frequently used words in a language also are the shortest (Zipf's law), it seems likely that the most frequently used Chinese characters may be those which have been progressively altered towards visual simplicity. The results reported here provide empirical support consistent with this hypothesis.

Interpretation based upon a "simplicity principle" would only apply to some of the characters, however. Many modern characters have origins which are not pictographic. Many of these were formed via operations involving borrowing the sound or meaning from other characters. A second potential bias in the results may occur because the language was not randomly sampled but equal representations within each visual category were chosen. Because of selective sampling, the available pool of symmetrical characters is much smaller than the pool of asymmetrical characters. However, the results were supported by the statistical tests applied, and the best evidence favors the perceptual hypothesis.

Whatever the dynamics of evolution, it is clear that through this development visual factors have become of much less importance and perceptual distinctiveness may no longer serve the reader very well in certain alphabets. It is here that the present results may have relevance for the earlier mentioned study of Rozin, Poritsky, and Sotsky (1971). In light of current results it now seems possible that the children of their study who were aided in reading English via Chinese forms may have been assisted by the comparatively easy perceptual content of Chinese characters to an extent not previously appreciated.

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A most unusual horizontal inscription: eight large
characters, two by two, which must be read,
not from right to left, but backwards,— and
what is more

The eight large characters are inverted. Passing
travellers exclaim: «Ignorance of the stone-
cutter! Or some unholy eccentricity!» and,
seeing nothing, they move on.

o

You, oh you, will you not translate? These eight
large backwards signs mark the return to the
grave and the SOUL'S WAY,— they are not
meant to direct living steps.

If, turning their backs to the air sweet to breath,
they burrow in stone; if, fleeting from light,
they look into the depths of solidity,

Clearly, it is to be read from the other side of space,—
where there are no roads and where the eyes
of the dead journey unblinkingly.

By Victor Segalen, translated from the French by Michael Taylor; excerpted from a broadside "STELE DU CHEMIN DE L'AME" which was printed and distributed by The Greenwood Press (San Francisco, CA 94133) earlier this year.