

Stephen M. Kraemer

The University of Arizona

Tucson, Arizona 85721

Using Similar Form Characters as an Aid to Character Recognition in Chinese







ABSTRACT





Since Chinese characters are composed of a relatively small number of basic strokes and components, and since these units are spatially arranged within characters in a limited number of ways, many Chinese characters are similar in their overall graphic form. These Similar Form Characters can cause confusion for students learning the Chinese written language. In order to help students better identify and recognize Chinese characters, a booklet was developed in which commonly occurring Similar Form Characters are presented and contrasted, so as to point out their areas of similarity as well as their distinctive features.




Similarity in character form can be manifest in two fundamental ways. First there is stroke or component similarity, where two or more characters have the same or similar strokes or components in common. Secondly, there is "proportional" similarity, where the constituent components of two or more characters are geometrically arranged in the same manner. Any two Similar Form Characters may exhibit one or both of these kinds of similarity.















Characters with stroke or component similarity may be described in several different ways. First, two characters may possess the same component. Examples include the characters 記 and 紀 with the component 己 in common, or the characters 都 and 部 with the component 阝 in common. Second, characters may share the same component, where the component is also a character by itself. Examples include the characters 件 and 牛, which share the component 牛, or the characters 字 and 子, which share the component 子.

There are Similar Form Characters that contain all the same strokes or components, but have these elements organized differently within them. For example, the characters 刀 and 力 share the elements 丿 and 丨, while the characters 己 and 巳 share the elements 丿 and 乚. It should be noted that "same" strokes or components are those that despite minor differences in stroke length or component size are nonetheless recognized as the same. For instance, the component 是 is recognized as the same in both characters 提 and 題.







even though in the latter , the component  has a longer final stroke. Similarly, the component  is recognized as the same in the characters  and , even though the size of the component  is different in each of the characters.

Similar Form Characters can possess components, strokes, or parts of strokes which are not exactly the same, but which are quite similar to each other. For example, the characters  and  have similar right-side components, namely (1)  and (2)  respectively. In both of these components, there are three strokes which are similar. These are the second, third, and fourth strokes of component (1); and the second, fifth, and sixth strokes of component (2). Thus the components

 and  can be seen as sharing the common area .

The left-side components of  and , namely (3)  and (4) , also share a common area of similarity , which is composed of strokes as well as parts of strokes. Thus the horizontal stroke - of  is a full stroke in both components (3) and (4), namely - in  and . However, the vertical portion ' of  is a full stroke in (3) but only part of a stroke in (4), namely ' in  versus ' in . In like fashion, the curved portion ' of  is a full stroke in (4), but only part of a stroke in (3), namely ' in  versus ' in .

The second major type of visual similarity among characters is "proportional" similarity. Here the components of two Similar Form Characters are geometrically arranged in a similar manner in each character. All Chinese characters can be thought of as being placed in an imaginary square, with their components occupying definite spaces within this square. Characters with proportional similarity have their respective components occupying roughly the same relative spaces in the imaginary character square; that is, the characters have become proportioned in the same way.

Quite often, two characters have proportional similarity in addition to a more obvious stroke or component type of similarity. For example, besides the fact that the characters 飯 and 館 both have the component 食 in common, they are also similar in form because their components are arranged in the same way, namely as the right and left halves of a square , such as  and . Additional examples of characters that exhibit proportional similarity include the characters 說 and 話, which exhibit the pattern ; the characters 美 and 英, which exhibit the pattern ; and the characters 問 and 問, which exhibit the pattern .

Characters that are similar in their overall graphic form can cause confusion for the student of Chinese and can lead to difficulties in character recognition and discrimination as well as reading

comprehension. To help the student better identify and remember Chinese characters, a character contrast method can be used, in which the student is shown groups of characters which are felt to be particularly confusing, due to their similar form. These Similar Form Characters can aid the student by enabling him not only to see those areas that are similar among a group of characters, but also to recognize those features of a particular character which distinguish it from other similar ones.

Many educators and teachers of Chinese have recognized the usefulness of contrasting Similar Form Characters as an aid to character recognition. In the book, Chinese Characters Easily Confused, edited by Henry C. Fenn, various groups of Similar Form Characters are set up for use by students. Similarly, in the presentation of individual characters in Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary, Similar Form Characters are occasionally presented, the reader being asked to distinguish between them. Both of these books show how Similar Form Characters can be used as teaching aids, but the character contrasts which they present are of limited practical use for beginning students of Chinese, since they often include more "advanced" characters, namely those which a student would probably not encounter in the early stages of character learning.

Similar Form Characters can be organized and geared specifically for beginning students, however, as has been done by Shau Wing Chan in his Chinese Reader for Beginners. Here Chan uses Similar Form Characters in a number of review exercises, where he asks the student to discriminate certain similar characters previously studied. However, in other more widely used beginning texts for reading Chinese, such as Beginning Chinese Reader by John DeFrancis, contrasts among Similar Form Characters are not shown; thus the student must either do without them or have them supplied by his teacher.

It was through my own experience teaching the DeFrancis reading texts that I discovered a number of Similar Form Characters that might present problems in recognition for beginning students of Chinese. As the need appeared substantial for a character contrast method which could help the beginning student to better recognize and discriminate similar characters, I developed a Similar Form Character contrast booklet, which was designed to accompany the first reading text in the DeFrancis reader series, namely Beginning Chinese Reader. This booklet formed the major part of a thesis which I wrote at Seton Hall University and was entitled, "Similar Form Characters and the Teaching of Reading in Chinese."

The character contrast booklet which I devised for Beginning Chinese Reader incorporates several principles which form the basis

for a method of using Similar Form Characters to aid in character discrimination and retention. These principles include

- (1) the presentation of Similar Form Character pairs, lesson by lesson, giving their pronunciations in Chinese along with their meanings in English;
- (2) the contrasting of Similar Form Character pairs, showing areas of graphic similarity in strokes or components, as well as proportional similarity;
- (3) the providing of information regarding possible sources of additional confusion between two Similar Form Characters, such as similarity in pronunciation, similar syntactic function, related meaning, occurrence in the same combination, etc.;
- (4) the construction of a set of review exercises for each unit, where two Similar Form Characters can be used in the same sentence.

Examples of Similar Form Characters that appear in the character contrast booklet for Beginning Chinese Reader and which seem to present particular difficulty for the beginning student of Chinese include the following pairs: 少 (shǎo) 'few' and 小 (xiǎo) 'little'; 說 (shuō) 'say' and 話 (huà) 'speech'; 先 (xiān) 'first' and 生 (shēng) 'give birth to'; 買 (mǎi) 'buy' and 賣 (mài) 'sell'; and 你 (nǐ) 'you' and 他 (tā) 'he/she'.

The purpose of this paper has been to show (1) that Similar Form Characters exist as a phenomenon in the Chinese writing system; and (2) that students' identification and retention of Chinese characters can be aided by pointing out the similarities and differences among commonly occurring Similar Form Characters.