

# Molly Bogart - Skeletal Draft

## The Semiotics of the Chinese Orthography

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### Introduction

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This paper discusses the semiotics [[47]] of Chinese characters. Aside from the introduction and conclusion, each section of this paper will delve into various aspects of Chinese characters which include the development of simplified characters from ancient drawings, the adoption of Pinyin, and various types of radicals, a component of a Chinese character.

The second section of this paper, titled “Basics of Icons in Chinese Characters,” discusses the basic understanding and key concepts of icons [[20]] along with indexes [[23]] and symbols [[58]] since Chinese characters are argued to be iconic. I will also expand on the use of firstness [[14]], secondness [[46]], and thirdness [[64]] as seen in Chinese characters. This section lays a foundation for a basic understanding of what type of sign Chinese characters are generally considered to be in terms of icon, index, or symbol. In addition, a foundation of how Peirce’s, which includes the object[[33]], representamin [[44]], and interpretant [[22]], and Saussure’s, which includes the signified [[55]] and signifier [[56]], sign models can be applied to Chinese characters [[51, 52, 53]] ((6, 2)).

The third section of this paper, titled “Development of Hanzi,” outlines the diachronic [[11]] transition from ancient drawings to traditional characters to, ultimately, simplified characters ((3, 4)). This section is highly dependent on concepts of structural economy ((5)). There will also be information on how various Chinese characters were developed as conventional signs [[8]]. The different components that make up a character along with the understanding of signifying order [[50]] will also be discussed. This section also serves to explain that Chinese characters can be considered as presentational symbols [[41]].

The fourth section of this paper, titled, “Adoption of Pinyin,” discusses the use of Pinyin as a form of phonetic orthography used to attribute pronunciation to Chinese characters ((1)). I will discuss how Pinyin is a part of the semiosphere [[48]] of Chinese characters as well as its usefulness in the modern technological era. This section will expand upon the ideas presented in syntagmatics [[62]] and paradigmatics[[35]] among Chinese characters and Pinyin from a synchronic [[60]] point of view ((7)). I also discuss how phonetic sequences that constitute as words can act as signals [[54]].

The fifth section of this paper, titled “Radicals: Content Indicators,” discusses radicals in Chinese characters that indicate a specific meaning that relates to the overall denotative [[9]] ((8)) meaning of the character ((9)).

The sixth section of this paper, titled “Radicals: Pronunciation Indicators,” discusses radicals in Chinese characters that can be considered syntagms [[61]] since they work together with the content indicator radicals to determine the meaning and pronunciation of the entire character ((9)).

The seventh section of this paper, titled “Different Characters, Same Pronunciation, Different Meaning,” discusses radicals in Chinese characters that indicate the paradigm [[34]] category of pronunciation which changes the icon of the character whilst keeping the same pronunciation. This type of character’s meaning is determined through context [[7]] when used in spoken parole [[36]] ((10)).

The eighth section of this paper, titled “Same Characters, Different Pronunciation, Different Meaning,” discusses Chinese characters that are indistinguishable in written parole unless the context is given which indicates the character’s connotative [[6]] ((8)) meaning.

The conclusion is utilized to summarize the points discussed throughout the paper and make any final conclusions made throughout the process of writing that paper that were not initially taken into account.

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## Basics of Icons in Chinese Characters

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**I want to write about** the basic connection between Chinese characters to icons and how they are identified as signs as well as other factors of firstness, secondness, and thirdness that contribute to the meaning and development of Chinese characters. **I plan to focus on** the basics of iconicity and the applications of Peircean and Saussurean models of signs to Chinese characters. **I would like my reader to** take away a firm understanding of the general theories on how Chinese characters are determined and categorized in terms of types of signs.

¶ I will write about icons, indexes, and symbols as they relate to Chinese characters.

¶ I will write about firstness, secondness, and thirdness and how they relate to aspects of Chinese characters.

¶ I will write about the applications of Peirce’s model of a sign to Chinese characters.

¶ I will write about the applications of Saussure’s model of a sign to Chinese characters.

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## Development of Hanzi

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**I want to write about** the development of Chinese characters from ancient to traditional to simplified characters. **I plan to focus on** the evidence of structural economy within an iconic orthographic language and the use of natural signs to develop Chinese characters. **I would like**

**my reader to** grasp the ideas that relate to the development of Chinese characters as well as understand simplified characters' true syntagmatic composition.

¶ I will write about the development of Chinese characters from ancient times to the modern era.

¶ I will write about the evidence of structural economy in the diachronic study of Chinese characters.

¶ I will write about the different components of Chinese characters and how the signifying order of a character is typically triggered and unravels.

¶ I will write about Chinese characters as a complete unit and can be considered as presentational symbols.

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## Adoption of Pinyin

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**I want to write about** the use of Pinyin and how it connects to Chinese characters. **I plan to focus on** the attribution of phonetic pronunciations to Chinese characters as well as how Pinyin contributes as a part of the Mandarin semiosphere. **I would like my reader to** get a sense of understanding the importance of Pinyin and its relation to Chinese characters.

¶ I will write about the use of Pinyin, the Chinese phonetic system, in the modern era.

¶ I will write about the different parts of the Chinese langue semiosphere.

¶ I will write about how paradigmatics and syntagmatics can be applied to Chinese characters in conjunction with Pinyin pronunciations.

¶ I will write about the possibility of pronunciations being considered as signals.

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## Radicals: Content Indicators

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**I want to write about** radicals in Chinese that indicate purely contextual meanings. **I plan to focus on** aspects of denotation while touching on connotation. **I would like my reader to** understand this type of radical and its significance within the syntagmatic structure of a Chinese character.

¶ I will write about radicals that indicate content or contribute to the meaning of a character.

¶ I will use the examples: 三点水 (Sān diǎn shuǐ/ three dots water), 女 (nǚ/ woman), and 心 (xīn/ heart) as tangible examples of content indicator radicals among Chinese characters.

1. 三点水 - 洗 (xǐ/ to wash), 湖 (hú/ lake), 江 (jiāng/ river)
2. 女 - 她 (tā/her), 妈 (mā/mother), 好 (hǎo/ good)
3. 心 - 忘 (wàng/ to forget), 想 (xiǎng/ to miss), 思 (sī/ to consider)

¶ I will write about the denotative nature of content indicator radicals.

¶ I will write about the contribution of syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures to Chinese characters using content indicator radicals.

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## Radicals: Pronunciation Indicators

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**I want to write about** radicals in Chinese that indicate purely pronunciation meanings. **I plan to focus on** aspects of syntagmatics while touching on paradigmatics. **I would like my reader to** understand this type of radical and its significance within the syntagmatic structure of a Chinese character.

¶ I will write about radicals that indicate the pronunciation of Chinese characters.

¶ I will use the examples: 羊 (yáng/ sheep), 青 (qīng/ blue, green, youth), and 巴 (bā/ to hope) as tangible examples of pronunciation indicator radicals among Chinese characters.

1. 羊 - 洋 (yáng/ ocean), 样 (yàng/ like, similar), 痒 (yǎng/ itchy)
2. 青 - 请 (qǐng/ ask), 晴 (qíng/ clear), 情 (qíng/ emotion)
3. 巴 - 把 (bǎ/ to hold), 吧 (ba/ modal particle used to suggest), 爸 (bà/ father)

¶ I will write about the syntagmatic and paradigmatic nature of pronunciation indicator radicals.

¶ I will write about the similarities of phonetic pronunciation along with the differences of tones.

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## Different Characters, Same Pronunciation, Different Meanings

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**I want to write about** pairs of Chinese characters that have different character representations, the same pronunciation, and different meanings. **I plan to focus on** aspects of paradigmatics while touching on syntagmatics with an emphasis on contextual cues. **I would like my reader to** understand these types of Chinese characters and their important role within the Chinese language.

¶ I will write about pairs of Chinese characters that appear different in form and meaning but have the same pronunciation.

¶ I will use the following as examples of Chinese characters that look and mean different things but have identical pronunciations.

1. Shì: 是 (to be/yes) versus 事 (matter/thing)
2. Bǎo: 保 (to defend/protect) versus 饱 (to be full from eating)
3. Zuò: 做 (to do) versus 坐 (to sit)

¶ I will write about the use of context in speech parole to elicit the correct denotative meaning.

¶ I will write about comparable English words that act in a similar way as the pairs listed.

¶ I will write about the paradigmatic nature of phonetic pronunciations in Chinese.

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## Same Character, Different Pronunciations, Different Meanings

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**I want to write about** pairs of Chinese characters that have the same character representation, different pronunciations, and different meanings. **I plan to focus on** aspects of connotation while

touching on denotation with an emphasis on contextual cues. **I would like my reader to** understand these types of Chinese characters and their important role within the Chinese language.

¶ I will write about pairs of Chinese characters that appear the same in form but have different pronunciations and meanings.

¶ I will use the following as example of Chinese characters that look the same but have different pronunciations and meanings:

1. 行 (xíng/ will do) versus 行 (háng/ row or line)
2. 奇 (qí/ strange) versus 奇 (jī/ odd number)
3. 恶 (wù/ to hate) versus 恶 (è/ evil or wrong)

¶ I will write about the use of context in written parole to elicit the correct denotative meaning.

¶ I will write about comparable English words that act in a similar way as the pairs of words listed.

¶ I will expand upon the connotative nature of Chinese characters.

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## Conclusion

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In this paper, I did my best at introducing the distinguishing aspects of Chinese characters in the realm of semiotics. I particularly focused on the topics listed below:

- The application of **Peirce's** and **Saussure's** model of signs to Chinese characters.
- The application of **icons**, **indexes**, and **symbols** to Chinese characters as well as how **firstness**, **secondness**, and **thirdness** can relate to Chinese characters.
- The development of Chinese characters which started as pictographs that gradually transformed through the application of structural economy to the Chinese orthography as well as the **conventional signs** that can be found in Chinese that weren't influenced by pictographs.
- The parts that make up a Chinese orthographic **Semiosphere**, and how Chinese characters can be looked at from a **diachronic** and **synchronic** perspective.
- I also look at radicals in Chinese that can be viewed through ideas of **denotation** versus **connotation** and paradigmatics versus syntagmatics.
- I also look at pairs of Chinese characters that can be viewed through ideas of denotation versus connotation and **paradigmatics** versus **syntagmatics**.

This paper deconstructs Chinese characters in a semiotic sense to understand how they developed, how different semiotic theories of signs apply to them, and how culture plays a massive role in the denotative and connotative functions of the characters. In the hopes of presenting the reader with a guide to the considerably complicated nature of Chinese characters, I apply semiotic ideas and concepts to Chinese characters in order to demystify the complex nature of Chinese characters.