

EAS 205 – How to use a Chinese Dictionary

Introduction:

Traditionally, Chinese dictionaries have been organized according to repetitive visual elements of the characters. These elements are known as radicals (*bushou* 部首). This is a very rational approach since the Chinese characters are not phonetic (i.e., you cannot tell how they are pronounced simply by looking at them). Under each character, the dictionary will include compounds and phrases that begin with that character. For example, the term for China is *zhongguo* 中国, and this appears under the character *zhong* 中 (see below for further information).

As noted in the handout on buying dictionaries, a complication has arisen in this basic arrangement. In the 1950s, the government of the People's Republic of China, in an effort to extend literacy, undertook to simplify the Chinese writing system (the first such effort in over 2000 years). A large number of characters were simplified (see the handout on simplification). At the same time, to assist Chinese learning to read, the government promulgated a new, official system of romanization known as the *pinyin* 拼音 system. These developments greatly influenced the organization of Chinese dictionaries.

Dictionaries using Traditional (complex) characters (*fantizi* 繁體字)

Traditional dictionaries use a system of 214 radicals to organize the characters they include. Most modern dictionaries include a table of the radicals. In addition, they will have an index arranged by radicals of all the characters in the dictionary. After you find the character, you must go to that section of the dictionary to find the particular compound or phrase that you need. These are usually arranged in one of two ways. Either they appear in order of the total number of strokes in the character or they are listed according to pronunciation as recorded in a particular transcription system.

The steps, then, for looking up a compound consist of the following:

1. Inspect the character for the relevant radical. Note that some of these are easy to identify; others are more obscure. Pay particular attention to the variations with which the radicals appear in the written character. For example, the “heart” radical (*xin* 心) often appears as a long vertical stroke flanked by two dots ↑, as in the character *kuai* 快, “quick.”
2. Consult the radical index under the proper radical and find the relevant character. The index will be organized by number of strokes excluding the radical. In other words, characters with four strokes after the radical proceed characters with five. The index will indicate the page in the main body of the dictionary where that character is located.
3. If you are looking for a compound (e.g., *kuai* 快樂, “happy”), look for it in the list that follows the main heading. You will be able to do this more rapidly if you take the time to figure out whether the dictionary lists compounds by stroke number of second (and subsequent) characters or pronunciation. Note that if the

dictionary uses stroke number, it is **total** stroke number. In other words, here you should include the radical as you count the strokes. Thus, if you are looking for the character *kuai* 快 (“quick”), you would look for four strokes in the radical index, seven strokes if it is the second character in a compound that begins with another character.

Dictionaries using Simplified Characters (*jiantizi* 简体字)

Popular dictionaries of Modern Standard Chinese (Mandarin) produced in the People’s Republic of China since the simplification of characters and the development of the *pinyin* system are organized a bit differently than the system described above. First of all, the radical system as undergone changes. These dictionaries generally use 188 radicals instead of the traditional 214 to index the characters. The changed number is the result of the elimination of some radicals. At the same time, the order of the radicals has changed as some of the radicals themselves have undergone simplification. For example, the “word” radical 言 is number 149 in the traditional arrangement, but it appears as number 9 (讠) in the simplified list. The character for “to speak,” *shuo* will appear in very different places in the radical list depending on whether you are looking for the complex form 說 or the simplified one 说.

Besides the radical index, many dictionaries (especially specialist dictionaries) index the characters according to a stroke number index. In such dictionaries, one finds the characters by counting the total number of strokes and then looking under that number. Because there are many characters with 5 – 13 strokes, the list is further separated according to the type of stroke used for the character’s first stroke. There are five of these: a horizontal stroke 一, a vertical stroke 丨, a slash 丿, a dot 丶, and a hooked stroke ㇇.

Furthermore, the bodies of modern mainland dictionaries are more likely to be organized according to the pronunciation as recorded in the *pinyin* system. This makes the dictionary much quicker to use if you already know how to pronounce the character you are seeking, a common situation when you are looking for a new compound that begins with a familiar first character.

Depending on the dictionary, there are thus two methods for looking up a character:

Dictionaries with the revised radical index:

1. After familiarizing yourself with the new radicals, identify the radical of the character (see above for more detail).
2. Consult the radical index under the relevant number of strokes (excluding the radical).
3. Go to the relevant page and find the compound under the pronunciation of the second character.

Dictionaries with stroke number index:

1. Count the total number of strokes including the radical.
2. Decide what kind of first stroke the character uses. Here is just one reason why your language teachers stress proper stroke order so much!
3. Consult the index under the relevant stroke number and initial stroke.
4. Go to the relevant page of the dictionary and find the compound according to the pronunciation.

Note that some dictionaries have both types of indices. In that case, you can choose whichever system works better for you.