HOW TO USE A KANJI DICTIONARY

As I write this, in 2008, I fear that the skills I’m about to describe will soon be—who am I kidding?—already are endangered species. That is to say, the way to use a traditional (paper) dictionary is a skill few students learn any more, thanks to electronic dictionaries. It’s so easy to take out your stylus or use your mouse to write the character on a pad and voila find what you need. I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t take my electronic dictionary with me everywhere in Japan, and that my Nelson’s is just too heavy for a backpack. BUT (and you knew this was coming), that doesn’t mean that my Nelson’s is collecting dust on the shelf. Nor are any of the other dictionaries next to it unused.

No matter how good electronic dictionaries become, I believe that there is still an argument for learning the basic methods for paper dictionary use. It is a little bit like math in the age of the calculator. Sure, your calculator makes quick work of tough math problems so you use it. But, in a pinch, if you didn’t have it, it sure is comforting to know how to do the same problems with a pencil and paper.

Another argument for learning the radical-organization method is that dictionaries without a touch pad or stylus are often cheaper and more comprehensive than those with them.

Finally, the more you use this method the faster you become at it. At first it may seem like a chore, but with time your fingers will fly through the pages with ease. Really. Stop laughing.

**Basic Organization**

In order to function in a CJK environment, one must first become comfortable with the concept of “radicals” (部首 J. bushu). What is a radical? Simply put, a radical is a part or a component of a character. All Chinese characters are made up of one or more radicals. In the traditional Kangxi 康熙 radical system, there are 214 radicals. Most dictionaries are arranged according to this system, although some use a modified version of it. We will be covering other systems of organization later in this course, but for now let’s focus on the Kangxi system, which is the most widely recognized. It is useful for students to learn the 214 Kangxi radicals, because then they can use most CJK reference works. Even if you regularly use a dictionary whose system is somehow modified, we strongly recommend that you learn the 214 Kangxi radicals or banish yourself to being able to use only one dictionary for the rest of your life.

CJK dictionaries of Chinese characters will all have a chart of radicals. Here is an example from one of the major dictionaries, Morohashi’s (we’ll come back to this later in the course):
For our purposes right now, you can ignore the numbers below each radical. Notice that the radicals are arranged according to how many brush-strokes it takes to write each one. Because written Chinese is not a phonetic system, the number of brushstrokes in a character is a convenient way of organization (we can’t organize alphabetically!).

Some of the radicals may look familiar to you because they constitute a character all on their own. For example, 木 means “wood,” 竹 means “bamboo,” and 日 means “sun.” Other radicals can only be part of a character. For example, 建 is not a character on its own, but is part of the character 建, “to build.”

Once you understand that characters are made up of a combination of recurring elements including these radicals, then the task of learning thousands of characters begins to look a little less daunting.
**Identifying Radicals**

In order to find a character in a dictionary, one must first be able to identify the radical. Think of the character as sitting on a grid. You look to different quadrants and/or sides to find the radical. With a character like 林 that is an easy task—the radical is the “tree” radical on the left-hand side. But what about a character like 爽? At first it may seem inscrutable, but there are some rules of thumb that can help. Although these rules don’t help 100% of the time, they are still remarkably effective. Ask yourself the following questions (in this order):

1. **Is the character a radical all on its own?**

   氏, 田, 車, 舌 and 魚 are all examples of this. Do not make the mistake of thinking that this question should be easy for you to answer intuitively. It isn’t, but don’t be discouraged! It is all too common to see a new character, spend a few minutes trying to break it down into radical components, only to discover that it is in its entirety a radical. Characters with many strokes are particularly misleading, such as 龍 (dragon), 亀 (turtle), and 鼻 (nose). The only way to know the answer to this question quickly is to memorize the 214 Kangxi radicals.

2. **Is the radical on the left hand side of the character?**

   Usually easily identifiable, typical left hand radicals can be seen in the following characters: 待 (wait, attend); 持 (have); 侍 (serve). In each of these cases, the right hand is the same (寺), but the left hand radical changes. Moreover, some these radicals are good examples of how the shape of a radical can change from the “full character” form. For example, 扌 is the left-hand radical form of 手 and 亻 is the left-hand radical form of 人. Most good radical charts, such as that above, show you both forms.

3. **Is the radical on the right hand side of the character?**

   Characters that have right-hand side radicals include: 教, 難, 新, 別, 歌 and 額. Be careful not to mistake 難 on the left with 難 on the right. They are actually different radicals: 難 on the left is an abbreviation of 阝 and 難 on the right is an abbreviation of 阝.

4. **Is the radical on the top of the character?**

   Characters that have top radicals include: 写, 安, 笑, 罪, and 老.

5. **Is the radical on the bottom of the character?**

   Characters that have bottom radicals include: 兄, 忘, 熱, 貧, and 益.

6. **Is the radical a NW enclosure?**

   Characters that have NW radicals include: 厚, 尺, 房, 店, and 病.

7. **Is the radical a SW enclosure?**
Characters that have SW radicals include: 近, 起, 建, 翅, and 鼬.

8. Is the radical a total enclosure?

This category is rather a catch-all. Sure, there are obvious inclusions like 因, but then there are other types of enclosures that don’t seem “total,” such as those we see in the following characters: 区, 包, 式, and 門. Some dictionaries, like Nelson’s, break this category down into sub-categories like “NW radicals,” etc. Others do not. In Japan, the category stands alone (see below) as a recognized unit.

The hardest radicals to identify are the one-stroke radicals, so it helps to take a look in that section of your dictionary to see what sorts of characters are categorized as having a one-stroke principal radical. Remember our friend 爽 from above? Nelson’s categorizes it under the radical ノ, but notes that traditionally it is categorized under 爻.

Now, let’s take a look at a page from Nelson’s dictionary and see how it is organized:
This is the number of brushstrokes in the radical (4)

This is the radical number—in this case, radical #75 is 木. Notice all the characters on this page have that radical in them.

These are all the radicals in the Kangxi system that have four brushstrokes in them. The square brackets indicate which radical will be found on this page. The small "5" indicates the number of residual brushstrokes of the first character on the page.

This is the range of kanji on this page (each kanji is assigned a discrete number)

This is the page number
Now let’s look at a small section of the page in greater detail: For the first character, we get two different versions (although these look almost identical here, there is a slight font difference). The first is the common version, and the second is the less common (or complex) version. Next, we have two numbers, one over the other. The one on top is the number that Nelson’s has assigned to this character. Other dictionaries will cross-list characters with the Nelson’s number, which is why this is useful. The number below, which begins with an F, is a cross reference to another dictionary, Fuzambō’s Shōkai Kanwa Jiten. For your purposes this is not all that useful.

The upper-case B or A to the left of the character indicate that the character is either one of the essential 881 kanji learned by elementary students (A) or one of the remaining 969 kanji in the list of 1850 kanji learned by the time one graduates from high school. If there is no A or B, then the kanji is not in either category.

The readings are given in either SMALL CAPS or in italics. If the reading is in SMALL CAPS it is an “on-yomi” or Sinicized reading, and if it is in italics then it is a “kun-yomi” or indigenous reading. Immediately following the reading is the definition in English. In a Japanese kanji dictionary, the on-yomi is represented with katakana and the kun-yomi is represented with hiragana.

Below each character is a list of other characters which, when combined with the first, create a compound with a new meaning. So, for example, the word柄杓 means “dipper” (see above).

The small number next to the compound kanji (such as the 7 next to杓 above) indicates the number of strokes in the 2nd character of the compound. Notice that compounds are listed by total stroke order of the second character.

Note that the readings of the compounds are always in italics, regardless of whether it is an on-yomi or a kun-yomi.
Categories of radicals

Using the directional categories above, the radical divisions are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Left-hand</td>
<td>へん（偏）</td>
<td>女  糸  金  竉</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-hand</td>
<td>つくり（旁）</td>
<td>づつ  つぐ  ひつ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top</td>
<td>かんなり（冠）</td>
<td>わかんむり  うかんむり  あみがし</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom</td>
<td>あし（脚）</td>
<td>ひとあし  れっか</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>たれ（垂）</td>
<td>たれを  まきを  やまを</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>にょう（繞）</td>
<td>にょうを  そうにょう</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enclosure</td>
<td>かまえ（構）</td>
<td>つもう  くも</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice that there are exceptions in many categories to how one refers to a certain radical. The water radical is not called “mizu-へん,” as you might expect, but rather “さんずい.” There is no particular reason for this, or a particular rule to follow. It is idiosyncratic, like so much of Japanese. Nelson’s dictionary will give you the proper way to refer to each radical at the beginning of the radical section. It will also give you the meaning of the radical, which is amusing if not relatively useless (just because a character contains the short-tailed bird radical 隹 it does not mean that it has anything to do with birds—consider 難, 雑, and 焦).¹

Now, if you’re describing a character to a Japanese friend on the telephone, you would start with the radical, then give the other components. For example, 槓 would be “木へんに高い.” Or, to get more complicated, 枋 would be “木へんに山冠の下に豆.” In a pinch you can always refer to a radical as a bushu and then give the location (above, below, etc.) and a native speaker will probably be able to figure out what you’re saying.

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¹ There are books that try to teach foreigners Chinese characters by telling us that characters implicitly represent what they mean. There are clever stories that go along with each character, complete with illustrations. Needless to say, if it were that easy we’d all be fluent in Japanese without trying. There ARE categories of characters (pictographs, abstractions, ideographs, etc.), but knowing these categories doesn’t really help the student of Japanese languages. We’ll revisit these categories in another unit.