

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), 龜 (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 阝 on the left with 阝 on the right. They are actually different radicals: 阝 on the left is an abbreviation of 阜 and 阝 on the right is an abbreviation of 邑.

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, 翹, 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 丿, but notes that traditionally it is categorized under 爻.

Talking about radicals in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean

Generally speaking, modern Chinese have a user-friendly way of talking about radicals. That is, if you're on the phone with your Chinese friend and you're trying to describe the way a character looks, you would break it down into radical components if at all possible. To do this, you must first know that every radical has a name. Many of these come from the root form of the radical. A good example is 心. The original form is 心 (xīn "heart"). Not surprisingly, the name of the radical is xīn. Good Chinese-English dictionaries will give the name of every radical. Chinese describe characters using either the formal or a colloquial name of the radical, its location within the character, and a description of the rest of the character. Some of the radicals and their positions are so common that there is a very simple way to refer to them. Thus, many of the recurring radicals that appear on the left are simply denoted by the name of the radical + "character" (字 zì) + 旁 (páng "side").

Let's take a couple of examples to illustrate how this is done:

說 (shuō): 言字旁 (yánzi páng)

便 (biàn): 人字旁 (rénzi páng)

吩 (fēn): 口字旁 (kǒuzi páng)

Radicals, however, sometimes occur on the right side of the character. In this case, native speakers may use the phrase 右旁 (yòu páng "right side") to avoid ambiguity.

Another set of common radicals appears above the character. These follow the above pattern, but instead of páng, they are denoted as 頭 (tóu "head").

蘭 (lán): 草字頭 (cǎozì tóu)

笛 (*dí*): 竹字頭 (*zhúzi tóu*)

By analogy, you will sometimes here radicals on the bottom designated as 底 (*dǐ* “bottom”).

感 (*gǎn*): 心字底 (*xīnzi dǐ*)

There are also some very common colloquial names for the most important radicals. Probably the first one that you will hear is the usual reference for the water radical 水 (*shuǐ*). Its colloquial name refers to the fact that it usually appears as three dot-like strokes on the left side of a character:

湯 (*tāng*): 三點水 (*sāndiǎn shuǐ* “three dot water”)

After specifying the radical, native speakers will resort to a general description of the remainder of the character. For example, if the rest of the character is itself a character, they might give a compound that uses that character.

If a Chinese speaker is trying to communicate the way to write the character 吩, they might say the following: 口字旁, 部分的分 (*kǒuzi páng, bùfen de fēn*): Literally, “the mouth radical on the side with the *fēn* from *bùfen*.”

Note that Chinese do, however, often resort to straight description. Thus, you might hear something like “the right side is x, the left side is y” or “inside the ‘door’ radical is z.” Naturally, the larger one’s vocabulary and the more experience one has with the radicals, the more successful the communication.

Below is a representative list of some of the most common radicals with their colloquial names:

Radical	Name	Colloquial Expression	Romanization
亻	<i>Rén</i>	人字旁 or 立人旁	<i>rénzi páng</i> or <i>lìrén páng</i>
冫	<i>Bīng</i>	兩點水	<i>liǎngdiǎn shuǐ</i>
刂	<i>Dāo</i>	立刀	<i>Lidāo</i>
口	<i>Kǒu</i>	口字旁	<i>kǒuzi páng</i>
凵	<i>Wéi</i>	口字框	<i>wéizi kuàng</i> (<i>kuàng</i> is a frame)
宀	<i>Mián</i>	寶蓋兒	<i>bǎo gài</i> (<i>gài</i> is a cover)
忄	<i>Xīn</i>	豎心旁	<i>Shùxīnpáng</i>
扌	<i>Shǒu</i>	提手旁	<i>tíshǒu páng</i>
木	<i>Mù</i>	木字旁	<i>Mùzi páng</i>
氵	<i>Shuǐ</i>	三點水	<i>sāndiǎn shuǐ</i>
灬	<i>Huǒ</i>	火字底	<i>huǒzi dǐ</i>
疒	<i>chuáng</i>	病字頭	<i>bìngzi tóu</i>
竹	<i>Zhú</i>	竹字頭	<i>zhúzi tóu</i>
月 X	<i>Rù</i>	肉月旁	<i>ròu yuè páng</i> (radical 130, NOT 74)
艹	<i>Cǎo</i>	草字頭	<i>cǎozi tóu</i>
言	<i>Yán</i>	言字旁	<i>yánzi páng</i>

辶	<i>chuò</i>	走之旁	<i>zǒuzhī páng</i>
Y 卩	<i>Yì</i>	右耳	<i>yòuěr</i>
金	<i>Jīn</i>	金字旁	<i>jīnzi páng</i>
門	<i>mén</i>	門字框	<i>ménzi kuàng</i>
卩 Z	<i>Fù</i>	左耳	<i>zuǒěr</i>

Japanese and Korean, on the other hand, have a more systematic and specific way of referring to radicals.

Japan

Using the directional categories above, the radical divisions are:

Location	Term	Examples
Left-hand	へん(偏)	<small>おんなへん いとへん かねへん さんずい にんべん</small> 女 糸 金 彳 亻
Right-hand	つくり(旁)	<small>おおざと さんづくり おのづくり ぼくづくり</small> 冫 彡 斤 攴
Top	かんむり(冠)	<small>わかんむり うかんむり あみがしら</small> 宀 宀 冫
Bottom	あし(脚)	<small>ひとあし れつか かい</small> 儿 灬 貝
Northwest	たれ(垂)	<small>がんだれ まだれ しかぼね やまいだれ</small> 厂 广 尸 疒
Southwest	にょう(纒)	<small>えんにょう そうにょう</small> 夂 走
Enclosure	かまえ(構)	<small>つつみがまえ くにかまえ もんがまえ</small> 勹 口 門

Notice that there are exceptions in many categories to how one refers to a certain radical. The water radical is not called “mizuhen,” as you might expect, but rather “sanzui.” 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, 雜, 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, 槁 would be “木偏に高い。” Or, to get more complicated, 榿 would be “木偏に山冠の下に豆。” 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.

Korean (on radicals)

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 Chinese without trying. There ARE categories of characters (pictographs, abstractions, ideographs, etc.), but knowing these categories doesn’t really help the student of CJK languages. We’ll revisit these categories when we examine Morohashi’s dictionary.

The way of referring to radicals in Korean is similar to the method used in Japanese. The location, term, and examples of them are as follows:

Location	Term	Examples
Left-hand	변 (邊)	亻(人部(사람인변부), 女部(계집녀부), 糸部(실사부), 金部(쇠금부), 氵(水部(삼수변부)
Right-hand	방 (傍,旁)	阝(邑部(우부방부), 彡部(터럭삼부), 斤部(도끼근부), 攵(攴部(등글월문부)
Top	머리 (頭)	冫部(민갓머리부), 宀部(갓머리부), 罒部(그물망부)
Bottom	발 (脚)	儿部(어진사람인부), 灬(火部(불화발부), 貝部(조개패부)
Northwest	엄호 (垂)	冫部(민엄호밑부), 宀部(엄호밑부), 尸部(주검시부), 疒部(병질엄부)
Southwest	받침	辶部(민책받침부), 走部(달릴주부)
Enclosure	에운담	勹部(쌀포뭉부), 凵部(큰입구뭉부), 門部(문문부)

When you read a character as a radical, you normally add 부 (部) meaning ‘a radical’ to the end of the character. For instance, 金 is named 금 with the meaning 쇠, ‘metal.’ However, when you want to read it as a radical, you can call it 쇠금부. (You attach 부 (部) to the end of the meaning and pronunciation of the character). However, there are exceptions in many categories to how one refers to a certain radical. For example, the water radical ‘水’ is not called “물 수부” as you might expect, but rather “삼수변부.” Just like in Japanese, there is no rule or reason for this. It is just arbitrary.

Unfortunately there are only a few Korean Chinese dictionaries, published especially designed for KFL (Korean as a foreign language) speakers. To my knowledge, James Whitlock’s *Chinese Characters in Korean* (Seoul: Ilchokak, 2001) may be the only one that can help American KFL learners to study Hanja through radicals. However, if you can read Korean, there are numerous Korean-Chinese learning sites and on-line dictionaries:

- <http://www.zonmal.com/>
- <http://www.openhanmoon.pe.kr/>

Now, if you try to describe a Chinese character to a Korean friend, you would tell him/her what the radical is and its location with other components (e.g., whether the radical is above, beside, or below the component). Then, the hearer will guess what character you are

trying to depict. For instance, to describe 時, “날일부변에 절사자.” In addition, 客 would be “갓머리부 밑에 각각자.”