



# A Study on the Phonetic Symbols of Action Characters in *Shuowen · Renbu*

**Junjie Lu**

Chinese Classics Research Institute, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

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**Abstract:** The study of Chinese philology has always been of interest to Sinologists worldwide. As a pictographic script, Chinese characters are divided into independent meaningful single-font character and composite characters made up of multiple elements. Some composite characters are formed by combining a meaningful symbol with a phonetic symbol, which are known as "semantic-phonetic characters (pictophonetic characters)". We have discovered that some semantic-phonetic characters also convey meaning, and the meanings they express belong to certain categories, reflecting the psychology of the people who created the characters and the cultural features of the Han ethnic group. In this article, we will conduct a thorough exploration of the behavior-related characters in *Shuowen·Renbu*, a monumental ancient Chinese work.

**Keywords:** *Shuowen · Renbu*, human behavior, phonetic symbols.

## 1. Introduction

The history of Chinese characters can be traced back to the period of Oracle Bone Inscriptions. To date, it has a history of about four thousand years. Sinologists should all be familiar with *Shuowen Jiezi*, which is the most authoritative work explaining Chinese characters. This book divided all the correct characters at that time into fifteen volumes according to the meanings represented by Chinese characters and divided them into five hundred and forty radicals according to the structural characteristics of Chinese characters. Among them, the characters of the radical related to "people" are extremely important. As is known to all, Chinese characters are ideographic characters. The composition of some Chinese characters is very similar to that of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs: one part represents the category of meaning of the composed character (the semantic radical), while the other part represents the pronunciation of the composed character (the phonetic radical). These two parts together form a Chinese character. The part representing the sound is the phonetic radical. Sometimes the phonetic radical not only represents the sound of the character. In order to be more suitable for the composed character, the phonetic radical also represents part of the meaning of the composed character, which are also called "characters with both semantic and phonetic elements".

Interestingly, the phonetic symbol, as a symbol of the characters in logographs, only indicates pronunciation in the form-sound characters, but when it serves as a symbol of language, it becomes a morpheme that combines form, sound, and meaning. Essentially, Chinese characters are not syllabic and the characters that serve as their phonetic symbols are all temporary substitutes by independent characters. Therefore, the form and meaning of the phonetic symbol itself, in the specific context of being a character, often no longer have the function of indicating the shape and meaning of the character, as an independent morpheme. However, the evolution and development of writing systems are often interconnected. Qiu Xigu (2018) noted that the earliest form-sound characters were not directly composed of ideographic and phonetic elements, but were produced by adding phonetic elements to borrowed characters or by adding phonetic elements to ideographic characters. Most form-sound characters were derived from existing ideographic characters and form-sound characters, or were created by transforming ideographic characters. Therefore, most form-sound characters' phonetic symbols played a role other than indicating pronunciation at the beginning of the development of Chinese characters. Additionally, there are four ways in which form-sound characters are formed: the first is to add phonetic elements to ideographic characters; the second is to replace part of the graphic form of an ideographic character with a phonetic element; the third is to add phonetic elements to existing characters; and the fourth is to replace the radical of a form-sound character. Of these, the third method produces the most form-sound characters, adding phonetic elements does not affect the original pronunciation and meaning of the characters, and the phonetic symbol generally indicates the etymology (except for borrowed characters). Meanwhile, in order to make the structure of logographic characters more compact and the function of indicating pronunciation and meaning more obvious, when people add phonetic symbols to logographic characters to indicate meaning, they will prioritize



hated secretly by others. It also showcases the witchcraft tradition of the Chinese nation: the thinking mode of "animism", where the ancients extended and perceived the world outward with themselves as the reference and equated specific objects with people.

### 3.2 communication between the monarch and the ministers

The relationship between the monarch and his ministers best reflects the distinct political feature of the ancient Chinese nation with clear superiority and inferiority: absolute authority and absolute obedience. The most representative Chinese character "侯 (duke)" is closely related to the "侯 (target)" in "shooting ceremony". The form of the character "侯 (target)" in oracle bone inscriptions is "𠄎" which is a target that is hit by an arrow. Usually, in the shooting ceremony, "the Son of Heaven shoots bears, tigers and leopards, demonstrating his ability to subdue the fierce. The feudal lords shoot bears, wild boars and tigers. The officials shoot elk. Elk symbolizes confusion. The scholars shoot deer and wild boars to eliminate pests for the fields." We believe that governing the country with etiquette was an important manifestation of the centralized system in a specific historical period of the Chinese nation. When shooting the marquis, matching the identities of wild beasts and humans was essentially to show the authoritative position of the ruler and reflect the characteristics of the etiquette system in the feudal society of China where vassals unconditionally submitted and obeyed the monarch. Above all, "侯" refers to the cloth shot by feudal lords, and "侯" refers to the officials enfeoffed by the monarch. Although they are things in different categories, both have the meaning of "being disposed of" and "being controlled", and both reflect the hierarchical system of feudal superiority and inferiority in China. The "侯" being shot by people and the "侯" being enfeoffed can constitute an analogical metaphorical relationship. This analogical concept is precisely the ideological basis of the Chinese character formation of "taking examples from oneself nearby and from other things far away".

### 3.3 communication between the ministers

The most representative Chinese character "僞 (hypocrisy)" is closely related to the "善 (goodness)". The form of the character "善 (goodness)" in oracle bone inscriptions is "𠄎" which is formed by partially picturing the head and eyes of a sheep. In the language and culture of the Han ethnic group, "sheep" is an extremely important domestic livestock. Therefore, "羊 (sheep)" is always associated with fine and auspicious qualities, that is, "善 (goodness)". However, after adding the semantic component "亻" (person), "僞" refers to a person whose gesture goes too far and becomes hypocritical, thus meaning false and insincere. The author believes that the virtue of interaction promoted by the Chinese nation is that both parties respect each other politely and keep a proper distance, treat each other sincerely without being servile or overbearing, and communicate enthusiastically without being flattering. This interpersonal posture is also manifested in the dialogue between major countries: with courtesy and sincerity, with words and deeds. Writing, as the carrier of language, records the way of thinking and behavioral concepts that the nation has had since its birth. And people's basic needs such as food, clothing, housing and transportation are all interconnected. The formulation of etiquette comes from all aspects of the nation's life. The sound symbol "善" of the character "僞" is "吉 (auspicious)", and "吉善" represents the value orientation of "德 (virtue)". In the national context of regarding "矢" as "德", it shows the connotation of "uprightness". Undoubtedly, the etymological meaning of "僞" contains the strong, resolute, upright and unyielding spirit of the Chinese nation.

## 4. The cognitive linguistics explanation of the phonogram's image selection

Cognitive linguistics holds that the structure of language has a certain degree of correspondence or "iconic" relationship with human beings' cognition of the objective world. Studying semantics inevitably involves human beings' subjective views or psychological factors. As an important component of cognitive linguistics research, metaphor is regarded as an important way of human cognition and also an important approach to lexical semantic change. Structuralists examine metaphor as a combinatorial relationship of words in semantics, breaking through the limitation of traditional rhetoric that regards metaphor as a lexical-level phenomenon, and viewing metaphor as a discourse phenomenon. As an important carrier of the Chinese language, individual Chinese characters often appear in combination as independent morphemes in sentences. From a narrow perspective, the configuration result of Chinese characters is also a specific product of the combination of certain principles and methods of character formation and the practical application process of the Han nationality, highlighting the language cognitive model of the Han nationality. We can apply the cognitive theories of "metaphor" and "metonymy" (the similarity of metaphor and the contiguity of metonymy), based on the analysis of the configuration of Chinese characters, to explore the phonetic symbol imaging and the meaning of phonetic symbol imaging of behavioral characters, and analyze the potential cognitive thinking of Chinese people. According to the actual grapheme-phoneme mapping of behavioral characters in *Shuowen Renbu* and referring to the relevant theories of "metaphor" and "metonymy" in cognitive linguistics mentioned above, we classify the grapheme-phoneme mapping of 55 behavioral characters into two types: "actual object

and human body mapping" and "abstract semantic feature mapping". The former involves 41 characters, accounting for 75.92%; the latter involves 13 characters, accounting for 24.08%.

## 4.1 The imagery of actual objects and the human body

This type of characters can be further divided into two categories: those taking the form of "human body" and those taking the form of "objects".

### 4.1.1 The imagery of human

#### 4.1.1.1 Metonymy: between the functions of human body and the characters

When human body parts are combined with the radical "person" to form characters, the new characters have the action meaning or noun meaning corresponding to that part, reflecting the unique functions of each organ displayed during specific human actions. "面" and "促" are representatives of such characters.

"面" refers to the area between a person's eyes, nose, and cheeks. This range basically encompasses the most important organs of the face and indicates the posture presented when a person faces others directly. We can interpret "面" as the facial contour. We believe that the nose is in the middle of the face and is the most prominent and eye-catching organ on the face, the meaning of "nose" is closely related to "面", and the character "面" represents the verb meaning "facing". Similarly, "足" (foot) indicates human's feet while "促" refers to walking fast and has the meaning of "forcing". As a result, "面" and "足" respectively refer to the important parts of the human body, namely "face" and "foot". "Face" is the main symbol that reveals a person's identity characteristics and is used in daily communication to indicate identity, show expressions and exchange language. "Foot" supports people's daily actions such as walking, running and jumping. When the phonetic components "face" and "foot" form the characters "面" and "促" with the semantic component "亻" (person), the nominal characters have their verbalized meanings. The function of "face" is "communication", and "面" means "the orientation for communication". The function of "foot" is "walking", and "促" means "to increase the walking speed". There is a metonymic relationship between the phonetic components and the formed characters, and this type of characters specifically refers to the proximity relationship between the part and its function. The characters of actions that belong to the same category also include "供" (supply) and "仰" (revere). "共" means raising both hands high. "供" indicates "present" and also has the meaning of "altar for offerings" as a noun. "叩" means to raise one's head, and "仰" indicates "to look upward from below but unable to reach", which is more figurative.

#### 4.1.1.2 Metaphor: between the nature of human body and the characters

The position or characteristic of a body part on the face is similar to the position or nature of the thing represented by the composed character. "耳" can be representative of such characters.

"耳"(The ear)" is one of the important organs of the human body and plays an important role in human communication activities. Different from "the face" and "the foot", when "the ear" which is mainly for "listening" is attached to the human character, it does not highlight the function of the human ear, but emphasizes the position distribution of the human ear. "耳" is explained as "次", taking the meaning of "secondary" or "subordinate". Meanwhile, "耳" specifically refers to the small compartments attached on both sides of the main room. Therefore, the author believes that the "ears" on both sides of the human face have positional similarity with the small compartments on both sides of the main room. This is the manifestation of the simulation of human body parts to utensils, and a metaphorical relationship is formed between "耳(ears)" and "耳(er)". The behavioral characters belonging to the same category also include "睨" and "佼", which are simply listed as follows: (i) 睨: "见" is perceived by two eyes. "睨" is associated with the function of the eyes, having the meanings of "peeping" and "analogy". (ii) 佼: "交" is for crossing legs, and "佼" compares the private interaction between people by the characteristic of "intersection".

### 4.1.2 The imagery of people's social identities

The human form often emphasizes the identity characteristics of the object referred to by the constituent character in the context of word formation. "侮" can be representative of this kind of character. From the perspective of phonology, "每" and "母" are cognate characters. Meanwhile, in the oracle bone script, "母" and "女" were of the same character form "𠂔" which means female. Because during the early phase of character formation, the activities of women were predominantly indoors, and bending their knees and crossing their hands was a frequent posture for them when residing indoors. Hence, this was regarded as a characteristic of women to differentiate them from men whose characteristic was working in the fields. The phonetic symbol that also conveys meaning, "每", reveals the original intention of the formation of the character "侮": Women had weak physical strength and a low social status, and often became the targets of being bullied and despised. This not only reflects the feudal concept of male superiority and female inferiority in China but also reflects the social reality of a specific historical period. Therefore, the character "侮" highlights the identity characteristics of "women" in the context of the formation of the character "侮". The character words belonging to the same category also include "使", "仕", and "



侯". They are simply listed as follows: (i) "使 (official)": Hunting with a forked hunting tool at the upper end refers to the person in charge of governance, highlighting that the person being directed is a petty official. (ii) "仕 (male)": In oracle bone inscriptions, "shi" (士) refers to the male physical characteristics, highlighting that the people who could become officials were mainly adult males. (iii) "宾 (best man in a wedding)": "宾" refers to a guest, highlighting that the identity of the person being received is an outsider or a visitor.

#### 4.1.3 The imagery of the pictorial human figure.

Some phonetic components that indicate meanings in some characters often form iconic scenes with the semantic component "亻 (people)", and the meanings they represent can be seen at a glance through the configuration of the characters. The character words belonging to the same category as this are "比" and "併".

The orthodox seal character of "比" is 𠄎, and we believe that with the picture of "three people standing together, one person turning away, and two people following", it represents the meaning of "departure"; the orthodox seal character of "併" is 𠄎, with the picture of "three people standing together in the same direction", it represents the meanings of "a small group gathering together" and "excluding others". "比" and "并" are phonetic symbols expressing meaning. Different from the "semantic radicals" mentioned above, they have the nature of "ideographic components" here, and their formation reflects the pictorial connotation of the associative compounds.

#### 4.1.4 The imagery of objects

##### 4.1.4.1 The objects and the final characters form a metonymic relationship

Artifacts, being the subjects associated with events, serve as the means for the realization of meaning. "𠄎" is the representative of this kind of character. Based on the research conducted by Xu Zhongshu (2014), "𠄎" is shaped like holding a fish with one's hand, thereby signifying the meaning of lifting. Meanwhile, "𠄎" also conveys the meaning of presenting offerings and should be regarded as the ceremony of lifting the presented books during sacrifices. The generation of the character "𠄎" is closely related to the sacrificial rituals. The offered fish and others are important sacrifices. We believe that when "𠄎" is used as a noun, it refers to the indispensable tool for the completion of the sacrificial ceremony. The character '𠄎' and '𠄎' constitute a metonymic relationship between the tool and the action performed. The behavioral characters belonging to the same category also include "係", "仔", "𠄎", "𠄎", "代", "𠄎", which are simply listed as follows: (i) "係 (attach)": "系 (rope)" is the necessary tool for the completion of the act of binding. (ii) "仔 (the young)": "人牲 (human sacrifice)" is the necessary offering for the completion of the ritual of sacrifice. (iii) "𠄎 (lift)": The "fish" lifted by both hands is an important component of the sacrificial offering. (iv) "𠄎 (pay back)": Jade as a ritual vessel and currency is the necessary medium for the realization of the transaction. (v) "代 (Stead)": "弋 (An arrow with a string)" in oracle bone inscriptions is a small wooden stake and is the necessary tool for replacing the livestock bound by the rope. (vi) "𠄎 (buy or sell)": Shells as currency are the necessary medium for the realization of the transaction.

In the same way, Objects and utensils, as the targeted entities, are the participants through which the meaning of righteousness can be realized. "傍 (draw near)" is the representative of such characters. In ancient China, the enfeoffment system gradually emerged from the patriarchal clan system. It stipulated that members of the royal family and meritorious subjects could be allocated land and were required to offer tributes and pay homage regularly. These fiefdoms radiated outward from the royal domain at the center. The character "旁" originated in such a context of character formation. It gradually developed the meanings of "nearby" and "dependent" from the names of the enfeoffed states. When the "person" radical was added to form "傍", it emphasized the dependent and interdependent relationship between people. Therefore, the original character "旁", which initially referred to the enfeoffed states, was an important part in the formation of the meaning of "傍". There is a metonymic relationship of event and accomplishment between "旁" and "傍".

The behavioral characters belonging to the same category also include "𠄎", "𠄎", "𠄎", "傍", and "任", which are simply listed as follows: (i) 𠄎: "𠄎" refers to the kindling delivered. (ii) 𠄎: "𠄎" indicates the stationed troops. (iii) 𠄎: "𠄎" represents the guarded object which is the rack full of arrows. (iv) 𠄎: "𠄎" indicates the attached object which is the distant suburb of the town. (v) 任: "任" refers to the heavy wood carried.

##### 4.1.4.2 The objects and the final characters form a metaphorical relationship

(1) Form an analogy.

Things belonging to two distinct categories always share certain common properties in the context of character formation. "𠄎" and "候" are these sort of Chinese characters.

The character form of "豆" in oracle bone inscriptions is "𠄎" which means the food container resembling a tall-footed plate. As a result, it has the meanings of "upright" and "vertical", which have similar natures to the meaning of "𠄎" as "trees", and they constitute an analogical relationship. Similarly, "侯" was the target of the ancients' archery which has the meaning of "being disposed" and "being controlled", and "候" refers to marquises who were assigned to various places in

ancient China that also has the meaning of "being disposed of".

(2) Form an associative connection.


Things that originally belonged to a certain category are always associated to a similar adjacent category due to their similar characteristics.

"候" is a typical instance. As a semantic radical, "矢" pertains to the action or term of secretly casting a curse. "候" implies secretly harboring hatred for someone in one's heart and slandering others. "疾" indicates that the person being cursed actually falls ill, while "候" represents the mental activity of the one who casts the curse. The transition from "疾" to "候" reflects the metaphorical and associative thinking mode of the ancients: from being struck by an arrow in the body to being secretly detested.

The behavioral characters belonging to the same category also include "候", "傲", "催", "借", "漂", "傳", which are simply listed as follows: (i) "候": Associate from "a person injured by an arrow" to "a person suffering from secret hatred". (ii) "傲": Associate from "wielding a whip to drive sheep" to "beating for warning". (iii) "催": Associate from "hitting a person with a wooden mallet" to "urging a person to act". (iv) "借": Associate from "dried meat placed for a long time" to "a long period of time", reflecting the time dimension implied in "borrowing". (v) "漂": Associate from "rising and floating lightly" to "a person being frivolous". (vi) "傳": Associate from "sacrificial wine vessels" to "a person in authority".

(3) Form an extended relationship.

The objects and the final characters usually form an extended relationship which means the denotation of things within a category expands.

"依" is a typical instance. "The character '衣' is the phonetic component of '依'. " The form of the character "依" in oracle bone inscriptions is , which shows people are wrapped in clothes. People possess clothes to shield their bodies and differentiate between honor and disgrace, which is actually the prerequisite for social interaction in a civilized society. Furthermore, the meaning of "concealing the heart" derived from the meaning of "covering the body" also mirrors the introspective thinking traits of the Chinese nation. Above all, it is obvious that The formation of the character "依" embodies the interdependent relationship between "people" and "clothing": People are aware of honor and disgrace due to clothing, and clothing is utilized for concealing and shielding, which is interpreted as "hidden illness". The meaning of "covering the body" associated with "clothing" can evolve to the meaning of "hidden illness" of "clothing". The character "依" takes the phonetic component "衣", which embodies the extended relationship between the meaning of the phonetic component and the constituent meaning, reflecting the inherent psychological pattern of the Chinese nation: from being hidden physically to being hidden mentally.

## 4.2 The imagery of abstract semantic feature

When the form of behavior characters takes the form of actual objects and human body shapes, it selects certain characteristics of the objects or human bodies. The meaning of the phonetic component is the meaning they represent themselves, which is relatively intuitive. However, some behavior characters also take the form of characters that seemingly have no direct connection with the constituent characters but have common semantic features in the context of word formation.

### 4.2.1 The imagery of word meaning

The meaning of the phonetic components of this kind of characters is relatively abstract and obscure, and the compositional meaning is often derived from the phonetic components of the characters. Such characters are represented by "倚".

For instance, among the three characters "奇", "倚" and "畸" which have the same etymology, "奇" means odd number, "倚" means lean on, and "畸" means barren field.

Similarly, according to Wang Li (1982), "奇" has the meanings of "not coupled", "only", and "unbalanced". We believe that the meaning of "inclining" in "倚" with the semantic radical of "人" (Indicate the meaning of people) implies the meaning of "lateral". Meanwhile, most characters with the phonetic component "奇" have the meanings of imbalance and lateral.

The same category of behavioral characters also include "侍", "侍", "對", "儲", "擬", "僭", "倚", "備", "傳", "仿". For example, Chinese characters with the phonetic component "甫" often have the meanings of "symmetry" and "connection". Similarly, Characters with the phonetic component "寺" often have the meanings of "standing still", "being respectful and cautious", and "abiding by the law".

### 4.2.2 The imagery of composition meaning

The constitutive meaning of this kind of characters is the implicit meaning of the pictorial meaning represented by their configuration. Such characters are represented by "直".

The form of the character "直(straight)" in Oracle Bone Script is  which is composed of vertical lines and eyes.

We believe that the long vertical line on the upper part of the character "直" should be in the shape of a direct line of sight. "值" and "持" have the same meaning. Therefore, it is obvious that the character "值" actually contains the meanings of "standoff" and "equivalent". As a phonetic component, "直" has the meanings of "righteous", "virtue" and "goodness". Above all, taking "亻 (person/people)" as the semantic radical, the subject pointed to is made clear: interpersonal relationship guidelines. Between people, it should be fair and just, maintaining an appropriate social distance and never overstepping the boundaries; being self-restrained, upright and polite; not taking advantage and having no debts to each other. Therefore, the character "值" which seemingly means "aim at" actually contains the meanings of "opposing each other" and "equivalent".

The behavioral characters belonging to this category also include "俗" and "例". For instance, the oracle bone script meaning of the character "俗" is a person's foot reaching the entrance of a cave, but this does not refer to the meaning of "arriving", but rather "disaster befalling".

## 5. Conclusion

This article selects 70 behavioral characters from *Shuowen · Renbu* and classifies the 55 behavioral characters available for research into two levels: "communication between states" and "communication between individuals". The phonetic symbol imaging and the meaning of phonetic symbol imaging of each behavioral character are discussed. On this basis, we apply the theories of "metaphor" and "metonymy" of cognitive linguistics to the study of the relationship between the meaning of phonetic symbol imaging and the constituted meaning of behavioral characters, analyzes the way of phonetic symbol imaging of "everything has a spirit" and "selecting objects by category" of the ancients and concludes the characteristics of phonetic symbol imaging of behavioral characters: The behavioral characters of human beings show various interpersonal relationship states and the phonetic symbols for expressing meaning mainly take two types: "actual figures" and "abstract semantics". The imaging of implements mostly comes from ritual vessels in political social interactions and equivalents of commodities in economic life. The imaging of "human body" mostly comes from body parts, human identity characteristics, and human shapes. Abstract semantic characters mostly take the imaging of objective objects that reflect unique cultural connotations. According to the theories of "metaphor" and "metonymy" of cognitive linguistics, there is a close or adjacent relationship between the meaning of phonetic symbol imaging and the constituted meaning. Starting from these two relationships, the phonetic symbol imaging of behavioral characters basically comes from the thinking modes of human comparison, association, and extension. The behavioral characters of the "Ren Bu" reflect the insurmountability of the feudal hierarchy system of the Chinese nation.

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