Yi Sheng Character Used in New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook (Volume 1-4)

Lingyi Zhang[1,a,*]

[1]*Literal arts college, Capital Normal University, Beijing, 100089, China*
a. 1200109080@cnu.edu.cn
*corresponding author

Abstract: In view of the current situation that the teaching of Chinese characters' pronunciation is relatively separated from the font and meaning in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL), this thesis puts forward a plan to introduce the concept of "Yi Sheng character" in *Shuowen Jiezi* based on the fundamental, practicability and innovative of *the New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook (Volume 1-4)*. This thesis analyses all the Yi Sheng characters and Yi Sheng components mentioned in the "Basic Chinese Characters" section of *the New Practical Chinese Reader Textbooks (Volumes 1-4),* discusses their associations with modern pronunciation by ancient or modern pronunciation, traditional or simplified Chinese character and phonemic component, in a bid to summarise the associations in meanings between the Yi Sheng components and the Yi Sheng characters. In this way, foreign Chinese learners can gain a holistic understanding of the pronunciation-font-meaning combination of basic Chinese characters.

Keywords: Yi Sheng character, *Shuowen Jiezi*, *New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook*, pronunciation-font-meaning combination

1.   Introduction

Overall, many pieces of research on Yi Sheng character have been done in China up until now. Moreover, the TCFL has formed a relatively mature and complete system globally.

There are different schools of thought on the study of Yi Sheng character. In *the Biography of Shuowen Jiezi System,* Xu Kai points out that Yi Sheng character should be incorporated into syssemantograph or other systems. Duan Yucai affirms the concept of Yi Sheng, defining it as "a compound which simultaneously admixes associative ("Huiyi" in Pinyin) and pictophonetic ("Xingsheng" in Pinyin) character" [1]. In *the examples of translating Shuowen Jiezi, Wang Yun considers* Yi Sheng character as the phenomenon derives from Chinese characters. In modern times, Long Yuchun classified Yi Sheng characters as mutually explanatory characters.

Ge Hongli thinks it is a new way of teaching vocabulary in teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) with the help of Chinese characters' pronunciation, shape and meaning based on inheriting the traditional semantics which adapts to Chinese characteristics. It can not only start vocabulary teaching from Chinese characters' pronunciation, solve some mistakes of similar vocabulary from the perspective of pronunciations, clarify the extension of the meaning of a word from the perspective of the meaning of words, but also proceed from two aspects, such as characters' pronunciation and

meaning. Thus, it would deepen vocabulary teaching. In this way, students can master Chinese better [2].

However, in TCFL, especially the basic education step, when teaching the pronunciation, font and meaning of Chinese characters, teachers are used to putting font and meaning together while separating the pronunciation and explaining it word by word using Pinyin. This is a neglected and unsolved problem in TCFL.

Based on the phenomenon of Yi Sheng character in ancient Chinese, this thesis innovatively proposes to analyse Yi Sheng character and Yi Sheng components involved in the "Basic Chinese Characters" section of *New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook (Volume 1-4)* [3], classify the pronunciation, font and meaning of some basic Chinese characters according to ancient or modern pronunciation, traditional or simplified Chinese character and phonemic component. In this way, foreign Chinese learners can seize a holistic cognition of basic Chinese characters and culture from the perspective of the origin of Chinese characters. Four aspects will be analysed in this thesis ------ Yi Sheng character, the *Textbook*, Yi Sheng character in *Textbook*, and teaching suggestions for using Yi Sheng character in *the Textbook* in TCFL.

2. Yi Sheng Character

In *Shuowen Jiezi*, there is a class of combined characters in which one of the components has both a meaning and a phonetic function, and Xu Shen labels this class of combined characters as Yi Sheng [4]. In the *Modern explanation of Shuowen Jiezi*, Tang Kejing explains that Yi Sheng characters in *Shuowen* illustrate the high importance Xu Shen attaches to the "pronunciation-meaning interdependence" [5].

Duan Yucai defines the Yi Sheng character first, and he regards Yi Sheng character as "a compound which simultaneously admixes associative and pictophonetic character" [1]. Hu Yunyu simply considers Yi Sheng character as the kind of character which can show pronunciation and meaning synchronously.

There is a great deal of discrepancy in the statistics of Yi Sheng characters in *Shuowen*. While Xu Xuan records 222 Yi Sheng characters, Xu Kai records 187. Besides 250 Yi Sheng characters Duan Yucai confirms, he adds more associative and pictophonetic compound characters, making the total number come to over 400. There are about 300 Yi Sheng characters according to Wang Yun, and 337 according to Zhu Junsheng [6].

3. The Nature of the New Practical Chinese Reader Textbooks

3.1. Fundamental

The *Textbook* is a new set of teaching materials developed at the beginning of the new century for learners of English as their mother tongue or medium language to learn Chinese. This Textbook aims to gradually develop learners' ability to use Chinese for communication through learning language structure, language functions and related cultural knowledge, as well as training in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. There are 70 lessons in six volumes. The first four volumes are for the beginner and the pre-medium level, with a total of 50 lessons; the last two volumes are for the intermediate level, with a total of 20 lessons. It can be used by overseas Chinese learners as an integrated Chinese language textbook for listening, speaking, reading and writing from freshman to junior year [3].

The section of text provides certain topics and backgrounds for each lesson, and the texts in Volumes 1 and 2 are basically in dialogue form (two paragraphs per lesson) to facilitate listening and speaking training based on the comprehensive requirements for listening, reading and writing, in the Foundation Stage. In Volume 1, lessons 1 to 6 highlight the pinyin texts to cater to students still in

the phonics stage, while lessons 7 to 14 shift to Chinese character texts with Pinyin underneath. In Volume 2, texts are no longer written in Pinyin, leaving only the tone marks. From Volume 3, there are no more tone marks to help learners gradually eliminate their reliance on Pinyin. The vocabulary section analyses the morphemes (Chinese characters) that make up the vocabulary to facilitate learners' understanding and memorisation while emphasising the use of vocabulary through conjugation exercises. Supplementary vocabulary is absorbed by learners according to their ability [3].

The *Textbook* especially pays attention to the learning of phonetics, vocabulary, sentence patterns, grammar and discourse as the fundamentals of language structure and language communication, following the principle of moving from the simple to the complex, from the easy to the difficult, in a gradual and constantly reproducible manner, aims at making the learning process easier and smoother [3].

3.2. Practicability

In order to achieve the aim of "developing learners' communicative competence in the target language". The *Textbook* has been developed to reflect the principle of "learner-centred": the content should be appropriate to the needs of the learners, conducive to their creative learning, and the learner should be constantly motivated and have a sense of achievement.

In terms of teaching methods, it is necessary to draw on the advantages of the various schools of pedagogy, from the grammar-translation methodology to the communicative methodology. The emphasis is not only on learning the communicative function of the language and having a firm grasp of the language structure but also on having learners develop the four basic skills through extensive drills and exercises and on having learners know the necessary grammatical knowledge and rules for forming words and sentences as well [3].

For the Chinese characters section, the *Textbook* introduces the components first and then combines them to form Chinese characters and introduces the structural and writing rules of Chinese characters. Through this method, the *Textbook* helps learners recognise and write Chinese characters [3].

3.3. Innovative

The *New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook*, rewritten from the Practical Chinese Textbook published since 1981, changes the shortcomings of most previous Chinese textbooks that did not highlight the teaching of Chinese characters. Taking into account the difficulties of students from non-Chinese cultural areas, Volume 1 and 2 places special emphasis on learning the basic strokes, components and monograms from easy to difficult according to the pattern of Chinese characters. To have this done, the first six lessons in Volume 1 adopt an appropriate separation of language and text: Sixty basic Chinese characters that are commonly used, easy to learn and combined are selected first so that learners can master the parts of the Chinese characters before combining them to form a compound character [3].

4. Use of Yi Sheng Characters in the New Practical Chinese Reader Textbooks

There are a total of 37 Yi Sheng characters in the "Understanding Basic Chinese Characters" section of *New Practical Chinese Reader Textbooks* (Volumes 1 to 4) [7, 8]. Ten of them appear in Volume 1, and ten in Volume 2. Volume 3 contains nine, as well as eight are recorded in Volume 4. Hereafter, these traditional and simplified fonts of 37 Yi Sheng components will be discussed in categories according to their relationship to the pronunciation of modern and ancient Chinese characters.

4.1. Characters That Are Pronounced in the Same Way

On the one hand, some Yi Sheng components are the same in traditional and simplified form and shown in the simplified font. For example, the explanation for 授(written as shou in Pinyin, fourth tone, [ʂou⁵¹] in the international phonetic system, below are the same) in *Shuowen Jiezi* is "give", and its Yi Sheng component is 受(shou, fourth tone, [ʂou⁵¹]). 受 is written in the same way, whether in traditional or simplified form and with the same pronunciation as 授. Take 功 (gong, first tone, [kuŋ⁵⁵]) as another example; *Shuowen Jiezi* explains it as "contributing to the stability of the country", 工 (gong, first tone, [kuŋ⁵⁵]) is its Yi Sheng component, which is not only written in the same way no matter in traditional or simplified form but also pronounced the same as 功.

On the one hand, the Yi Sheng components are different in traditional and simplified forms and shown in a traditional font. For example, 豊 (li, third tone, [li²¹⁴]) is the Yi Sheng component of 禮 (li, third tone, [li²¹⁴]) recorded in *Shuowen Jiezi*, and 礼(li, third tone, [li²¹⁴]) is the simplified font of 禮 [9]. In the process of simplifying Chinese characters, 豊 is simplified into 乚. Obviously, 豊 and 礼 own the same pronunciation as [li²¹⁴].

4.2. Characters That Are Pronounced Similarly

The first is the character that owns the same initial and final, different tone. Such as 忘(wang, fourth tone, [uɑŋ⁵⁵]) and its Yi Sheng component 亡 (wang, second tone, [uɑŋ³⁵]) recorded in *Shuowen Jiezi,* both spelt as wang, but one's tone is the fourth while the other's is the second, 整(zheng, third tone, [tʂəŋ²¹⁴]) and its Yi Sheng component 正(zheng, fourth tone, [tʂəŋ⁵¹]) recorded in *Shuowen Jiezi* share the exact spelling zheng but one's tone is the fourth while the other's is the third.

The second is the character that owns the same final, different initial. For instance, 酒(jiu, third tone, [tɕiou²¹⁴])and its Yi Sheng component 酉 (you, third tone, [iou²¹⁴]) recorded in *Shuowen Jiezi* share the same final iou[iou], 均(jun, first tone, [tɕyn⁵⁵])and its Yi Sheng component 勻(yun, second tone, [yn³⁵]) recorded in *Shuowen Jiezi* share the same final ün[yn].

The third is the character that owns the same coda, different onset, main vowel and initial. Such as 单(dan, first tone, [tan⁵⁵]) and its Yi Sheng component 吅(xuan, first tone, [ɕyɛn⁵⁵]) recorded in *Shuowen Jiezi* share the same coda [n], 览(lan, third tone, [lan²¹⁴]) and its Yi Sheng component 監 (jian, first tone, [tɕiɛn⁵⁵]) recorded in *Shuowen Jiezi* share the same coda [n].

The fourth is the character that owns the same initial, onset and coda, different main vowel. 选 (xuan, third tone, [ɕyɛn²¹⁴]) and its Yi Sheng component 巽(xun, fourth tone, [ɕyn⁵¹]) recorded in *Shuowen Jiezi* share the same initial x[ɕ], onset ü[y] and coda n[n].

The fifth is the character that owns the same initial, different final. 可(ke, third tone, [k'ɤ²¹⁴]) and its Yi Sheng component 丂(kao, third tone, [k'ɑu²¹⁴]) recorded in *Shuowen Jiezi* share the same initial k[k'] [9].

4.3. Characters That Are Pronounced Differently between Now and Ancient Times

In a large proportion of the Yi Sheng characters, their pronunciation and that of their Yi Sheng components have changed over thousands of years, and their similarity is no longer discernible from modern pronunciations. However, many similarities can still be found in the ancient pronunciations.

Many examples can be found in Guang Yun. For instance, 舒 (shu, first tone, [ʂu⁵⁵]) in Volume 1 of the *Textbook* has the same rhyme she (摄), rhyme heading and rhyme category as its Yi Sheng component 予(yu, third tone, [y²¹⁴]), they are both Kaikouhu (which means articulation when neither

[i] [u] or [y] is used as medial or main vowel), fine sound, third rank character, Ping Sheng, Yinsheng rhyme final. Moreover, 债(zhai, fourth tone, [tʂæi⁵¹]) in Volume 3 of the *Textbook* has the same Fanqie (which means a traditional method of indicating the pronunciation of a Chinese character by using two other Chinese characters, the first having the same consonant as the given character and the second having the same tone and vowel with or without final nasal), initial, rhyme she and final as its Yi Sheng component 责(ze, second tone, [tsɤ³⁵]), they are both Kaikouhu, broad sound, second rank character, Ru tone [10].

4.4. Characters That Are Still in Doubt

The word like 两 (liang, third tone, [liɑŋ²¹⁴]), which appears in Volume 1, is now widely regarded as a variant of its Yi Sheng component 㒳(liang, third tone, [liɑŋ²¹⁴]), with the horizontal stroke above 兩 (the traditional font of 两) being the decorative stroke [9]. However, Xu Shen interprets it as two characters: "㒳" means "again" or "equally", and 兩 means a unit of measurement, equal to twenty-four zhu.

5.   The Contribution of Yi Sheng Characters in the Textbook to TCFL

When using the *New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook* or other textbooks for teaching Chinese characters to international students, teachers of TCFL should make full use of characters that contain the same traditional and simplified fonts and have the same or similar pronunciation as modern Chinese characters, and relate their pronunciation to their fonts and meanings, so that foreign learners of Chinese have a holistic understanding of basic Chinese characters.

For example, the component 受 (written as shou in Pinyin, fourth tone, [ʂou⁵¹] in the international phonetic system, below are the same), which can be formed as 接受(receive or accept in English, below are the same), can be used to form 授 (shou, fourth tone, [ʂou⁵¹]) for 授予(confer) and 绶 (shou, fourth tone, [ʂou⁵¹]) for 绶带(ribbon). To receive is to accept something given by another; to confer is to give from a superior to a subordinate; ribbon is a reward for merit. As can be seen, the words "receive or accept", "confer" and "ribbon", which contain this component 受, not only have the same pronunciation but are both related in meaning to give.

Another example, 包 (bao, first tone, [pɑu⁵⁵]), appears in Volume 2 of the *Textbook* and is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as resembling an unborn child wrapped in a womb [11]. Nowadays, 包 is often used to mean "wrap" or "fill".

Although it is not explicitly mentioned in *Shuowen Jiezi* as a Yi Sheng component, it does serve as a pivot for combining phonetics, fonts and meanings to help international students understand Chinese characters.

For example, 抱(bao, fourth tone,[pɑu⁵¹]), wrapped by hand; 胞 (bao, first tone,[pɑu55]), explained in the Shuowen Jiezi as "wrapped by the mother"; 苞 (bao, first tone,[pɑu55]), wrapped by plant; 泡 (pao, fourth tone,[pɑu⁵¹]), wrapped by water; 袍 (pao, second tone,[pɑu35]), wrapped by clothes; 刨 (pao, second tone, [pɑu35]), to remove what is wrapped around the periphery. 饱 (bao, third tone, [pɑu214]), filled with food; 炮(pao, fourth tone,[pɑu⁵¹]), filled with gunpowder; 雹 (bao, second tone,[pɑu35]), filled with ice.

These characters have the same or similar pronunciation as "包" and are closely related in meaning. Characters like 抱 胞 and 苞 carries the meaning of "wrap", and 饱 炮 and 雹 take the meaning of "fill".

6.　Teaching Advice

The concept of A is complex and not required to be mastered by students, but if teachers of TCFL are to adopt this method, they must have a thorough understanding of the meaning of Yi Sheng and express to their students the fundamental concept of the combination of pronunciation, font and meaning of Chinese characters. When teaching the word "亡", for example, teachers of TCFL can form a knowledge network with the words "忘", "妄" and "罔". Not only do they all contain the component '亡', but their similar pronunciation and meaning are also appropriate pivots for students to associate with each other.

This procedure may be used repeatedly as students learn Chinese characters, as each character has a different commonly used level and students have different cognitive levels of Chinese characters depending on different stages of learning. For example, the most elementary students only know the words "亡" and "忘", but they can have the characters "妄" and "罔" introduced to them in advance. The two characters "妄" and "罔" can be introduced to students as a pre-reading exercise, so that they can understand the concept and characteristics of the pronunciation-font-meaning linkage of Chinese characters and lay the foundation for subsequent learning. After the students have learnt "妄" and "罔", the concept of Yi Sheng characters can be introduced to enhance the students' cognition of the pronunciation-font-meaning combination of Chinese characters.

7.　Conclusions

Yi Sheng character represents the combination of pronunciation, font and meaning of Chinese characters, a manifestation of the overlap between two ways of character formation: associative and pictophonetic compounds in the six categories of Chinese characters, which are pictographs, self-explanatory characters, associative compounds, pictophonetic characters, mutually explanatory characters and phonetic loan characters.

Suppose teachers of TCFL can use the textbooks to help students at the basic level to recognise the connection between the pronunciation, font and meaning of Chinese characters from the perspective of Yi Sheng characters. In that case, they will not only enable students to quickly grasp the pronunciation, font and meaning of the characters they are learning from the perspective of the origin of Chinese characters, but also help students to quickly form a network of Chinese character memory. So that the three natures of Chinese characters are no longer fragmented and can be related to each other.

Based on limited teaching experience, this study describes only general methods and patterns, which still lacks targeted analysis of the particular circumstances of Chinese learners in different native language contexts. All in all, however, this innovative groundwork has remedied, to some extent, the lack of research in the teaching of Chinese characters.

Although it may appear to have increased the preceding workload, it is, in fact, efficient. It enables students to understand the origins and principles of Chinese character formation, thus laying a solid foundation for a further understanding Chinese character culture and knowledge of the Chinese language in the future.

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