

Visual symmetry in Chinese writing

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The writing system of Modern Standard Chinese is logographical; each writing unit (a “character”) fundamentally represents a monosyllabic word in the precursor language(s) which evolved into Chinese. However, most modern Chinese words are bisyllabic, being composed of two logographs, each one having once been an individual word. It is worth noting that even today each syllable does carry separable and identifiable semantic content which can at times stand alone, or more often be combined with other logographs to create novel constructions: while 火 is “fire” and is 山 “mountain”, the combination gives us 火山 “volcano”. Of course, within the logographs themselves we find that components appear again and again. Take, for example, the component 立 within 童, 音, 龍, 煜, and 竖.

This ever-evolving logographic alchemy leaves us with a large number of visual forms to draw our interest. For centuries, the prevailing writing forms, using brush and ink, valued aesthetic asymmetry, even as the idealized form of logographs were clearly symmetrical. In the modern era of mass printing and computerized fonts, we are free to more clearly access that symmetry and reproduce it here. I present a non-exhaustive list of visually symmetrical Chinese logographs (simplified and traditional forms liberally mixed in), which are symmetrical along either the x-axis or the y-axis:

一 yī one

三 sān three

且 qiě moreover

丙 bǐng third of ten in the first portion of the sexagenary cycle

业 yè enterprise

中 zhōng center

丰 fēng abundant

二 èr two

互 hù mutual

亚 yà inferior

亞 yà inferior

夔 bó (name of an ethnic group)

全 quán all

八 bā eight

共 gòng common

关 guān mountain pass

其 qí its

具 jù tool

典 diǎn canon

冈 gāng ridge

冒 mào to emit

冥 míng dark

凤 fèng phoenix

凶 xiōng terrible

由 yóu clod of dirt

凸 tū convex

凹 āo concave

出 chū to go out

匡 kuāng to rectify

十 shí ten

半 bàn half

又 yòu also

变 biàn to change

口 kǒu mouth

古 gǔ ancient

只 zhǐ only

合 hé to join

吉 jí auspicious

否 ǒu to negate

呆 dāi foolish

呕 ǒu vomit

匡 kuāng (onomatopoeia for a crashing sound)

啬 sè stingy

喜 xǐ to be fond of

回 huí to return

困 kùn sleepy

固 gù hard

土 tǔ soil

圣 shèng holy

圭 guī jade tablet

垚 yāo embankment

诳 kuāng to whitewash

堂 táng large hall/chamber

墓 mù grave

大 dà big

天 tiān day

夫 fū husband

央 yāng center

奉 fèng to offer (tribute)

富 fù rich

山 shān mountain

岗 gǎng mound

崮 gù steep-sided flat-topped mountain

工 gōng work

巨 jù huge

巫 wū shaman

干 gān dry
平 píng flat
幸 xìng fortunate
廿 niàn twenty
支 zhī to support
日 rì sun
旦 dàn dawn
早 zǎo early
旱 hàn drought
昌 chāng prosperous
昔 xī former times
普 pǔ general
晶 jīng crystal
曲 qū bent
曼 màn handsome
曾 céng previously
木 mù wood
未 wèi not yet
末 mò tip
本 běn roots
杏 xìng apricot
束 shù to bind
来 lái to come
杰 jié hero
果 guǒ fruit
某 mǒu some

栗 lì afraid

桑 sāng mulberry tree

父 fù father

爻 yá o lines on a trigram

爽 shuǎng bright

王 wá ng monarch

甘 gān sweet

田 tiá n field

由 yóu to follow

画 huà to draw

百 bǎi hundred

皿 mǐn dish

目 mù eye

直 zhí straight

眶 kuàng eye socket

立 lì to stand

童 tóng child

米 mǐ rice

羊 yá ng sheep

羔 gāo lamb

舍 shě to give up

艾 ài wormwood

咩 miǎ to bleat

苗 miá o sprout

苜 mù clover

苦 kǔ bitter

英 yīng hero

苴 jū sack cloth

茔 yíng a grave

草 cǎo grass

荣 róng glory

菩 pú herb

莝 yíng polish

谷 gǔ grain

豆 dòu bean

里 lǐ within

量 liáng to measure

金 jīn metal

非 fēi to not be

风 fēng wind

黑 hēi black

鼎 dǐng tripod-cauldron