

## A preliminary study on the history of Chinese character classification

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This study is part of a wider project about the use of Chinese characters in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. The objectives of the research were: (1) Identify the historical background of the classification of Chinese characters. (2) Identify the most suitable classification which can be used in teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

According to the traditional Chinese lexicography, Chinese characters can be classified into the following six categories: Pictograms, indicatives, ideograms, phono-semantic, borrowed and re-clarified characters. This Classification system can be called "*Liu Shu*" or "Six Principles of Writings". It is often attributed to *Shuo wen jie zi*, the first Chinese analytical dictionary written by *Xu Shen*, a famous Chinese graphologist in second century A.D. But the concept of this classification dates back to *Zhou* dynasty (11th century-711BC). The "Six Principles of Writings" had been the standard classification scheme for Chinese characters since *Xu Shen*'s time. This traditional classification is still taught in but is no longer the focus of modern lexicographic practice. The *Shuo wen Jiezi* is often mistakenly cited as the origin of the "Six Principles of Writings". Some categories are not clearly defined, nor are they mutually exclusive. The first four principles refer to structural composition of characters, while the last two principles refer to usage of them.

Traditional Chinese graphologists had pointed some weaknessness of this classification. They tried to modify the scheme, but none challenged it. Tang Lan (1902-1979) was the first person to dismiss *liushu*, offering his own *sanshu*. "*sanshu*" can be translated into English as "Three Principles of Writings", but what he had meant by *sanshu* was the following "Three Principles of Character Formation": form-representing, meaning-representing and meaning-sound. This classification was not a good alternative system for *Xu Shen*'s "*Liu Shu*". It was later criticised by Mr. Chen Mengjia (1911-1966) and Prof Qiu Xigui. Both Chen and Qiu offered their own *sanshu* but those classifications are clearly influenced by *Xu Shen*'s "*Liu Shu*".

In early 80's Mr. Dong Zuobin defined chinese characters as pictograms while Mr. Ge Benyi defined them as symbols. But Chinese graphologists dismissed both pictogram and symbol classifications

For many modern graphologists, all Chinese characters are ideograms. They are the combinations of following three parts: form, sound and meaning. This classification is widely accepted by both China mainland and Taiwan graphologists.

The overall outcome of this study indicates the classification based on ideogram theory can be used for teaching Chinese as a foreign language through form, sound and meaning parts in a character.

**Key words:** Six principles of writings, Three principles of character formation, Pictograms, Symbols, Ideograms.

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