The Wonderland of Chinese Characters and Classical Chinese Poetry

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The goal of today’s lecture is to find tips for analyzing the structure of Chinese Characters and to enjoy reading the Classical Chinese poems.
My lecture includes:

1. Introduction of the poem
2. Discussion
3. The basic structure of Chinese Characters
4. Discussion
5. Close reading of another poem
6. Discussion

Following these steps, you will be able to enjoy the charm of Chinese Characters and the fascination of classical poems.
江雪
唐 柳宗元

千山鳥飛絕
萬徑人蹤滅
孤舟蓑笠翁
獨釣寒江雪
You can see no birds flying on thousands of mountains.

You can see no foot prints on millions of small paths.
There is an old man with a straw rain cape on his shoulder and a bamboo hat on his head in a small boat by himself.

He is fishing alone on a cold river covered by snow.
Now let’s take a look at the structure of Chinese Characters
Four Basic Types of the Chinese Characters Structure

1. **Concrete Pictograph** such as

2. **Abstract Pictograph** such as

3. **Compound Pictograph** such as

4. **Combination of a semantic and a phonetic element** such as
Concrete pictographs are symbolic characters which represent something concrete, such as ‘mountain’, ‘bird’ and so on.
Guess what these pictographs stand for!
2 Abstract Pictograph

Abstract pictographs are symbolic characters which represent concept / notion such as ‘up’, ‘down’ and so on.
3 Compound Pictograph

The compound pictographs are the complicated characters consisted of several pictographs.
An example of a Compound Pictograph
Another example of a Compound Pictograph
Another example of a Compound Pictograph
The idea of making a compound
The transition of the style and the form
The decomposition of a compounded character
The transition of the style and the form
4 Combination of a **semantic element** and a **phonetic element**
4 Combination of a semantic element and a phonetic element
4 Combination of a semantic element and a phonetic element

follow
4 Combination of a semantic element and a phonetic element
Combination of a semantic element and a phonetic element is the most productive structure of Chinese Characters. More than 80% of Chinese Characters are of this type.
Quiz Can you figure out which of the four categories these characters belong to?

- a child
- the sky
- rain
- paper

- to fly
- a king
- to chirp
- to wash
Answer: Pictograph

Concrete

子

飛
A line on the top of a man stands for the sky.

The king governs the sky, the earth and the people.
雨 = 一 + 山 + 水 → 雨
Raindrops are falling down from the sky through clouds.

鳴 = 山 + 亀 → 鳴
A bird is singing a song opening its mouth.
Answer and combination of a semantic element

cliff + tree
Summary
the structure of Chinese Characters

1. Concrete Pictograph
   characters consist of simple elements

2. Abstract Pictograph

3. Compound Pictograph
   characters consist of combined components

4. Combination of a semantic and a phonetic element
Now let’s review the poem “JiangXue”

“The Cold River with Snow”
江雪  唐  柳宗元

千山鸟飞绝
万径人踪灭
孤舟蓑笠翁
独钓寒江雪
Discuss your impression about Chinese Characters after you learned about the structure.
Conclusion

Chinese Characters are made of a unity of simple components. The most primitive components are pictorial ideograms, which are two types of pictograph; concrete and abstract. The compound and combination of several pictographs produce new characters, which are meaning oriented and sound oriented.

After you recognize the system of Chinese Characters, you are at the entrance to the world of classical Chinese Linguistics!
Next let’s advance to focusing both on the structure and on the sound of Chinese Characters.
How many of you are familiar with the story of two stars- the Weaving Girl and the Cowherd Boy?

Share the story with your partners.

Now that all of you share the story, let us read an Old Poem of Han Dynasty.
“The Old Poem” is based on a myth. — The Romance of the Two Stars—

According to a Chinese myth, the Herd Boy and the Weaving Maid were originally a couple.

But after their marriage, they became lazy in their work.

Therefore they were separated as a punishment.

Even though, they were allowed to unite ounce a year on the seventh night of the seventh lunar month, when magpies build a bridge over the Milky Way for them to meet each other.
迢迢牵牛星，皎皎河汉女。
纤纤擢素手，札札弄机杼。
终日不成章，泣涕零如雨。
河汉清且浅，相去复几许。
盈盈一水间，脉脉不得语。
The Herd Boy and The Weaving Maid are separated by the white and bright Milky Way, remote from each other.
The Weaving Maid stretches her delicate white hands out of sleeves, working with a loom and a shuttle, and there is the sound of weaving.
The Weaving Made is not be able to complete patterns even at the end of the day thinking about the Herd Boy, and she falls tears as if it is raining.
As the Milky Way is clear and shallow, it seems easy to go across the river. I wonder how long we apart from each other again.
As a river full of water separate the Herd boy and the Weaving Made, the Weaving Made is not able to talk with him, only she can do is to gaze her lover far across the Milky Way.
Far and far is the Cowherd Star, bright so bright is the Weaving Star. Slender and white, her hands are moving *click-cluck* shuttling over the loom. She doesn't finish one piece in a day, and her tears spin down as rain. The Celestial River is clear and shallow; there is no distance between the tow. Across the brimming water the Weaver gazes with silent love.
Find Chinese Characters which have a similar structure!
迢迢牵牛星，皎皎河汉女。
纤纤擢素手，札札弄机杼。
终日不成章，泣涕零如雨。
河汉清且浅，相去复几许。
盈盈一水间，脉脉不得语。
What kind of element do these characters have in common?

河 漢 汗 汚 涕 氽 濬 清
These Characters have something to do with water. (a river, the name of a river, to cry, tears, clean, shallow)
What do you call this type of combination of same characters?

迢迢 皎皎 纖纖
札札 盈盈 脈脈
Reduplication

迢迢 皎皎 纖纖
札札 盈盈 脈脈

札札 皎皎 纖纖
札札 盈盈 脈脈
Onomatopoeia 🎧 Listen to the pronunciation!

tiao2tiao2  jiao3jiao3  xian1xian1

迢迢 皎皎 纖

zha2zha2  ying2ying2  mo4mo4

纤
Now let’s talk about the pronunciation!

The pronunciation of Chinese Characters is monosyllable, which consists of [a consonant], (a) vowel(s) and a tone.

There are four types of tones in Chinese; ma1, ma2, ma3, ma4, each of which expresses different meaning.

e.g. 媽 ma1 mother 鳥 wu1 a crow
     麻 ma2 linen 吾 wu2 I
     馬 ma3 a horse 舞 wu3 to dance
     罵 ma4 to get angry 誤 wu4 to misunderstand
Lastly let’s check the rhyme.

Listen carefully how the red characters, reduplication, monosyllabic rhythm and melodious four tones sound!
迢迢牵牛星，皎皎河汉女。
纤纤擢素手，札札弄机杼。
终日不成章，泣涕零如雨。
河汉清且浅，相去复几许。
盈盈一水间，脉脉不得语。
Discuss your impression about Chinese Characters after you learned about the structure and the sound.
The tips for analyzing the Chinese Characters structure is to understand the four categories of its structure.

The tips for enjoying the Classical Chinese poems is to get familiar with the sound system of Chinese Characters.
Conclusion

The **logical analysis** of Chinese Characters and the **sensible comprehension** of Chinese poetry are both effective and dispensable ways to be well acquainted with **Chinese classics**.
THANK YOU!