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An Analysis of the definition of character 喜

***xǐ* (joyful)**

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Is it the true definition of 喜?

- According to the *Cosmic Covenant of the Spring and Autumn Annals Apocrypha* (*Chunqiu wei yuanming bao* 春秋緯元命苞), 喜 was interpreted as two *kǒu* 口 (mouth) holding *shì* 士 (scholar-official). (兩口銜士為喜。)
- However, when referring to the *Explaining Simple Graphs and Analysing Compound Words* (*shuowen jiezi* 說文解字), it is assuredly not the true meaning of this character.
- This PowerPoint will analyse the definition of 喜. Section one draws from *Shuowen's* explanation; sections two and three examine the two components that construct 喜; and section four states two acceptable definitions for this character.

1. Interpretation of 喜 in the *Shuowen*

- 喜 means joyful. It is composed of 壺 and 口. (喜，樂也。从壺从口。)

According to *Shuowen*, 喜 is an associative compound character.

- The definition of the associative compound in the Preface of *Shuowen*:

Associative compounds combine constituent graphs to synthesise a new meaning, to make appear what is indicated in the composite character. (會意者，比類合誼，以見指偽。)

- As the definition signifies, associative compound characters are combined by two individual characters to convey a new meaning, so analysing the composed characters aids in comprehending the meaning of an associative compound.

Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the two components of character 喜: 壺 and 口.

2. An analysis of the character 壹

- 壹 appeared in the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046). (Li 2012, 427)
- This character will be analysed based on the three basic elements of Chinese characters: form, pronunciation, and meaning.

2.1 *The form of* 壹

- The following pages present nine interpretations of this character's form, covering the period from the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–8 CE) to the modern period, which signifies the distinct word formation principles putatively used in this character, including pictograph and associative compound.



Western Han dynasty (associative compound)

1. Xu Shen 許慎 (c. 58–148 CE): 𥝌 presenting an instrument standing upright, [with ceremonial adornments] visible at its apex. It is composed of *che* 𠂔 and *dou* 豆.

Tang dynasty (618–907) (pictograph)

2. Xu Kai 徐鍇 (920–974): Decoration feather+the erection of drum [羽葆+樹鼓之象]

Song dynasty (960–1279) (pictograph)

3. Dai Tong 戴侗 (1200–1285): Sawtooth-shaped adorned on the erecting stand+drum+drum stand [設業崇牙+鼓+建鼓之虞]

Qing dynasty (1644–1912) (associative compound)

4. Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815): Sawtooth-shaped carvings on a bell stand+instrument+erecting position [崇牙+樂器+立]

5. Wang Yun 王筠 (1784–1854): Sawtooth-shaped carvings and ceremonial feather on a bell stand, representing 屮+erecting position, representing 豆 [屮 (崇牙樹羽) +豆 (立)]

6. Zhu Junsheng 朱駿聲 (1788–1858): Sawtooth-shaped carvings on a bell stand, representing 屮+erecting position, representing 豆 [屮 (崇牙) +豆 (立)]

Twentieth century (pictograph)

7. Jin Guotai 金國泰: ceremonial feather+round drum shape+base stand [羽飾+圓鼓形+腳座]

8. Yin Liyun 尹黎云: Sawtooth-shaped adorned on the erecting stand+drum body+drum stand [設業崇牙+鼓身+鼓架]

9. Tan Fei 譚飛: Bovine horns+drum body+drum stand [牛角+鼓腔+鼓座]

(For original assertions in Chinese, please reference Appendix One.)

The above interpretations can be categorised into two:

1. Xu Shen's Associative Compound Interpretation

The foundational analysis originates from Xu Shen's *Shuowen*, which interprets 壺 as an instrument standing upright, [with ceremonial adornments] visible at its apex, and classifies this character as an associative compound composed of two components: 卣 and 豆.

Qing dynasty Scholarship:

Most Qing scholars adopted Xu's framework, further explained his interpretation into:

- 卣 is a pictograph representing the visible upper adornments of musical instruments (上見).
- 豆 is an ideograph conveying the implicit meaning of “erect positioning” (陳樂立).

2. Alternative Pictographic Interpretation (Xu Kai, Dai Tong and Post-imperial China scholars)

In contrast to Xu's approach, an alternative tradition interprets 𥝿 as a pictograph of a drum.

- Upper Component has three competing theories:
 1. Decorative feathers (羽葆/羽飾).
 2. Sawtooth-shaped carvings on the drum frame (崇牙).
 3. Bovine horns (牛角).
- Middle component: The drum resonator (鼓腔/鼓身).
- Lower Component: The drum stand (鼓座/鼓架)

Contemporary research, based on archaeological finds (such as paintings on the lacquered box in the grave of the Marquis Yi of Zeng 曾侯乙 (c. 477–433 BCE), see Appendix Two), strengthens the pictographic drum theory. This interpretation now enjoys broader scholarly consensus, as it aligns more closely with material evidence and may better reflect the character's original semantic value.

2.2 Pronunciation and embedded meanings in 𥝿

When the character 𥝿 is regarded as a pictograph depicting the outline of a drum, its pronunciation and meanings are indicated as follows:

Pronunciation: *gǔ* (Yin 1998, 167)

Meaning: the outline of a drum, and considered as the orthograph of *gǔ* 鼓 (drum).



3. An analysis of the character 口

The form, pronunciation, and meaning of 口 have a simpler picture, as there is a wide consensus in academia compared to 壹.

Shuowen's definition: 口 is the organ by which humans speak and eat. (口，人所以言食也，象形。)

Form: A pictograph. The character's shape has remained remarkably consistent from oracle bone inscription to the modern regular script, retaining its simple, square-like outline resembling an open mouth.

Pronunciation: *kǒu*

Meaning: Mouth



Oracle bone inscription



Bronze inscription



Clerical script



Regular script

4. The definitions of the character 喜

After analysing the two components of 喜, the interpretation of this character becomes tangible and accessible. Three main definitions exist in academia:

1. Joyful when hearing music.

𪛗: a type of music instrument; 凵: the shape of mouth when laughing

段玉裁《說文解字註》（从𪛗。从口。𪛗象陳樂立而上見。从口者，笑下曰喜也。聞樂則笑。）

徐鍇《說文繫傳》（哀樂者，萬物之本性也。樂則思散越之，故曰烏烏之聲樂，鐘鼓管磬所以飾喜也。故於文口𪛗為喜。）

朱駿聲《說文通訓定聲》（按聞樂則樂，故從𪛗，樂形於譚笑，故從口。）

2. The joy of drumbeats expressed in laughter.

𪛗: the orthograph of 鼓; 口: joy expressed in laughter

饒炯《說文解字部首訂》（樂之見於談笑曰喜，故从口。又从𪛗者，𪛗即鼓之古文，意取鼓鞀之聲謹也。）

金國泰《字源》（𪛗是鼓的象形初文，聽到鼓聲就快樂，所以从𪛗，歡喜的情緒表現在笑語中，所以从口。）

3. Joyful.

𪛗: the orthograph of 鼓; 口: an ideographical symbol

季旭昇《說文新證》（古人以為最讓人喜樂的東西是「𪛗」（鼓的初文），於是要造喜字的時候，就用一個𪛗字，然後加上指事符號「口」，表示這個字要的只是「𪛗」的抽象意義——樂。）

The various interpretations of 喜 share a common understanding of the character as representing joy arising from the rhythmic patterns of instrumental music (particularly drumbeats).

Among these interpretations, the second and third views prove more convincing as they explicitly identify 喜 as the orthograph of 鼓. This connection finds further support when examining the character 彭, which similarly incorporates the 喜 radical. Significantly, Xu's *Shuowen* defines 彭 by directly associating the 喜 component with a drum, rather than vaguely classifying it under the broader category of musical instruments. (鼓聲也。从喜，彡聲。) This clarification substantially strengthens the argument that 喜 functions as a pictographic representation of a drum, serving as the original orthographic form of 鼓.

While both the second and third interpretations present plausible explanations, they propose fundamentally distinct principles of character formation for 喜. The second interpretation follows Xu's traditional classification as an associative compound combining 喜 with 耳 to signify joy produced through drumming. In contrast, Ji Xusheng's analysis positions 喜 as an ideograph, drawing upon evidence from oracle bone and bronze scripts. His interpretation highlights a broader pattern in early Chinese writing where abstract concepts were commonly expressed by adding the 耳 radical to concrete objects associated with those concepts. In this context, 耳 operates as a semantic abstractor, distilling the essential quality of joy from its concrete manifestation in the drum.

5. Conclusion

Three significant conclusions emerge from this analysis.

First, it is evident that 壺 functions as a pictograph depicting the outline of a drum, carrying the pronunciation *gǔ*, meaning drum, and serving as an orthograph of 鼓.

Second, the 口 component, it is widely accepted that it is also a pictograph, which depicts an opening mouth, pronounced as *kǒu*, meaning mouth. However, it can also operate in compound characters as a conceptual marker for abstract qualities.

Third, the character 喜 demonstrates a dual interpretative possibility: it may be understood either as an associative compound representing joy expressed through drumming, or alternatively as an ideograph where the abstract concept of joy is derived from the concrete image of the drum through the semantic abstraction function of 口.

Appendix One (Original Chinese Assertions Regarding the Form of 豆)

1. 許慎《說文解字》：𣎵，陳樂立而上見也。从中从豆。
2. 徐鍇《說文解字繫傳》：豆，樹鼓之象。中，其上羽葆也。象形。
3. 戴侗（載於徐灝《說文解字註箋》）：豈，樂器類，艸木籩豆非所取象。其中蓋象鼓，上象設業崇牙之形，下象建鼓之虞。
4. 段玉裁《說文解字註》：謂凡樂器有虞者豎之。其顛上出可望見。如詩禮所謂崇牙、金部所謂鑄鱗也。厂部曰。𡵓、岸上見也。亦謂遠可望見。从中豆。豆者、豎也。豎、堅立也。豆有𣎵而直立。故𣎵豎从豆。𣎵亦从豆。中者、上見之狀也。艸木初生則見其顛。故从中。

5. 王筠《說文解字句讀》：云立者，豎亼皆從豆，說皆曰立也，是立之義從豆生也。……云上見者，主筍虞而言中在豆上，如崇牙樹羽也。
6. 朱駿聲《說文通訓定聲》：會意。按立謂虞也，豆者豎也，亼也。高高在上，遠而可望，所謂崇牙是也。
7. 金國泰《字源》：象形字。初文像上插羽飾，下有腳座的圓鼓形。
8. 尹黎云《漢字字源系統研究》：非「从中从豆」，而是鼓的象形。上為設業崇牙，中為鼓身，下為鼓架。
9. 譚飛〈“壺”、“豈”及其相关字〉：「壺」的甲骨文字形的主要部件象牛角、鼓腔、鼓座，為早期豎鼓的典型形制，主要為祭祀之用。

Appendix Two (Archaeological Finds Evidential for the Pictographical

Explanation of 壹)



The painted decoration on the lacquered box discovered in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng presents a vivid ritual scene that strikingly aligns with the pictographic explanation of the character 壹. On the left side of the box, half-human, half-animal figures are depicted in what appears to be a ceremonial dance, while on the right, an unidentifiable animal is shown striking a drum. At the centre of the composition stands a large drum supported by a duck-like base, mounted on a long pole, and adorned with a decorative plume.

This imagery resonates strongly with the 20th-century scholarly interpretation of 壹. The upper part of the character is thought to represent a feathered ornament, much like the plume depicted on the drum in the painting. The middle component corresponds to the drum's resonator, while the lower element signifies the base or stand, paralleling the duck-shaped support in the artwork.



THANK YOU
FOR READING

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