

Chinese Characters: The First 20 Radicals

Learn the basic meaning of each radical and use it as a clue when you meet a new character. No pinyin needed!

A. Radical Detective

A radical (部首) is a recurring part of a Chinese character. It can provide a clue about meaning or category. Some radicals change form inside characters—for example, 人 → 亻 and 刀 → 刂.

#	Radical	Basic meaning	Example characters
1	人	person	你 (you)、他 (she/he)
2	刀	knife	切 (to cut)、別 (other)
3	力	power / strength	男 (male)、加 (to add)
4	又	right hand; again	友 (friend)、雙 (double)
5	口	mouth	吃 (to eat)、喝 (to drink)
6	口	enclose / enclosure	國 (country)、園 (garden)
7	土	earth / soil	地 (earth)、城 (region)
8	夕	sunset / evening	外(outside)、多 (many)
9	大	big	天 (sky/god)、太 (too much)
10	女	woman	好 (good)、媽 (mom)

Try it: Circle the radical in each character:

你 切 男 友 喝 國 地 多 天 好

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Look for the radical first. Then ask: What kind of meaning might this part suggest?

#	Radical	Basic meaning	Example characters
11	子	child	字 (character)、孩 (child)
12	寸	inch	射 (to shoot)、對 (correct)
13	工	labor / work	左 (left)、巧 (cleaver)
14	弓	bow	引 (to lead)、張 (surname)
15	小	small	少 (few)、尖 (pointed)
16	么	tiny / small	么 (tiny)、麼 (9part of “what”)
17	心	heart	想 (to think)、忙 (busy)
18	戈	dagger-axe	我 (I)、戰 (to fight)
19	手	hand	打 (to hit)、拿 (to take)
20	日	sun / day	明 (bright)、時 (time)

B. What Does the Radical Suggest?

1. Which radical would you look for in a character connected with the heart or mind? _____
2. Which radical in today's list would you expect in a character connected with the sun/day? _____
3. Look at 想. Which part gives you a useful meaning clue? _____
4. Look at 明. Which part gives you a useful meaning clue? _____

C. Make Your Own Radical Connections

Choose three radicals. Write the radical, its basic meaning, and one character containing it.

Radical	Meaning	Character
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Remember: A radical is a clue, not a complete definition. The meaning of the whole character may be much more specific.