Chapter 1
Chinese character grammar: The very idea

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Abstract

This chapter provides background on this book's central claim that Chinese characters have a genuine mental grammar. Characters have proliferated over the centuries by recombining existing constituents, with semantic-phonetic characters, the most common type, composed of semantic radicals and phonetic components. This productivity already hints that characters have a grammar; other key grammatical features, like psychological reality and abstractness, are also demonstrated for characters in later chapters, using both corpus-based and experimental evidence. Grammatical notions have long been applied beyond speech, with mainstream linguists now confident that sign languages have grammars much like those of spoken languages, including the signed equivalent of phonology. Grammatical approaches to orthography remain controversial, but it is known that readers and writers do learn purely orthographic regularities and that this knowledge is mentally active and neurologically localized. Chinese character grammar itself has been discussed for at least half a century. The following chapters will build on the evidence and analyses of previous character researchers but couched in a framework distinguishing among character morphology (relating to potentially interpretable character constituents), character phonology (relating to purely formal regularities), and character phonetics (relating to the psychophysics of reading and writing).