

Chapter 3

Character phonology and phonetics

[Myers, J. \(May 2019\). *The grammar of Chinese characters: Productive knowledge of formal patterns in an orthographic system*. London: Routledge.](#)

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on Chinese character phonology, which relates to formal regularities that do not affect external interpretation, and character phonetics, which relates to perception and articulation. The character morphology/phonology distinction reflects duality of patterning. Much of character phonology is driven by a holistic prosodic template that provides a unified explanation for semantic radical position and reduction, reduplication shape, stroke size (prominence), and stroke curving. As in spoken and signed languages, character prosody shows binary asymmetry, weight, and stress clash. Duality of patterning is also seen in the parametrically analyzable inventory of strokes, which, as in phonotactics, combine only in restricted ways. Non-contacting strokes are usually either dots or assimilate axis with a neighbor, formally like the default/fill-in trade-offs ubiquitous in spoken and signed phonology. Hooking is also partly predictable. All of this is lexical phonology, showing exceptions, sensitivity to morphology, and structure preservation. By contrast, character phonetics is gradient and physically based, though it has influenced character phonology diachronically, with the prosodic template partly motivated by the physiology of right-handed writers. Stroke order is also phonetics, since it has no synchronic influence on phonology and shows considerable variation due to competition among articulatory and perceptual constraints.