

Chinese Lesson

The Shape of Water

水流冲泡



Water is a magical substance. It's the ultimate softness that overcomes hardness. Without complaint, water takes on the form of its surroundings. It's willing to flow to the depths and change its form, and it's the medium for transformational exchange.

The Chinese character for water, 水 "shui," is an embodiment of the element's fluidic nature – the character looks like three little rivulets flowing together. When used as a modifier and paired with other characters, its simplified form 氵 clues us in that the word we are dealing with is somehow associated with the fluid realm.

Let's take a look at the structure of a few characters and how they tell the story of water's various properties.

First we have 流 "liu," which means to flow. Notice here the water modifier is to the left and the bottom portion again shows us the character for water. We can think of this as the flow aspect of water, the way it moves and seeps as it shows its outline under the influence of gravity.

This same character for flow also is used to describe the turnover in a business. Isn't it curious that in English it's also positive to think of a business as having liquidity? Something here hints at movement and exchange, how the dynamic of flow and movement lead to health and wellbeing, be it in a body, a business or an economy. Both flow and exchange are essential.

Compare 流 with 冲 "chong" where the character for water is on the left, but paired with 中, which, depending on the tone, either

means “center” or “to hit or strike.” The meaning here is that through the power of moving water, something is flushed or rinsed, as in pouring water over a wound to clean it, taking a quick shower or flushing a toilet.

We see this character in the name of one of most used acupuncture points, 太沖, Liver 3, which is often needed for it’s powerful qi moving properties. The name of the point is “Great Surge” or “Great Rushing.” Again, we easily grasp how the power and force of moving fluids can wash away obstructions or debris.

Let’s look at 泡 "pao" a character that describes another aspect of the transformational properties of water. Here we have the water classifier 氵 added to 包 "bao," which means “to hold” or “to contain.” Where 沖 tells us something about the moving nature of water, 泡 points us toward the alchemical transformation that occurs when something is held in water, making the point that water is a medium of exchange.

So we see 泡 showing up when we talk about making tea or coffee. An exchange also is present when you allow the fluidic heat of a hot springs to melt away your tension and stress. Something is happening within the transformative container of hot water.

All three of these characters describe something different and something essential about water. We have words in English to describe what these characters represent, but one of the benefits of Chinese is that often the character itself will give you clues as to its meaning.

There are no secrets here. Everything is in plain view once you know how to look.