The Keys to the Chinese Characters by Shizuka Shirakawa and Christoph Schmitz. Translation and Introduction by Christoph Schmitz. ISBN 9781503036307. 588 pages und Format 8.5 X 11.0 inches (215.9 X 279.4 mm)

What a weight this tome will be on your bookcase! But for those who love etymology it will come as a blessing to students and scholars intent on delving into the unusual world of the development of Chinese characters. This is not an etymological dictionary in the ordinary sense as it treats of the development of Chinese characters from ancient times – in terms of the original pictures of things and ideas. There are few such dictionaries in existence, and this one – a translation of a work by a Japanese scholar, Shizuka Shirakawa, will make a great contribution to both Japanese and Chinese studies.

The book is divided into two parts: the biggest part being Christoph Schmitz’s translation of Shizuka Shirakawa’s Jōyōjikai (Glossary of Chinese characters of general use) of 2003 and Christoph Schmitz’s very thorough introduction of Chinese characters. The bulk of the work is entitled “The Keys to the Chinese Characters”. At the end of the book there is an index of Chinese characters listed alphabetically in categories: Japanese pronunciation, Sino-Japanese pronunciation and modern Chinese pronunciation. This method is particularly convenient, because it enables the scholar of both Japanese and Chinese to find the word to be looked up. After each entry, a number is given to the Chinese character in question and the number of entries is 1948 which corresponds to the use of Chinese characters in Japan after the war, plus a character read sai also reproduced on the cover.

Certainly for etymologists, the first part is of great use. I shall give a few examples of the practical value of the work by looking up certain words which I personally find interesting. Let me begin with that great Confucian philosophical concept of “benevolence”. Unfortunately, there is no index for words from English, and this is quite normal otherwise this enormous dictionary would be twice the size! But it can be assumed that someone who has studied Chinese philosophy will at least on one occasion have heard of ren or in the older transcription jen. In the index by looking under the Chinese pro-
nunciation or the Japanese, *jin* or *nin* one finds the word sought after listed as Chinese character 984. Appended, one also finds an index not contained in Shirakawa’s original version arranged according to the conventional classifiers as an aid to the reader.

The first entry is the modern Chinese character itself, followed by the historical development of the character from ancient times – in this case three stages. The modern Chinese pronunciation is then given with the tone – a fact that is often overlooked in other dictionaries – and which is of course very helpful for those studying modern Chinese. Besides the modern Japanese *on-yomi* pronunciation, the *kun-yomi* pronunciation is also given: *itsukushima*, *megumu*. The English translation is then given: “benevolence” and finally under “explanation” it is noted that this character is a compound one, i.e. more than one simple Chinese character put side by side in order to give an abstract picture and sometimes a hint to the (Chinese) pronunciation.

It is the section under “explanation” that is for most scholars the most interesting and most revealing of the ancient Chinese way of thinking. But here we must be forewarned. By “explanation” is also included what one would normally term today “interpretation”. It is unfortunately the case that in dealing with interpretations of Chinese characters that each scholar has his own and often does not offer alternatives. This may sound baffling to those familiar with etymological studies in Western languages, but in the case of Chinese one is dealing with pictures – and very ancient ones at that – and therefore one can expect both “correct” and alternative views. Shirakawa, however, in contrast to other scholars, by tracing the old materials over decades on thousands of rubbings, presents character groups of the underlying system he discovered. Without being prejudicial to Chinese thinking, it has always seemed to me that the alternative is not always welcomed. I base this view on Confucius’ *Analects Book XIII* in which he formulates his famous doctrine of the “Rectification of Names” (*zheng ming*). Mr. Schmitz in his part of the book entitled “Breakthrough To The Laws of Chinese Characters” (no. 7) clearly explains this concept, citing the Confucian passage referred to above concerning the “cornered vessel”. The principle is that the characters chosen should correspond to the reality of the object, i.e. should resemble the drawing. If this principle is followed, ideas will be clearly transmitted.

Perhaps the most revealing character in the entire book is the one drawn on the outside cover. This is the character no. 525 which is referred to as “mouth”. But Shirakawa maintains that among tortoise plastron, bone and bronze inscriptions, “there is no clear usage that can be regarded as the mouth of a human being”. All the characters that depict this particular figure refer, in Shirakawa's interpretation, to a prayer writing receptacle. He also adds that verifying the identity of the two characters is impossible. This supposed fact will of course radically change the interpretation of a vast number of Chinese characters, as a vast number of them contain the “mouth” radical no. 30.

Let me give just one example of a Chinese character which is of particular interest. The old name for Japan is Yamato and this character consists of two pictographs: “grain”
and “mouth”. Here I am taking the traditional interpretation of most sinologists which, even among themselves do not agree. Jean-Claude Martin in his *Memento des Kanji utilisé dans la langue japonaise* (1992) (“Memento of kanji used in the Japanese language”) takes the character *wa* which consists of “grain” and “mouth” and not “receptacle for writing”. He interprets the character as the mouth, being the “breath” or “wind” which blows over the fields of grain, making them all bend down together, thus producing “harmony”. I find this interpretation particularly pleasing. But of course there are others. Wieger, S.J. in his *Chinese Characters, their origin, etymology, history, classification and signification*, (1915) gives a rather surprising interpretation. He claims that this character was originally the 214th radical (a “flute”) plus “grain” with the derived idea that grain “growing and ripening together” lends the notion of “harmony”. The 214th radical he explains was a tune of “mouths”.

If we now turn to Shirakawa’s explanation, it will be seen that it is radically different (as unlike Wieger who published his work before the oldest character materials were unearthed and analysed, he does not follow the classic *Shuōwén Jiězì [Explanation Of The Simple And Analysis Of the Composite Characters]* from the first century). Under the listing *wa* (1942) we are told that the character is a compound ideograph consisting of “a tree put up at an army gate” but what has normally been taken as “mouth” is a ‘*sai*’ – “the form of a covenant receptacle into which prayer writings for the gods are put”. From this, Shirakawa deduces the interpretation is “stopping the war and returning to a peaceful state”. This is what “harmony” is.

It should be clear from above that there are, as always with interpretations, an abundant supply. Which is the “correct” one is not a question that we normally answer in this postmodern world. Suffice it to say that they all give us some insight into the thinking of the ancient Chinese many thousands of years ago.

Schmitz has done a fine job in presenting to those who are not masters of Japanese, a very well researched and useful guide to people interested in Chinese characters, their history and development in China and Japan. He pays particular attention to the creation of proper names in China to represent foreign places and has a unique explanation for the reason which caused the Japanese to change the character used for his native Germany, *deguo* “virtuous country” to something less favourable, he avers, in Japanese. All this makes for very interesting reading. Certainly there are very few such books available in English and it should be an important contribution to studies in Sinology and Japanology.

William Gater
Former lecturer in the University of Tokyo
Chiba, April, 2016
The Keys To The Chinese Characters

a-column

1. Explanation pictograph
   The plane figure of an underground tomb chamber for en-tened kings and nobles in ancient China. It is the form of the tomb chamber with the four corners of its regular square reeled off. It seems that the four corners are reeled off is based in that it was feared bad ghosts could hide there. ∴ referred to the person responsible for holding the funeral rites of burying the dead and similar and the ceremonies for the souls. The powerful clans of ancient China had persons in the position of ∴, the duty of the tomb chamber; that person used something that has the form  in it as a kind of family insignia. These are referred to as 'marks with the shape of ∴.' As the person in charge of the tombs is an official fulfilling a sacred clerical duty, he was made the second man after the clan chief. For this reason, also came to be used with the meaning 'tsugu: rank next or second' and 'second.' ∴: shirotsuchi: white earth' refers to the kaolin the walls or similar are painted with; the walls and the ceilings of tomb chambers were painted with kaolin originally.

Examples of use 

亚聖 person ranking next to the [Confucian] Sage-ages
亚流 anything or somebody who copies the first class but does not achieve the original; person or thing of the second class
亚熱帯 subtropical zones, area next hot to the tropics

2. Explanation compound ideograph
   A form that combines ∴ with 父. 父 is the form of a garment with overlapping neckband. 父 is an ideograph for putting in prayer writings to the gods. When a person dies, one prays putting a 父 'sai' into the neckband of the dead person. ∴ refers to thus expressing the pity for the dead person and to the ceremony of calling back the soul of the dead (referred to as 'tamayobai: calling the soul' and also 祇魂 'shôkon: inviting of the soul'); it is used with the meaning 'aware: sorrow, grief,' 'awaremu: pity,' and 'kanashii: sad.' ∴ 'En' (the basic character of 恩) which shows the putting of a jade at the neckband of a dead person's garment adding 乏 (the shape of a footprint meaning 'walk') close to the pillow sending the dead person on the journey to the world of the dead, and 乏 which shows fixing a mourning band of hemp at the neckband of the dead person's garment and exorcizing calamities and similar; there are a lot of characters which have the same structure as 乏.

Examples of use

哀歌 aika elegy in the form of a poem
哀歌 aikan joy and sorrow
哀傷 aishô being sad and grieving, mourning over, deep sorrow
哀情 aijô sad thoughts
哀切 aitesu so sad that it touches the heart, pathetic
哀訴 aiso making a plaintive appeal, complaint
哀痛 atsû deep grieving
哀楽 airaku grief and pleasure
悲哀 hiai sad and sorrowful or pitiable

 unreasonable, abstract

1. Explanation compound ideograph
   A form that combines 父 'ai' and 心. It is the form of a person standing still for a while and looking back with the form of a heart 'heart' added to the region of the chest of 春. It is the shape of a person who's heart is drawn back when wanting to depart; 父 'love' refers to that feeling; it gets the meaning 'itsukushimu: love, care for.' In Japanese, it can also be read 'kanashii: sad, sorrowful,' and it means leaving the heart with those behind and the weighing of something on one's mind. From this, it came to bear the meaning of love or affection. 父 'Ai' (honoka: faint; vague; indistinct) refers to an unclear absent-minded state; 父 'ai' (kageru: darken, get dark, kura: dark) refers to the sun going behind the clouds and being dusky; it is used as in 昼暮 'aimai: ambivalent' (unclear state of a matter).

Examples of use

愛育 aiku educating treating tenderly, tender nurture
愛好 aikan attaching great importance to, cherishing
愛好 aikô loving and liking, fondness (of)
愛情 aijô love, affection, attachment; feeling of affection for a partner

courtesy Dr. Christoph Schmitz
A form showing a light at the blade of a knife. The Shuowen (Setsumon) VIII, first part, has: “It means to get close or to get to know,” holding a small bough-like pole in the form of a carpet (mat).

Examples of use

仁心, kannin having a wide heart and being considerate

仁徳, nиндou virtue of benevolence, benevolent love

仁孝, rinou virtue of benevolence, benevolent love

仁愛, jinai having mercy and love


Examples of use

尽日, jinjitsu all day long, the whole day

尽心, jinshin exhausting mind and intelligence to the utmost to get to know the truth of things

尽力, jinryoku exhausting power, effort

無尽, mujin not being exhausted, inexhaustibility

be swift, be fast hayai, hageshii

very hanahada, hanahadashii, okikamado, hageshii

extremely, shen, shen

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wa-column

1942 和平 8 １ 2 わ, お (锐), か (kawa)
wa, o (锐), ka (kawa)
reconciliation, yawaragu, yawarageru, nagomu, harmony
naoyaka, kotaeru
Explanation compound ideograph
A form that combines 和 'ka' and 和, 1. 和 is the form of a marking tree put up at an army gate. 綾 'Reki' lining up 綾 'mark trees' is the form of an army gate. ㄷ is a 歹 'sai,' the form of a covenant receptacle into which prayer writings to the gods are put. 和 refers to swearing before an army gate where a 歹 was put and 奉和する 'kôwa suru (koto): reconcile' (stopping the war and returning to a peaceful state); it gets the meaning 'yawaragu: soften,' 'yawarageru: soften,' 'nagomu: become calm,' and 'naoyaka: mild, calm, gentle, congenial.' The 中庸 Zhōng Yōng (Chû Yô: The State of Equilibrum and Harmony, first paragraph, has: 和也者, 天下之達道也; 和なる者は, 天下的達道なり“Harmony is the way of reaching an aim on earth,” regarding 和 as a word that indicates the highest virtuous deeds on earth.

Examples of use
和解 wakai reconciliation
和気 waki harmonious or congenial feeling
和親 washin getting along well, countries associating and getting along well
和楽 waraku congenial enjoying peace and harmony
和尚 osbô word for a chief monk in the Zen denomination
和柔 wairu congeniality
講和 kôwa delivering a lecture and speaking intelligibly
会話 kaiwa delivering a lecture and speaking intelligibly
通話 tsôwa talking on the telephone

1943 話し 13 わ, かい (kai)
speak, talk
hanasu, hanashi
Explanation picto-phonetic character
舌 'Katsu' is the On reading marker. The original character of 舌 is written 舌 'kutsu,' it has the meaning of 殺 'ku' (sliced) 'kezuru: delete' by piercing a 歹 'sai' (the form of a covenant receptacle into which prayer writings to the gods are put) with a small 刃 'knife' with handle (柄) bereaving of the effect of its prayers. 舌 refers to speaking and harming other persons like that; it is used with the meaning 'hanasu: speak;' ‘soshiru: criticize;' and ‘hanashi: talk.’ The Shuowen (Setsumon) III, first part: “It means to meet and talk good,” defines the meaning as eulogizing, but explained from the origin of the character, it means criticizing and a talk which is like slandering and cursing another person. The On reading and meaning of 舌 'hô (ka)’ is close to 舌 'ca' (‘tsuwauru: lie, tell a lie’) and to 舌 'kai (kai),' (‘waragashibi: sly, cunning’), and they are sometimes used in place of each other.

Examples of use
話言 wagen, kaigen spoken words; also: good words
話題 wadai subject of talk, subject of talk or conversation
会話 kaiwa exchanging words
講話 kôwa delivering a lecture and speaking intelligibly
対話 tâwa meeting directly face to face and talking
通話 tsôwa talking on the telephone

1944 貢献 13 わ, かい (kai)
貢献 makanau, okuru, mainai
Explanation picto-phonetic character
有 (有) 'Yû' is the On reading marker. 有 means holding worship meat in the hand and making an offering to the gods; it has the meaning 役める 'susumeru: offer.' The Shuowen (Setsumon) VI, second part, has: “It means 貢 ‘cai: fortune; money,” meaning the wealth one possesses. The Book of Odes, 行風 Wèi Fēng (Ei Fû: Odes of Wèi). 賄 Ming (Bô): Pedlar has: 以貢車来我封以進: 封の車を以て来たるされ我が封を以て進らん ‘Nanji no kuruma o motte kitare waga wai o motte usuran: Then come with your carriage and I will come forth with my goods (equipment); (cp. Legge) a woman coaxed by a 貢 'peddler' (itinerant trader) who sings of gathering her luggage and leaving the village. It seems that this own property is the original meaning of ‘貢.’ Later on, it gets the meaning: ‘okurimono: present one’s own property or money to another person and of 賣物 'okurimono: present;' it is used with the meaning 賣物 'wairu: bribe' (money or goods given to somebody with the aim of having arranged something suitable one’s convenience; ‘mainai: bribe’).
Read 'makanau: supply, furnish' in Japanese, it is used as in need to 貢う 'juyô o makanau: supply demand (provide)’ and 目前で貢う 'jime de makanau: supply or furnish oneself (prepare).’

Examples of use
貢賄 zôwai giving a bribe
収賄 shûwai receiving a bribe

courtesy Dr. Christoph Schmitz

OAG Notizen
## Conventional Classification Of Character Forms

1 stroke

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### 3 strokes

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This list gives the character forms of the Japanese List of Chinese Characters for General Use from the year 1981 according to the section headers going back to the tradition of the dictionary 康熙字典 Kangxi Zitian (Kôki Jiten).

Look up a character under one of its parts that is regarded as the section header or classifer (requires experience). This order and way of ‘analysis’ of character structure contradicts Shirakawa character studies in most cases but has its customary value as a method for finding a character with unknown reading. While the Kangxi Zitian section headers are more or less the same in all dictionaries, character allowance under section headers varies. The following is adopted from the table Shirakawa gives in his dictionary 字通 Ji Tai (Firsthom the Character).

courtesy Dr. Christoph Schmitz