“Crisis” Does NOT Equal “Danger” Plus “Opportunity”

How a misunderstanding about Chinese characters has led many astray

There is a widespread public misperception, particularly among the New Age sector, that the Chinese word for “crisis” is composed of elements that signify “danger” and “opportunity.” I first encountered this curious specimen of alleged oriental wisdom about ten years ago at an altitude of 35,000 feet sitting next to an American executive. He was intently studying a bound volume that had adopted this notorious formulation as the basic premise of its method for making increased profits even when the market is falling. At that moment, I didn't have the heart to disappoint my gullible neighbor who was blissfully imbibing what he assumed were the gems of Far Eastern sagacity enshrined within the pages of his workbook. Now, however, the damage from this kind of pseudo-profundity has reached such gross proportions that I feel obliged, as a responsible Sinologist, to take counteraction.

This essay is by Victor H. Mair, professor of Chinese language and literature at the University of Pennsylvania, with contributions from Denis Mair and Zhang Liqing. © Victor H. Mair.

A whole industry of pundits and therapists has grown up around this one grossly inaccurate statement. A casual search of the Web turns up more than a million references to this spurious proverb. It appears, often complete with Chinese characters, on the covers of books, on advertisements for seminars, on expensive courses for “thinking outside of the box,” and practically everywhere one turns in the world of quick-buck business, pop psychology, and orientalist hocus-pocus. This catchy expression (Crisis = Danger + Opportunity) has rapidly become nearly as ubiquitous as The Tao of Pooh and Sun Zi's Art of War for the Board / Bed / Bath / Whichever Room.

The explication of the Chinese word for crisis as made up of two components signifying danger and opportunity is due partly to wishful thinking, but mainly to a fundamental misunderstanding about how terms are formed in Mandarin and other Sinitic languages. For example, one of the most popular websites centered on this mistaken notion about the Chinese word for crisis explains: “The top part of the Chinese Ideogram for 'Crisis' is the symbol for 'Danger': The bottom symbol represents 'Opportunity'. ” Among the most egregious of the radical errors in this statement is the use of the exotic term “Ideogram” to refer to Chinese characters. Linguists and writing theorists avoid “ideogram” as a descriptive referent for 汉字 (Mandarin) / 象形 (Japanese) / 汉字 (Korean) because only an exceedingly small proportion of them actually convey ideas directly through their shapes. (For similar reasons, the same caveat holds for another frequently encountered label, pictogram.) It is far better to refer to the 汉字 / 象形 / 汉字 as logographs, sinographs, hanograms, tetragraphs (from their square shapes [i.e., as 汉字]), morphosyllabographs, etc., or — since most of those renditions may strike the
average reader as unduly arcane or clunky — simply as characters.

The second misconception in this formulation is that the author seems to take the Chinese word for crisis as a single graph, referring to it as “the Chinese Ideogram for 'crisis'.” Like most Mandarin words, that for “crisis” (wēijī) consists of two syllables that are written with two separate characters, wēi (危) and jī (機/机).

The third, and fatal, misapprehension is the author’s definition of jī as “opportunity.” While it is true that wēijī does indeed mean “crisis” and that the wēi syllable of wēijī does convey the notion of “danger,” the jī syllable of wēijī most definitely does not signify “opportunity.” *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines “opportunity” as:

1. a favorable juncture of circumstances;
2. a good chance for advancement or progress.
While that may be what our Pollyanaish advocates of “crisis” as “danger” plus “opportunity” desire jī to signify, it means something altogether different.

The jī of wēijī, in fact, means something like “incipient moment; crucial point (when something begins or changes).” Thus, a wēijī is indeed a genuine crisis, a dangerous moment, a time when things start to go awry. A wēijī indicates a perilous situation when one should be especially wary. It is not a juncture when one goes looking for advantages and benefits. In a crisis, one wants above all to save one's skin and neck! Any would-be guru who advocates opportunism in the face of crisis should be run out of town on a rail, for his / her advice will only compound the danger of the crisis.

For those who have staked their hopes and careers on the CRISIS = DANGER + OPPORTUNITY formula and are loath to abandon their fervent belief in jī as signifying “opportunity,” it is essential to list some of the primary meanings of the graph in question. Aside from the notion of “incipient moment” or “crucial point” discussed above, the graph for jī by itself indicates “quick-witted(ness); resourceful(ness)” and “machine; device.” In combination with other graphs, however, jī can acquire hundreds of secondary meanings. It is absolutely crucial to observe that jī possesses these secondary meanings only in the multisyllabic terms into which it enters. To be specific in the matter under investigation, jī added to huì (“occasion”) creates the Mandarin word for “opportunity” (jīhuì), but by itself jī does not mean “opportunity.”

A wēijī in Chinese is every bit as fearsome as a crisis in English. A jīhuì in Chinese is just as welcome as an opportunity to most folks in America. To confuse a wēijī with a jīhuì is as foolish as to insist that a crisis is the best time to go looking for benefits.

If one wishes to wax philosophical about the jī of wēijī, one might elaborate upon it as the dynamic of a situation's unfolding, when many elements are at play. In this sense, jī is neutral. This jī can either turn out for better or for worse, but — when coupled with wēi — the possibility of a highly undesirable outcome (whether in life, disease, finance, or war) is uppermost in the mind of the person who invokes this potent term.

For those who are still mystified by the morphological (i.e., word-building) procedures of Sinitic languages, it might be helpful to provide a parallel case from English. An airplane is a machine that has the capability of flying through the air, but that does not imply that “air” by itself means airplane or that “plane” alone originally signified airplane. (The word “plane” has only come to mean “airplane” when it functions as a shortened form of the latter word.) The first element of the word airplane, like the first element of wēijī, presents no real problems: it is the stuff that makes up our earth's atmosphere. The second element, however, like the second element of wēijī, is much trickier. There are at least half a dozen different monosyllabic words in English spelled “plane.” While most of these words are derived from a Latin root meaning “flat” or “level,” they each convey quite different meanings. The “plane” of “airplane” is said to be cognate with the word “planet,” which derives from a Greek word that means “wandering.” A planet is a heavenly
body that wanders through space, and an airplane is a machine that wanders through the air. As Gertrude Stein might have said, “An airplane is an airplane is an airplane.” Neither “air” nor “plane” means “airplane”; only “airplane” means “airplane” - except when “plane” is being used as an abbreviation for “airplane”! Likewise, neither wēi nor jī means wēijī; only wēijī means wēijī. These are illustrations of the basic principles of word formation that are common to all languages. When etymological components enter into words, they take on the semantic coloring of their new environment and must be considered in that context.

As a matter of fact, the word “airplane” has a contested etymology (I follow Webster’s Third International), with some authorities believing that it derives from “air” + the apparent feminine of French plan (“flat, level”). Even with this latter etymon, however, we must recognize that “airplane” does not mean “a flat surface in the air,” but rather it signifies a heavier than air flying machine. That is to say, when entering into a word consisting of two or more morphemes, the constituent elements take on special meanings depending upon their new, overall environment. In “airplane,” the second element no longer means merely “wander” or “flat” — depending upon which etymology you favor.

Perhaps it would be worthwhile to offer another example from English that is closer to our Chinese word wēijī (“crisis”). Let’s take the –ity component of “opportunity,” “calamity” (“calamity” has a complicated etymology; see the Oxford English Dictionary, Barnhart, etc.), “felicity,” “cordiality,” “hostility,” and so forth. This –ity is a suffix that is used to form abstract nouns expressing state, quality, or condition. The words that it helps to form have a vast range of meanings, some of which are completely contradictory. Similarly the –jī of wēijī by itself does not mean the same thing as wēijī (“crisis”), jīhuì (“opportunity”), and so forth. The signification of jī changes according to the environment in which it occurs.

The construction of wēijī merits further investigation. The nature of this troublesome word will be much better understood if it is pointed out that, in Mandarin morphology, morphemes are divided into “bound” and “free” types. “Bound” morphemes can only occur in combination with other morphemes, whereas “free” morphemes can occur individually.

It just so happens that, in the real world of Mandarin word formation, wei and ji are both bound morphemes. They cannot occur independently. Just as the syllable/morphemes cri- and -sis that go together to make up the English word “crisis” cannot exist independently in an English sentence, so too wēi and jī cannot exist by themselves in a Mandarin sentence. They can only occur when combined with other word-forming elements, hence fēijī (“airplane”), jīhuì (“chance, opportunity”), wēixiǎn (“danger”), wēijī (“crisis”), and so forth.

Now let us look at the morphology of the word “crisis” itself, bearing in mind that it derives from Greek κρίσις (krisis) < κρίνω (krinō) (see the last section of this essay). The English suffix -sis may be analyzed as consisting of -si- + -s, where -si- is a Greek suffix and -s is the nominative singular ending in Greek. The suffix is used to form action or result nouns from verb roots: kri-si-s ("judgement, decision" > “crisis”); the-si-s ("act of putting [down]" > “thesis”);
Greek -si- is cognate with Sanskrit -ti-. Greek -sis endings are nominal and productive (i.e., they can be added to roots to produce new nouns quite readily), and are often used to make abstractions, usually from verbs.

If one wants to find a word containing the element jī that means “opportunity” (i.e., a favorable juncture of circumstances, or a good chance for advancement), one needs to look elsewhere than wēijī, which means precisely “crisis” (viz., a dangerous, critical moment). One might choose, for instance, zhuǎnjī (“turn” + “incipient moment” = “favorable turn; turn for the better”), liángjī (“excellent” + “incipient moment” = “opportunity” [!!]), or hǎo shǐjī (“good” + “time” + “incipient moment” = “favorable opportunity”).

Those who purvey the doctrine that the Chinese word for “crisis” is composed of elements meaning “danger” and “opportunity” are engaging in a type of muddled thinking that is a danger to society, for it lulls people into welcoming crises as unstable situations from which they can benefit. Adopting a feel-good attitude toward adversity may not be the most rational, realistic approach to its solution.

Finally, to those who would persist in disseminating the potentially perilous, fundamentally fallacious theory that “crisis” = “danger” + “opportunity,” please don't blame it on Chinese!

Pertinent observations for those who are more advanced in Chinese language studies.

The word “crisis” enters the English language around 1425 with the meaning of “turning point in a disease,” in a translation of Chauliac’s Grande Chirurgie (Major Surgery). It was borrowed from Latin crisis, which in turn comes from Greek krisis (“a separating, distinguishing, discrimination, decision, judgement”), from krinein (“separate, decide, judge”). Chauliac's first translation gives it as Old French crise, while the second translation has Latin crisis. The sense of “decisive moment” is first recorded in English in 1627 as a figurative extension of the original medical meaning. In Latin, crisis signified: 1. a (literary) judgement, 2. a critical stage in one’s life; climacteric. Since, in the Hippocratic-Galenic medical literature, “crisis” signified “a turning point in a disease; sudden change for better or worse,” this old Greek usage would be somewhat better positioned to serve as a justification for the “danger + opportunity” meme than does Chinese wēijī, which is, from the very beginning, always something worrisome and unwanted.

The earliest occurrences of the Chinese expression wēijī occur in the 3rd century A.D., at which time, and for centuries thereafter, they convey the notion of “latent danger.” It was not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that wēijī came to mean “crisis,” as in “financial crisis,” “economic crisis,” and so on. How did this happen? It was almost certainly the result of matching up the old Chinese word wēijī (“latent danger”) with the Western concept of “crisis,” and carried out through the intermediary of Japanese, where it is pronounced kiki. This would make it another of the hundreds of modern Chinese terms that I refer to as “round-trip words” (see Sino-Platonic Papers, 34 [October, 1992]).
Many coinages that made it into twentieth-century báihuà (vernacular Mandarin) are based on traditional uses of words. That is to say, new compounds using jī draw on traditional uses of jī.

There is no traditional use of jī that means “opportunity” per se. Jīhuì is a neologism coined to translate the English word “opportunity.”

To say that jī means “opportunity” is like saying that the zōng of zōngjiào means “religion” (N.B.: jiào here means “doctrine, teaching”). Zōng traditionally means a line of orthodox transmission, or a clan lineage. It is anachronistic to say that zōng by itself means “religion.” For numerous examples of such calques and neologisms, many (such as those for “economics” and “society”) involving an initial borrowing into Japanese, and then a reborrowing into Chinese with a completely new, Westernized meaning, see Victor H. Mair, “East Asian Round-Trip Words,” Sino-Platonic Papers, 34 (October 1992).

Traditional senses of jī include: mechanism, inner workings (and by extension secrecy), germinal principle, pivotal juncture, crux, or a witty turn of thought.

This is the same jī that was used in the coinage yǒujī (organic), but we can hardly say that jī in and of itself means “organic.”

As examples of recent coinages using jī in innovative ways, we may cite jīzhī, which means “mechanism” or “machine-processed / produced.” There's also another jīzhī meaning “quick-witted” where the zhī syllable is written with a different character than the zhī syllable of the jīzhī meaning “mechanism.” The latter jīzhī is based on the same sense of jī which is used in the expression dǎ Chánjī — to employ the gnomic, witty language of Chan (Zen) Buddhist teaching stories. If anyone is truly interested in sharpening his or her mind to meet the crises of the future, engagement with this kind of challenging wisdom might be a good place to begin.

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An example of English phrase-checker ‘Graphein’ r.2 utilizing the Gamera corpus (powered by 879,557,846 distinct 4-grams); The essay “Crisis” Does NOT Equal “Danger” Plus “Opportunity” by Victor H. Mair was 4-gram-checked — it contains 1,822 4-grams of them 1,761 distinct of them 673 familiar; downloaded from www.sanmayce.com

The first half of next phrase-checked (with Gamera corpus) 4-gram wordlist contains unfamiliar 4-grams whereas the second half holds all familiar to Gamera 4-grams with their corresponding occurrences:

1st file: all 4-grams found in incoming file
2nd file: all 4-grams found in incoming file which are part of Gamera corpus
Blended lines, i.e. combined lines from both files: 1088
Overlapped lines, i.e. lines common for both files: 673
Unfamiliar lines, i.e. lines from 1st file not encountered in 2nd file: 1088

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>turning point in a</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turns in the world</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turns up more than</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two of more morphemes</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understood if it is</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>university of pennsylvania philadelphia</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>until the fate th</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>up more than a</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>up of two components</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>up the english word</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>upon it as the</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uppermost in the mind</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>us look at the</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>used as an abbreviation</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>used in the caignage</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>used in the expression</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>used to term abstract</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>used to make abstractions</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vast range of meanings</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wants above all to</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wants to find a</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was almost certainly the</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was borrowed from latin</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was intentionally studying a</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was not until the</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was used in the</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>were the gems of</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what he assumed were</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when combined with other</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when entering into a</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when its functions as</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when many elements are</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when should be</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when something begins or</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when the market is</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what things start to</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>where it is pronounced</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>where st is a</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>which derives from a</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>which in turn comes</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>which is used in</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first half of next phrase-checked (with Gamera corpus) 2-gram wordlist contains unfamiliar 2-grams whereas the second half holds all familiar to Gamera 2-grams with their corresponding occurrences:

1st file: all 4-grams found in incoming file
2nd file: all 4-grams found in incoming file which are part of Gamera corpus
Bleended lines, i.e. combined lines from both files: 1000
Overlapped lines, i.e. lines common for both files: 1749
Unfamiliar lines, i.e. lines from 1st file not encountered in 2nd file: 131

advocates opportunism
alone originally
aphesis app
apparent feminine
as fangkuaizi
asian round
avoid j degram
bi hu
bath whichever
blessfully imposing
catchy expression
challenging wisdom
character j l
chirurgical major
civilizations university
clunky simply
colleged y
complete ssp
complicated etymology
components signifying
contested etymology
copyright pinyin
criis enters
crisis signified
crisis viz
defines opportunity
denis mair
descriptive referent
different monosyllabic
den nige
dissertation
eastern sapacity
etymological components
etymology yao
excellent incipient
extens on secrecy
form chinese
french crisis
g o aphasis
grande chirurgie
greek sis
hanja as
hanji kanji
hanzi mandarin
html pinyin
html readings hu chance
hu occasion hu opportunity
i hu vernacular
i airplane
i came
i crisis
i latent
i merits

ij most
ij incipient moment
ij nfo readings
ij nfo romanization
ij nfo xhtml
ij syllable
ij signifying opportunity
ij chance
ij occasion
ij opportunity
ij Vernacular
ij airplane
ij crisis
ij latent
ij merits
ij pronunciation
ij character
ij incipient
ij occasion
ij opportunity
ij Vernacular
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An example of English phrase-checker ‘Graphein’ r.2 utilizing the Gamera corpus (powered by 124,669,942 distinct 2-grams); The essay "Crisis" Does NOT Equal "Danger" Plus "Opportunity" by Victor H. Mair was 2-gram-checked — it contains 2,309 2-grams of them 1,880 distinct of them, 1,749 familiar; downloaded from www.sanmayce.com page 2 of 10.
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