

- » Grasping the complexity of written Chinese
- » Understanding the difference between traditional and simplified characters
- » Getting excited and developing some strategies to help you learn to write in Chinese

## Chapter 1

# Wrapping Your Mind around the Chinese Writing System

The Chinese writing system is many things, but easy isn't one of them. It's unique, it's beautiful, and it's remarkable in its complexity. But just how does anyone attack a written language that doesn't even have an alphabet? And how do you know which way to write it or read it, if the characters can go from left to right, right to left, or up and down?

In this chapter, I give the lowdown on these age-old questions and more. I also give you tips on how to write and how to memorize at least the first 100 characters out of a language that has thousands of them.

## Appreciating the Complexities of Written Chinese

Chinese has the distinction of being the mother tongue of the oldest continuous civilization on earth as well as the language spoken by the greatest number of people. It is also has arguably one of the most intricate written languages in the world, with about 50,000 characters in a typical Chinese dictionary — 28,000 of which are already obsolete.

So why keep obsolete words in a Chinese dictionary, you ask? Same reason we keep them in English dictionaries. They may no longer be used regularly, if at all, but they do still exist. Haven't you ever felt *crapulous*? What? You've never been stuffed to the gills? Back in the 16th century, that Late Latin word meant just that. While we don't use that word anymore, it can still be found in any dictionary worth its salt. Those are the kinds of words you'll find in Chinese dictionaries too. This character, 栗 (pronounced "lee") variously meant *chestnut*, *trembling*, or *afraid*. That character with those original meanings is now obsolete, but one more stroke was added to the



basic character, and the resulting character 傑 took over with a new meaning: ancestral tablet — a stone slab or piece of wood used by Chinese people to revere their ancestors.

To read a Chinese newspaper with relative ease, you only need to know about 3,000 to 4,000 characters. A well-educated person will be able to read between 4,000 and 6,000 characters and 40,000 to 60,000 words, each of which is comprised of one, two, or three characters. Armed with only 500 characters, you can recognize 75 percent of all Chinese words. And if you know 1,000 characters, you'll be able to read almost 90 percent of a newspaper.

Traditionally, only the wealthiest could afford the time and money to have their sons tutored in a written language so complex that it necessitated years of study to master. China has been a subsistence level society for centuries, and hunger and famine were real things not to be taken for granted. As a result, few people were literate in ancient China.

While Chinese characters are beautiful and filled with meaning in just one glance, with the sheer number of characters needed for even a rudimentary level of literacy, many could only see its impracticality and predicted its replacement by the more efficient alphabet. Thus began the creation of *Pinyin* (a form of transliteration which used Latin letters to reflect the pronunciation of Chinese words, such as our own in English), and the march toward language reform.

## How the Written Word Unifies China

For thousands of years, spoken Chinese has been subdivided into hundreds of regional dialects, most of them mutually incomprehensible. Throughout the centuries, dynasty after dynasty, kingdom after kingdom, the one thing that united the Chinese people was the written word.

Even today, if two Chinese people are sitting next to each other on a train and one is from Beijing and speaks Mandarin, while the other is from the south and speaks Cantonese, and they read a newspaper out loud to each other they would have absolutely no idea what the other one is saying. However, if they look at the same characters and read silently next to each other, they will both understand the same thing. It is easier for them to write to each other than carry on an actual conversation.

In fact, spoken Chinese, with its many tones, leaves the door open for ever greater possibilities of meanings with any given word, including words that are not only pronounced the same but also spoken with the same tone. It is only by looking at the written word that the intended meaning and word become clear, if context alone is not enough.



REMEMBER

Chinese people don't only speak one of the two dialects we typically associate with the spoken language: Mandarin and Cantonese. Hundreds of spoken dialects exist, representing every province, city, or town throughout the country, but Mandarin is the official dialect taught in all schools.



TECHNICAL  
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This unification of the country through the written word came about during the Qin (pronounced "chin") dynasty. It was during this dynasty that the tyrannical emperor Shi Huangdi had the famous terra cotta warriors made to accompany and protect him in the afterlife. He standardized many things during his short reign to further solidify his rule, foremost among them being the Chinese writing system. If he announced a new edict, everyone could read it.

# What? No Alphabet?

Most of the world's languages are written alphabetically, with each letter representing only a sound, rather than containing any meaning. Chinese writing is *logographic*, however, so each character represents an entire word or part of a compound word, necessitating thousands of characters. The word **diànnǎo** 电脑 (*dyan now*), for example, is composed of **diàn**, meaning *electric*, and **nǎo**, meaning *brain*. Put them together, and you have *electronic brain*, otherwise known as a computer. While this is fascinating and brilliant, the unabashed truth is that since there's no alphabet in Chinese, the only way to learn characters is the good old-fashioned way: study, study, study. Roll up your sleeves, put in the time, and memorize each and every one of them.

While learning Chinese characters sometimes feels like an insurmountable task, if you follow this book step-by-step and get to know the radicals and other components that comprise the characters, your study of Chinese will become much, much easier in no time.

## Which Way Did They Go? The Direction of Characters

Since each character in Chinese is in and of itself a word, or a part of a compound word (two characters that make a separate word when combined together), they can be written and read in almost any order — right to left, left to right, or top to bottom. Every which way except diagonal.

If you go to a Chinese movie, you may see several subtitles: one in English, going from left to right, one in Chinese, also going left to right, and suddenly another Chinese line going from right to left. You may go cross-eyed for a while trying to follow them both, but you'll get the hang of it soon enough. And if you *really* want a shock, you just might also see a further set of subtitles written vertically, projected onto a wall, so your eyes begin to feel like ping-pong balls. Then all bets are off.



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Right to left and left to right are common enough, but why top to bottom, you may ask? Before the invention of paper (by the Chinese, I might add), around the 8th century BCE, Chinese was originally written on pieces of bamboo, which necessitated writing vertically in the same direction as the strips of bamboo.

You can also see the role of bamboo strips in the character for the word *volume* (as in the volume of a book): 册 (冊) **cè** (tsuh). The simplified character consists of two bamboo strips connected by a piece of string, while the traditional character (in parentheses) looks like even more bamboo strips tied together by a string.

See whether you can tell what the following Taoist saying means, no matter which direction it's going. To help give you a head start, in parentheses I've written the definition of each individual character. From there you can string them together and take a stab at translating the whole saying. Here are the meanings of the four characters in the saying:

知 **zhī** (jir) (*to know*)

者 **zhě** (juh) (possessive article, as in "*the one who*")

不 **bù** (boo) (negative prefix, such as *no, not, or doesn't*)

言 **yán** (yeah-n) (classical Chinese word for *to speak*)



Okay, here's the saying in three different directions. See whether you can figure it out by the time it's written top to bottom.

**Left to right:** 知者不言, 言者不知      **zhī zhě bù yán**

**Right to left:** 知不者言, 言不者知      **yán zhě bù zhī**

**Top to bottom:**

知	<b>zhī</b>
者	<b>zhě</b>
不	<b>bù</b>
言,	<b>yán</b>
言	<b>yán</b>
者	<b>zhě</b>
不	<b>bù</b>
知.	<b>zhī</b>

Give up? It means, “*Those who know do not speak, and those who speak do not know*” — a saying attributed to the 6th century Taoist philosopher Laozi 老子. How's that for wisdom?

In modern times, the Western layout of words from left to right became the norm, and in 1955 the People's Republic of China (PRC) government mandated that the same thing be done for Chinese characters. Taiwan did the same for official documents beginning in 2004.



REMEMBER

Chinese can be written from right to left, left to right, or top to bottom. Pretty much any which way except diagonally, which would make anyone dizzy just looking at it.

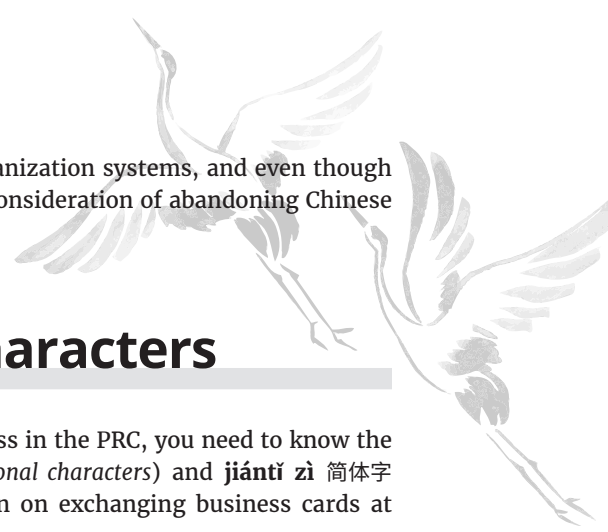
## Chinese Language Reform

With an illiteracy rate estimated at 85 percent in 1949, when the Communists took over China, drastic measures were needed before the country could move forward — way before the current lightning speed of modernization and seemingly nanosecond economic boom with which China is associated today. The overarching goal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) back in 1949 was to create a new political order along with a revolutionary transformation of traditional Chinese values and social structure. As a result, adult education now consisted of three essential elements: the development of practical skills, the promotion of ideological education, and the eradication of illiteracy.

The first step of language reform, therefore, was the simplification of Chinese characters, reducing their sheer number while simplifying the forms in which they were written. A new standardized dictionary was published in 1955, instantly eliminating over 1,000 characters. The following year a list of 355 simplified characters was published, and by 1964, out of the 8,000 most frequently used characters, over 2,000 were simplified. Western punctuation and a revised printing style, from vertical to horizontal, made it easier to add foreign words and phrases and prepare for the eventual takeover of Pinyin.

The simplification of Chinese characters has been seen as progress in China's drive toward modernization. China's literacy rate has shot up from 20 percent to between 80 and 90 percent — an incredible outcome in a relatively short span of time.

The Pinyin system officially replaced previous types of Romanization systems, and even though it has become standard in China, there is no longer serious consideration of abandoning Chinese characters altogether after all.



## Traditional versus Simplified Characters

Whether you're planning on visiting Taiwan or doing business in the PRC, you need to know the difference between **fántǐ zì** 繁体字 (fahn-tee dzuh) (*traditional characters*) and **jiǎntǐ zì** 简体字 (jyan-tee dzuh) (*simplified characters*). Especially if you plan on exchanging business cards at some point.

**Fántǐ zì** haven't changed much since **kǎi shū** 楷书 (楷書) (kye shoo) (*standard script*) was first created around 200 CE. (You read more about this and other kinds of script in Chapter 3.) Traditional characters are still used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and many overseas Chinese communities today, where learning them begins at an early age.

**Jiǎntǐ zì** are used solely in the People's Republic of China, Singapore, and Malaysia. When the PRC was established in 1949, the illiteracy rate among the general populace hovered around 85 percent — in large part because learning to write Chinese was so difficult and time consuming, and most of the populace were farmers who worked on the land from dawn to dusk.

The new Communist government decided to simplify the writing process primarily by reducing the number of strokes it took to create a specific character, but not all. Table 1-1 below shows you some examples of the before (traditional characters) and after (simplified characters).

**TABLE 1-1** Traditional and Simplified Chinese Characters

Traditional Character (# of Strokes)	Simplified Character (# of Strokes)	Romanization and Pronunciation	Meaning
見 (7 strokes)	见 (4 strokes)	<b>jiàn</b> (jyan)	<i>to see</i>
車 (6 strokes)	车 (4 strokes)	<b>chē</b> (chuh)	<i>vehicle</i>
聲 (17 strokes)	声 (7 strokes)	<b>shēng</b> (shuhng)	<i>sound</i>
國 (11 strokes)	国 (8 strokes)	<b>guó</b> (gwaw)	<i>country</i>
較 (13 strokes)	较 (10 strokes)	<b>jiào</b> (jyaow)	<i>relatively</i>



REMEMBER

This book features simplified characters rather than traditional because they are used by the greatest number of people and comprise the writing system you will need to know if you go to mainland China.



WARNING

Simplification of the Chinese writing system has all sorts of political overtones, so if you're planning on doing business in Taiwan, for example, make sure your business cards and other company materials are printed with *traditional* Chinese characters. Save the simplified characters for your next business trip to China, Singapore, or Malaysia.

The campaign to reform China's written language by the Communists began in 1956, when the National Commission for the Reform of Writing published a list of 1,700 simplified characters. In 1964, the same commission put out an expanded list, which included over 2,200 simplified characters.



The process of simplifying characters includes reducing the number of strokes in characters that were too complicated, replacing a number of words with their homophones, and getting rid of superfluous variants (since certain characters had several different forms).

Even though writing is easier after characters are simplified, the beauty of traditional characters is lost forever. (Some of us are still mourning it, although I have to admit, simplified characters really are quicker and easier to write. Not all calligraphers follow suit however.)

## Why Learn to Write Chinese?

Now that you know a bit more about the history and complexity of the written Chinese language, perhaps you're starting to panic. You may be wondering what in the world possessed you (what would possess anyone, in fact) to try to tackle one of the toughest, if not *the* toughest, writing systems in the world. I mean, it's one thing to want to learn how to speak Mandarin. Heck, everyone does these days, what with the lightning-speed economic boom and endless business opportunities that beckon. For that, we have *Chinese For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, and *Chinese Phrases For Dummies* (both also published by Wiley). Those two books take you right to the doorstep of your friends, neighbors, and business partners so that you can chat with them face to face or try to engage in business negotiations. (For the high-stakes stuff, you should still hire an interpreter, but at least you'll know what everyone's haggling about.)

If you truly want to glimpse the depth and beauty of Chinese history, culture, and even its ancient worldview, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better way than by looking to the written word. Literally. Take, for example, the character for *peace*: 和. It is created by combining a mouth (口) with a piece of grain (禾). What if I told you that, throughout the centuries, famines have plagued the people of the Middle Kingdom, and after almost every famine there was a revolt against the ruler by the starving masses? The connection between people's mouths being filled with food (grain) and a peaceful kingdom was not lost on China's emperors throughout the ages. Just look to the character, and you'll find the bigger picture.

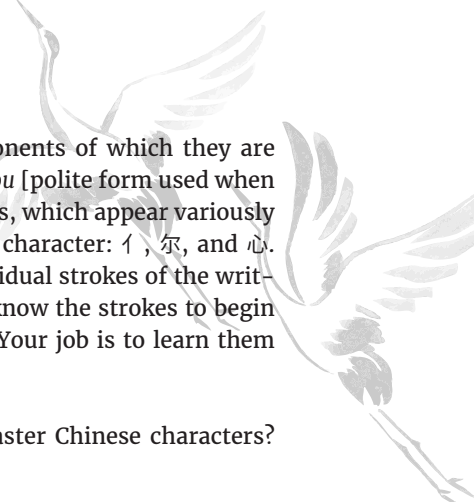
It works in the reverse for English too. Characters shine an instant light on the definition of almost any word. For example, what the heck was the "bubonic plague" in the Middle Ages, and how did people get it? Just look up "bubonic plague" in a handy Chinese dictionary and you'll see the characters for rat (鼠) and illness (疫). The disease borne of rats — Ta Da-a-ah! Is this not a brilliant language?

You'll get to know Chinese people by speaking with them in Mandarin, that's for sure. But take a long look at the Chinese writing system, and you'll get to know their collective souls. Scary? Yes. Even daunting, perhaps? For sure.

Fear not, my friend. This book will get you well on your way.

## Strategies for Learning to Write Chinese Characters

One of the goals of this book is to introduce some of the most tried-and-true strategies for learning to write Chinese. You also have lots of opportunities to practice. All characters in this book are divided into "graphic components." This is to remind you that an effective method for memorizing Chinese characters is to remember the combination of these basic components.



Even though there are thousands of characters, the number of components of which they are comprised is actually quite limited. For example, the character **nín** 您 (*you* [polite form used when speaking to those much older than yourself]) has three basic components, which appear variously at the top, on the bottom, or in this case on the left-hand side of the character: 亻, 尔, and 心. Memorizing these three components is easier than memorizing 11 individual strokes of the writing brush by which the character is ultimately written, so long as you know the strokes to begin with. The job of this book is to teach you what these components are. Your job is to learn them and practice using them. How's that for a perfect division of labor?

So how exactly do you get from Point A to Point B when trying to master Chinese characters? Follow these basic rules.

## Set goals

Before you even begin to practice writing the characters themselves, you need to get into the “Can do!” mindset. Following are some specific suggestions to set you up for success before you put pen (or writing brush) to paper:

- » Set aside 10 to 15 minutes every day for character practice.
- » Decide how many characters you want to learn by the end of each week, month, or day.
- » Etch in stone the time you've scheduled for character practice on the calendar.
- » Treat your character practice routine as if it's a real work appointment and stick to it.
- » Listen to your gut. If you were dying to memorize all 100 characters by the end of the day but aren't even on character 5 by noon, you're probably setting unrealistic goals.
- » Aim for a minimum of five characters a week (one each workday).
- » Give yourself a big pat on the back at the end of each week just for setting and reaching your goals — or getting close to it.

## Write, review, rinse, repeat

Some of the best ways to learn Chinese characters are also the simplest, tried-and-true ways to learn the written form of any foreign language: practice, practice, practice. Below I give you some ideas, which are easy to follow. All you have to do is, well, follow them.

- » Write each new character five times.
- » Write each new radical five times.
- » Create index cards for each character as you learn them.
- » Write the actual character on one side of the index card, and the Pinyin with tone marks, along with the English translation, on the other.
- » Put the index cards in your pocketbook or briefcase, so that when there's a lull, like at the waiting room of your doctor's office or while you're in line at the bank, you'll be able to whip out the cards and use your time efficiently.



## Cultivate your inner character whisperer

Remember the connection between hand-eye coordination? Well, learning Chinese characters takes that up a notch, to eye-brain-hand coordination. What you see when you look at a seemingly inscrutable character needs to be emblazoned in your brain and then magically materialize again by your hand. Following are some ways to do this:

- » Identify the part of the character that indicates its likely pronunciation and say it quietly to yourself.
- » Group together the index cards whose characters look similar. Then say each out loud and guess the common denominator in how each character is written, which would produce that same sound.

For example, the characters for horse, mother, and to scold, are respectively written 马, 妈, and 骂. When you say them out loud, you realize that they are all pronounced “ma,” except they are pronounced with different tones.

- » When you look closely, you will see that the character for horse (马) appears in all three characters. The only difference is that two of the characters have additional strokes beyond the horse. The character for “mother” has additional strokes, which mean female, and the character for “to scold” has two mouths written above the horse (perfect for yelling at someone, no?). Sounds difficult, but the more you look, the more you see, and the more you see, the more you get it. Get it?
- » Say the sound of each character out loud or in a low voice as you write them.
- » Speak to that character as it speaks to you (sorry, getting carried away now).

## Practice creative visualization

Take a good look at an index card with a character on it. Any character. Now take a look at the back of the index card to see what it means. Look at the character again and start to connect the meaning of the character with how the character actually looks. If it was the character for horse, for example, you might imagine a horse galloping forward at full speed.

Do this with the next character you learned, and then the next, and then the next.

Congratulations! You’ve just finished the first part of your journey to learn to write Chinese characters. How does it feel?

- hǎo** 好 (how) (*good*)
- bù hǎo** 不好 (boo how) (*bad [literally not good]*)

See? Your first two characters are ready for the index cards.