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Heisig/Remembering the Kanji 1

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to provide the student of Japanese with a simple method for correlating the writing and the meaning of Japanese characters in such a way as to make them both easy to remember. It is intended not only for the beginner, but also for the more advanced student looking for some relief to the constant frustration of forgetting how to write the kanji and some way to systematize what he or she already knows. By showing how to break down the complexities of the Japanese writing system into its basic elements and suggesting ways to reconstruct meanings from those elements, the method offers a new perspective from which to learn the kanji.

There are, of course, many things that the pages of this book will not do for you. You will read nothing about how kanji combine to form compounds. Nor is anything said about the various ways to pronounce the characters. Furthermore, all questions of grammatical usage have been omitted. These are all matters that need specialized treatment in their own right. Meantime, remembering the meaning and the writing of the kanji—perhaps the single most difficult barrier to learning Japanese—can be greatly simplified if the two are isolated and studied apart from everything else.

What makes forgetting the kanji so natural is their lack of connection with normal patterns of visual memory. We are used to hills and roads, to the faces of people and the skylines of cities, to flowers, animals, and the phenomena of nature. And while only a fraction of what we see is readily recalled, we are confident that, given proper attention, anything we choose to remember, we can. That confidence is lacking in the world of the kanji. The closest approximation to the kind of memory patterns required by the kanji is to be seen in the various alphabets and number-systems we know. The difference is that while these symbols are very few and often sound-related, the kanji number in the thousands and have no consistent phonetic value. Nonetheless, traditional methods for learning the characters have been the same as those for learning alphabets: drill the shapes one by one, again and again, year after year. Whatever ascetic value there is in such an exercise, the more efficient way would be to relate the characters to something other than their sounds in the first place, and so to break ties with the visual memory we rely on for learning our alphabets.
The origins of the Japanese writing system can be traced back to ancient China and the eighteenth century before the Christian era. In the form in which we find Chinese writing codified some 1,000 years later, it was made up largely of pictographic, detailed glyphs. These were further transformed and stylized down through the centuries, so that by the time the Japanese were introduced to the kanji by Buddhist monks from Korea and started experimenting with ways to adapt the Chinese writing system to their own language (about the fourth to seventh centuries of our era), they were already dealing with far more ideographic and abstract forms. The Japanese made their own contributions and changes in time, as was to be expected. And like every modern Oriental culture that uses the kanji, they continue to do so, though now more in matters of usage than form.

So fascinating is this story that many have encouraged the study of etymology as a way to remember the kanji. Unfortunately, the student quickly learns the many disadvantages of such an approach. As charming as it is to see the ancient drawing of a woman etched behind its respective kanji, or to discover the rudimentary form of a hand or a tree or a house, when the character itself is removed, the clear visual memory of the familiar object is precious little help for recalling how to write it. Proper etymological studies are most helpful after one has learned the general-use kanji. Before that, they only add to one’s memory problems. We need a still more radical departure from visual memory.

Let me paint the impasse in another, more graphic, way. Picture yourself holding a kaleidoscope up to the light as still as possible, trying to fix in memory the particular pattern that the play of light and mirrors and colored stones has created. Chances are you have such an untrained memory for such things that it will take some time; but let us suppose that you succeed after ten or fifteen minutes. You close your eyes, trace the pattern in your head, and then check your image against the original pattern until you are sure you have it remembered. Then someone passes by and jars your elbow. The pattern is lost, and in its place a new jumble appears. Immediately your memory begins to scramble. You set the kaleidoscope aside, sit down, and try to draw what you had just memorized, but to no avail. There is simply nothing left in memory to grab hold of. The kanji are like that. One can sit at one’s desk and drill a half dozen characters for an hour or two, only to discover on the morrow that when something similar is seen, the former memory is erased or hopelessly confused by the new information.

Now the odd thing is not that this occurs, but rather that, instead of openly admitting one’s distrust of purely visual memory, one accuses oneself of a poor memory or lack of discipline and keeps on following the same routine.
Introduction

Thus, by placing the blame on a poor visual memory, one overlooks the possibility of another form of memory that could handle the task with relative ease: imaginative memory.

By imaginative memory I mean the faculty to recall images created purely in the mind, with no actual or remembered visual stimuli behind them. When we recall our dreams we are using imaginative memory. The fact that we sometimes conflate what happened in waking life with what merely occurred in a dream is an indication of how powerful those imaginative stimuli can be. While dreams may be broken up into familiar component parts, the composite whole is fantastical and yet capable of exerting the same force on perceptual memory as an external stimulus. It is possible to use imagination in this way also in a waking state and harness its powers for assisting a visual memory admittedly ill-adapted for remembering the kanji.

In other words, if we could discover a limited number of basic elements in the characters and make a sort of alphabet out of them, assigning to each its own image, fusing them together to form other images, and so building up complex tableaux in imagination, the impasse created by purely visual memory might be overcome. Such an imaginative alphabet would be every bit as rigorous as a phonetic one in restricting each basic element to one basic value; but its grammar would lack many of the controls of ordinary language and logic. It would be like a kind of dream-world where anything at all might happen, and happen differently in each mind. Visual memory would be used minimally, to build up the alphabet. After that, one would be set loose to roam freely inside the magic lantern of imaginative patterns according to one’s own preferences.

In fact, most students of the Japanese writing system do something similar from time to time, devising their own mnemonic aids but never developing an organized approach to their use. At the same time, most of them would be embarrassed at the academic silliness of their own secret devices, feeling somehow that there is no way to refine the ridiculous ways their mind works. Yet if it does work, then some such irreverence for scholarship and tradition seems very much in place. Indeed, shifting attention from why one forgets certain kanji to why one remembers others should offer motivation enough to undertake a more thorough attempt to systematize imaginative memory.

The basic alphabet of the imaginative world hidden in the kanji we may call, following traditional terminology, primitive elements (or simply primitives). These are not to be confused with the so-called “radicals” which form the basis of etymological studies of sound and meaning, and now are used for the lexical ordering of the characters. In fact, most of the radicals are them-
selves primitives, but the number of primitives is not restricted to the traditional list of radicals.

The primitives, then, are the fundamental strokes and combinations of strokes from which all the characters are built up. Calligraphically speaking, there are only nine possible kinds of strokes in theory, seventeen in practice. A few of these will be given primitive meanings; that is, they will serve as fundamental images. Simple combinations will yield new primitive meanings in turn, and so on as complex characters are built up. If these primitives are presented in orderly fashion, the taxonomy of the most complex characters is greatly simplified and no attempt need be made to memorize the primitive alphabet apart from actually using it.

The number of primitives, as we are understanding the term, is a moot question. Traditional etymology counts some 224 of them. We shall draw upon these freely, and also ground our primitive meanings in traditional etymological meanings, without making any particular note of the fact as we proceed. We shall also be departing from etymology to avoid the confusion caused by the great number of similar meanings for differently shaped primitives. Wherever possible, then, the generic meaning of the primitives will be preserved, although there are cases in which we shall have to specify that meaning in a different way, or ignore it altogether, so as to root imaginative memory in familiar visual memories. Should the student later turn to etymological studies, the procedure we have followed will become more transparent, and should not cause any obstacles to the learning of etymologies. The list of elements that we have singled out as primitives proper (Index ii) is restricted to the following four classes: basic elements that are not kanji, kanji that appear as basic elements in other kanji with great frequency, kanji that change their meaning when they function as parts of other kanji, and kanji that change their shape when forming parts of other kanji. Any kanji that keeps both its form and its meaning and appears as part of another kanji functions as a primitive, whether or not it occurs with enough frequency to draw attention to it as such.

The 2,042 characters chosen for study in these pages (given in the order of presentation in Index i and arranged according to the number of strokes in Index iii) include the basic 1,850 general-use kanji established as standard by the Japanese Ministry of Education in 1946,1 roughly another 60 used chiefly in proper names, and a handful of characters that are convenient for use as primitive elements. Each kanji is assigned a key word that represents its basic

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1 In 1981 an additional 95 characters were added to this list. They have been incorporated into the later editions of this book.
meaning, or one of its basic meanings. The key words have been selected on the basis of how a given kanji is used in compounds and on the meaning it has on its own. There is no repetition of key words, although many are nearly synonymous. In these cases, it is important to focus on the particular flavor that that word enjoys in English, so as to evoke connotations distinct from similar key words. To be sure, many of the characters carry a side range of connotations not present in their English equivalents, and vice versa; many even carry several ideas not able to be captured in a single English word. By simplifying the meanings through the use of key words, however, one becomes familiar with a kanji and at least one of its principal meanings. The others can be added later with relative ease, in much the same way as one enriches one’s understanding of one’s native tongue by learning the full range of feelings and meanings embraced by words already known.

Once we have the primitive meanings and the key word relevant to a particular kanji (cataloged in Index iv), the task is to create a composite ideogram. Here is where fantasy and memory come into play. The aim is to shock the mind’s eye, to disgust it, to enchant it, to tease it, or to entertain it in any way possible so as to brand it with an image intimately associated with the key word. That image, in turn, inasmuch as it is composed of primitive meanings, will dictate precisely how the kanji is to be penned—stroke for stroke, jot for jot. Many characters, perhaps the majority of them, can be so remembered on a first encounter, provided sufficient time is taken to fix the image. Others will need to be reviewed by focusing on the association of key-word and primitive elements. In this way, mere drill of visual memory is all but entirely eliminated.

Since the goal is not simply to remember a certain number of kanji, but also to learn how to remember them (and others not included in this book), the course has been divided into three parts. Part one provides the full associative story for each character. By directing the reader’s attention, at least for the length of time it takes to read the explanation and relate it to the written form of the kanji, most of the work is done for the student, even as a feeling for the method is acquired. In Part two, only the skeletal plots of the stories are presented, and the individual must work out his or her own details by drawing on personal memory and fantasy. Part three, which comprises the major portion of the course, provides only the key word and the primitive meanings, leaving the remainder of the process to the student.

It will soon become apparent that the most critical factor is the order of learning the kanji. The actual method is simplicity itself. Once more basic characters have been learned, their use as primitive elements for other kanji can save a great deal of effort and enable one to review known characters at
the same time as one is learning new ones. Hence to approach this course haphazardly, jumping ahead to the later lessons before studying the earlier ones, will entail a considerable loss of efficiency. If one’s goal is to learn to write the entire list of general-use characters, then it seems best to learn them in the order best suited to memory, not in order of frequency or according to the order in which they are taught to Japanese children. Should the individual decide to pursue some other course, however, the indexes should provide all the basic information for finding the appropriate frame and the primitives referred to in that frame.

It may surprise the reader casually leafing through these pages not to find a single drawing or pictographic representation. This is fully consistent with what was said earlier about placing the stress on imaginative memory. For one thing, pictographs are an unreliable way to remember all but very few kanji; and even in these cases, the pictograph should be discovered by the student by toying with the forms, pen in hand, rather than given in one of its historical graphic forms. For another, the presentation of an image actually inhibits imagination and restricts it to the biases of the artist. This is as true for the illustrations in a child’s collection of fairy tales as it is for the various phenomena we shall encounter in the course of this book. The more original work the individual does with an image, the easier will it be to remember a kanji.

Before setting out on the course plotted in the following pages, attention should be drawn to a few final points. In the first place, one must be warned about setting out too quickly. It should not be assumed that because the first characters are so elementary, they can be skipped over hastily. The method presented here needs to be learned step by step, lest one find oneself forced later to retreat to the first stages and start over; 20 or 25 characters per day would not be excessive for someone who has only a couple of hours to give to study. If one were to study them full-time, there is no reason why the entire course could not be completed successfully in four to six weeks. By the time Part one has been traversed, the student should have discovered a rate of progress suitable to the time available.

Second, the repeated advice given to study the characters with pad and pencil should be taken seriously. While simply remembering the characters does not, one will discover, demand that they be written, there is really no better way to improve the aesthetic appearance of one’s writing and acquire a “natural feel” for the flow of the kanji than by writing them. The method will spare one the toil of writing the same character over and over in order to learn it, but it will not supply the fluency at writing that comes only with constant practice. If pen and paper are inconvenient, one can always make do with the palm of the hand, as the Japanese do. It provides a convenient square space for
jotting on with one’s index finger when riding in a bus or walking down the street.

Third, the kanji are best reviewed by beginning with the key word, progressing to the respective story, and then writing the character itself. Once one has been able to perform these steps, reversing the order follows as a matter of course. More will be said about this later in the book.

In the fourth place, it is important to note that the best order for learning the kanji is by no means the best order for remembering them. They need to be recalled when and where they are met, not in the sequence in which they are presented here. For that purpose, recommendations are given in Lesson 5 for designing flash cards for random review.

Finally, it seems worthwhile to give some brief thought to any ambitions one might have about “mastering” the Japanese writing system. The idea arises from, or at least is supported by, a certain bias about learning that comes from overexposure to schooling: the notion that language is a cluster of skills that can be rationally divided, systematically learned, and certified by testing. The kanji, together with the wider structure of Japanese—and indeed of any language for that matter—resolutely refuse to be mastered in this fashion. The rational order brought to the kanji in this book is only intended as an aid to get you close enough to the characters to befriend them, let them surprise you, inspire you, enlighten you, resist you, and seduce you. But they cannot be mastered without a full understanding of their long and complex history and an insight into the secret of their unpredictable vitality—all of which is far too much for a single mind to bring to the tip of a single pen.

That having been said, the goal of this book is still to attain native proficiency in writing the Japanese characters and associating their meanings with their forms. If the logical systematization and the playful irreverence contained in the pages that follow can help spare even a few of those who pick the book up the grave error of deciding to pursue their study of the Japanese language without aspiring to such proficiency, the efforts that went into it will have more than received their reward.

Kamakura, Japan
10 February 1977
Note to the 4th Edition

In preparing a new layout and typesetting of this fourth edition, I was tempted to rethink many of the key words and primitive meanings, and to adjust the stories accordingly. After careful consideration and review of the hundreds of letters I have received from students all over the world, as well as the changes that were introduced in the French and Spanish versions of the book, I have decided to let it stand as it is with only a few exceptions.

There are, however, two related questions that come up with enough frequency to merit further comment at the outset: the use of this book in connection with formal courses of Japanese and the matter of pronunciation or “readings” of the kanji.

The reader will not have to finish more than a few lessons to realize that this book was designed for self-learning. What may not be so apparent is that using it to supplement the study of kanji in the classroom or to review for examinations has an adverse influence on the learning process. The more you try to combine the study of the written kanji through the method outlined in these pages with traditional study of the kanji, the less good this book will do you. I know of no exceptions.

Virtually all teachers of Japanese, native and foreign, would agree with me that learning to write the kanji with native proficiency is the greatest single obstacle to the foreign adult approaching Japanese—indeed so great as to be presumed insurmountable. After all, if even well-educated Japanese study the characters formally for nine years, use them daily, and yet frequently have trouble remembering how to reproduce them, much more than English-speaking people have with the infamous spelling of their mother tongue, is it not unrealistic to expect that even with the best of intentions and study methods

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2 The French adaptation was prepared by Yves Maniette under the title Les kanji dans la tête: Apprendre à ne pas oublier le sens et l’écriture des caractères japonais (Gramagraf sccl, 1998). The Spanish version, prepared in collaboration with Marc Bernabé and Verónica Calafell, is Kanji para recordar: Curso mnemotécnico para el aprendizaje de la escritura y el significado de los caracteres japoneses (Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 2001). After the issuance of this new edition, a German version was published in collaboration with Robert Rauther, Die Kanji lernen und behalten 1: Bedeutung und Schreibweise der japanischen Schriftzeichen (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2005, 2006).
those not raised with the kanji from their youth should manage the feat? Such an attitude may never actually be spoken openly by a teacher standing before a class, but as long as the teacher believes it, it readily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This attitude is then transmitted to the student by placing greater emphasis on the supposedly simpler and more reasonable skills of learning to speak and read the language. In fact, as this book seeks to demonstrate, nothing could be further from the truth.

To begin with, the writing of the kanji is the most completely rational part of the language. Over the centuries, the writing of the kanji has been simplified many times, always with rational principles in mind. Aside from the Korean hangul, there may be no writing system in the world as logically structured as the Sino-Japanese characters are. The problem is that the usefulness of this inner logic has not found its way into learning the kanji. On the contrary, it has been systematically ignored. Those who have passed through the Japanese school system tend to draw on their own experience when they teach others how to write. Having begun as small children in whom the powers of abstraction are relatively undeveloped and for whom constant repetition is the only workable method, they are not likely ever to have considered reorganizing their pedagogy to take advantage of the older student’s facility with generalized principles.

So great is this neglect that I would have to say that I have never met a Japanese teacher who can claim to have taught a foreign adult to write the basic general-use kanji that all high-school graduates in Japan know. Never. Nor have I ever met a foreign adult who would claim to have learned to write at this level from a native Japanese teacher. I see no reason to assume that the Japanese are better suited to teach writing because it is, after all, their language. Given the rational nature of the kanji, precisely the opposite is the case: the Japanese teacher is an impediment to learning to associate the meanings of the kanji with their written form. The obvious victim of the conventional methods is the student, but on a subtler level the reconfirmation of unquestioned biases also victimizes the Japanese teachers themselves, the most devoted of whom are prematurely denied the dream of fully internationalizing their language.

There are additional problems with using this book in connection with classroom study. For one thing, as explained earlier in the INTRODUCTION, the efficiency of the study of the kanji is directly related to the order in which they are learned. Formal courses introduce kanji according to different principles that have nothing to do with the writing. More often than not, the order in which Japan’s Ministry of Education has determined children should learn the kanji from primary through middle school, is the main guide. Obvi-
ously, learning the writing is far more important than being certified to have passed some course or other. And just as obviously, one needs to know all the general-use kanji for them to be of any use for the literate adult. When it comes to reading basic materials, such as newspapers, it is little consolation to know half or even three-quarters of them. The crucial question for pedagogy, therefore, is not what is the best way to qualify at some intermediate level of proficiency, but simply how to learn all the kanji in the most efficient and reliable manner possible. For this, the traditional “levels” of kanji proficiency are simply irrelevant. The answer, I am convinced, lies in self-study, following an order based on learning all the kanji.

I do not myself know of any teacher of Japanese who has attempted to use this book in a classroom setting. My suspicion is that they would soon abandon the idea. The book is based on the idea that the writing of the kanji can be learned on its own and independently of any other aspect of the language. It is also based on the idea that the pace of study is different from one individual to another, and for each individual, from one week to the next. Organizing study to the routines of group instruction runs counter to those ideas.

This brings us to our second question. The reasons for isolating the writing of the kanji from their pronunciation follow more or less as a matter of course from what has been said. The reading and writing of the characters are taught simultaneously on the grounds that one is useless without the other. This only begs the basic question of why they could not better, and more quickly, be taught one after the other, concentrating on what is for the foreigner the simpler task, writing, and later turning to the more complicated, the reading.

One has only to look at the progress of non-Japanese raised with kanji to see the logic of the approach. When Chinese adult students come to the study of Japanese, they already know what the kanji mean and how to write them. They have only to learn how to read them. The progress they make in comparison with their Western counterparts is usually attributed to their being “Oriental.” In fact, Chinese grammar and pronunciation have about as much to do with Japanese as English does. It is their knowledge of the meaning and writing of the kanji that gives the Chinese the decisive edge. My idea was simply to learn from this common experience and give the kanji an English reading. Having learned to write the kanji in this way—which, I repeat, is the most logical and rational part of the study of Japanese—one is in a much better position to concentrate on the often irrational and unprincipled problem of learning to pronounce them.

In a word, it is hard to imagine a less efficient way of learning the reading and writing of the kanji than to study them simultaneously. And yet this is the
method that all Japanese textbooks and courses follow. The bias is too deeply ingrained to be rooted out by anything but experience to the contrary.

Many of these ideas and impressions, let it be said, only developed after I had myself learned the kanji and published the first edition of this book. At the time I was convinced that proficiency in writing the kanji could be attained in four to six weeks if one were to make a full-time job of it. Of course, the claim raised more eyebrows than hopes among teachers with far more experience than I had. Still, my own experience with studying the kanji and the relatively small number of individuals I have directed in the methods of this book, bears that estimate out, and I do not hesitate to repeat it here.

A word about how the book came to be written. I began my study of the kanji one month after coming to Japan with absolutely no previous knowledge of the language. Because travels through Asia had delayed my arrival by several weeks, I took up residence at a language school in Kamakura and began studying on my own without enrolling in the course already in progress. A certain impatience with my own ignorance compared to everyone around me, coupled with the freedom to devote myself exclusively to language studies, helped me during those first four weeks to make my way through a basic introductory grammar. This provided a general idea of how the language was constructed but, of course, almost no facility in using any of it.

Through conversations with the teachers and other students, I quickly picked up the impression that I had best begin learning the kanji as soon as possible, since this was sure to be the greatest chore of all. Having no idea at all how the kanji “worked” in the language, yet having found my own pace, I decided—against the advice of nearly everyone around me—to continue to study on my own rather than join one of the beginners’ classes.

The first few days I spent pouring over whatever I could find on the history and etymology of the Japanese characters, and examining the wide variety of systems on the market for studying them. It was during those days that the basic idea underlying the method of this book came to me. The following weeks I devoted myself day and night to experimenting with the idea, which worked well enough to encourage me to carry on with it. Before the month was out I had learned the meaning and writing of some 1,900 characters and had satisfied myself that I would retain what I had memorized. It was not long before I became aware that something extraordinary had taken place.

For myself, the method I was following seemed so simple, even childish, that it was almost an embarrassment to talk about it. And it had happened as such a matter of course that I was quite unprepared for the reaction it caused. On the one hand, some at the school accused me of having a short-term photographic memory that would fade with time. On the other hand,
there were those who pressed me to write up my “methods” for their benefit. But it seemed to me that there was too much left to learn of the language for me to get distracted by either side. Within a week, however, I was persuaded at least to let my notes circulate. Since most everything was either in my head or jotted illegibly in notebooks and on flash cards, I decided to give an hour each day to writing everything up systematically. One hour soon became two, then three, and in no time at all I had laid everything else aside to complete the task. By the end of that third month I brought a camera-ready copy to Nanzan University in Nagoya for printing. During the two months it took to prepare it for printing I added an INTRODUCTION. Through the kind help of Mrs. Iwamoto Keiko of Tuttle Publishing Company, most of the 500 copies were distributed in Tokyo bookstores, where they sold out within a few months. After the month I spent studying how to write the kanji, I did not return to any formal review of what I had learned. (I was busy trying to devise another method for simplifying the study of the reading of the characters, which was later completed as a companion volume to the first.) When I would meet a new character, I would learn it as I had the others, but I have never felt the need to retrace my steps or repeat any of the work. Admittedly, the fact that I now use the kanji daily in my teaching, research, and writing is a distinct advantage. But I remain convinced that whatever facility I have I owe to the procedures outlined in this book.

Perhaps only one who has seen the method through to the end can appreciate both how truly uncomplicated and obvious it is, and how accessible to any average student willing to invest the time and effort. For while the method is simple and does eliminate a great deal of wasted effort, the task is still not an easy one. It requires as much stamina, concentration, and imagination as one can bring to it.

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Barcelona, Spain
21 December 2000