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Heisig & Richardson/Remembering Traditional Hanzi 1

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INTRODUCTION

THE AIM OF THIS course is to help you teach yourself, as quickly and efficiently as possible, the meaning and writing of the 3,000 most commonly used Chinese characters. The course is intended not only for beginners, but also for more advanced students looking for some way to systematize what they already know and gain relief from the constant frustration of forgetting how to write the characters. By showing how to break down the complexities of the characters into their basic elements, assigning meanings to those elements, and arranging the characters in a unique and rational order, the method aims to make use of the structural properties of the writing system itself to reduce the burden on memory.

The 55 lessons that make up Book 1 cover the 1,000 most commonly used characters in the Chinese writing system, plus another 500 included either because they are needed to preserve the logical ordering of the material or because they are especially easy to learn at this early stage. Book 2 will add another 1,500 characters for a total of 3,000—all of them selected on the basis of the frequency with which they appear in written Chinese. What you will *not* learn here is how to pronounce any of these characters or how to combine them to form new words. Since this breaks with conventional methods for teaching characters, it is important that you understand the rationale behind the approach before setting out.

To students approaching Chinese from a mother tongue written with an alphabet, the characters represent a forbidding obstacle, one that involves the memorization of thousands of complex configurations, each of which has to be tethered to a particular sound and a particular meaning or function. Focusing for the moment just on what is involved in trying to commit the written forms to memory, imagine 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, your mind is unaccustomed to processing such material and it will take some time to organize the pattern for retention and recall. 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, repeating the process until you are sure you have it committed to memory.

Then someone passes by and jars your elbow. The pattern is lost forever 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 characters are like that. One can sit at one's desk and drill a number of 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. No wonder learners begin to think that they simply don't have a good memory for characters, or decide that learning to write characters is not so important anyway.

In many cases failure to retain what has been learned has much less to do with a lack of ability than with the lack of a method of learning adjusted to the circumstances of the learner. Of course we forget, and some of us forget more than others. But some of this forgetting is due to a simple misuse, even abuse, of our powers of memory, and is therefore preventable. The first step to prevention is to break with certain preconceptions about learning to write Chinese.

UPROOTING BIASES ABOUT CHARACTER LEARNING

One bias circulating among teachers and students of the Chinese language is that a character's *meaning, pronunciation, and writing need to be learned at the same time*. Chinese textbooks typically include all three bits of information for each character or compound term as it is introduced, in addition to supplying details about grammatical function and examples of usage. Of course, these things are important, but to have to learn them all at once places an unreasonable burden on memory. Little wonder that the brain slows down or grinds to a complete halt.

The Chinese themselves are not faced with this problem. As children, they are exposed first to the spoken language, learning how to associate sounds with meanings. When the time comes to learn how to read, they already have at their disposal a solid basis of words whose sounds and meanings are familiar to them; all that remains is to associate those words with written forms. Doing so opens them to printed texts, which, in turn, helps them assimilate new words and characters. Those of us who come to the language as adults can gain a similar advantage by tying each of the character forms to a particular unit of pronunciation and meaning, a "key word" in English, that we already know.

Before you dismiss the idea of affixing English words to Chinese characters out of hand, consider this: all the Chinese dialects, no matter how mutually unintelligible they are when spoken, use the same characters for writing. These characters convey the same meaning, no matter how they are pronounced. What is more, when the Japanese use Chinese characters, they assign them still other

pronunciations. In other words, there is nothing in the nature of a character dictating that it must be verbalized one way or another. Unlike students coming to Chinese from an alphabetically written language, the Japanese already know the meaning and writing of a great many of the characters. By the time you finish this course, you will be in a position similar to theirs. Of course, you will eventually need to learn Chinese pronunciations, just as Japanese students do. But adding difficult and unfamiliar sounds to a solid knowledge of character forms is a much more manageable task than trying to memorize meaning, pronunciation, and writing all at the same time.

If some separation of learning tasks seems reasonable, then why not acquire a sizable vocabulary of Chinese pronunciations and meanings first—as the Chinese children do—and then pick up writing later? After all, oral language is the older, more universal, and more ordinary means of communication. Hence the bias that *if anything is to be postponed, it should be the introduction of the writing system*. The truth is, written characters bring a high degree of clarity to the multiplicity of meanings carried by homophones in the spoken language. For example, even an ordinary pocket dictionary of Mandarin lists some 60 characters that are pronounced *yi* in one or another of its tonal variants, with at least 30 distinct characters in the fourth tone alone. Each of these characters carries its own meaning or meanings, which the simple syllable *yi* of itself cannot communicate. Beginning with characters and their meanings greatly reduces this ambiguity.

The idea that writing should come after speaking is bolstered by another, more pervasive bias: *the writing of characters is the most complex part of the language to learn*. In fact, it is a far simpler task than is often supposed, as these books hope to demonstrate. In addition, beginning with the writing leaves the student with solid units of form and meaning to which Chinese pronunciations can then be attached. Even more important, completing what is usually perceived to be the most challenging task first, and in a relatively short period of time, rather than leaving it for later, cannot help but motivate one to carry on with the language. Given high attrition rates among students of Chinese in the West, the role of such positive reinforcement is not to be discounted.

Yet another bias that needs uprooting is the idea that *characters can only be mastered through constant drill and repetition*. Traditional methods for approaching the Chinese writing system have been the same as those for learning alphabets: practice writing the characters one by one, over and over again, for as long as it takes. Whatever ascetic value there is in such an exercise, it is hardly the most efficient way to approach character study. The reason this bias has such a strong hold on students of Chinese is that persons completely ignorant of the Chinese writing system naturally rely on teachers who have learned

characters from childhood. Surely a pedagogy with many centuries of history behind it and over a billion users demands our respect. Here again, the prevailing wisdom is deceptive.

Native speakers of Chinese are clearly in a position to teach a good many things about their language, but they are not necessarily qualified to answer questions from non-native speakers about how best to learn the characters, for the simple reason that they themselves have never been in the situation of having to ask such a question. Having begun their study as children, in whom the powers of abstraction were not yet developed and for whom rote memory was the only option, they cannot be expected to fully grasp the learning potential an adult brings to the study of the characters. As children, we were all good *imitators*, with few habits to get in the way of our absorption of new skills. But we did not become good *learners* until we had the ability to classify, categorize, and organize discreet bits of information into larger blocks. This is precisely what young children cannot do with character forms and why they have no choice but to rely on imitation and repetition. Whatever educational and social advantages there may be to having an entire school population study Chinese characters by writing them again and again from an early age, for the adult approaching the language from the outside it amounts to little more than a gigantic waste of time. A touch of irreverence towards current pedagogical conventions, along with a little rethinking of the way the characters are studied and the order in which they are learned, can produce far better results than simple reliance on methods designed for the teaching of children.

The approach followed in these pages incorporates important elements of all three broad areas into which cognitive learning strategies are thought to fall—organization, elaboration, and rehearsal—and entails a strong reliance on memory techniques or “mnemonics.” The very word is sure to tap into predispositions against the use of mnemonics in general, and for the learning of Chinese characters in particular. Here, too, the biases run deep, and we can do little more in these introductory remarks than try to identify them and offer a brief response.¹

For some, reservations about mnemonics are grounded in the image of disreputable charlatans who hype expensive memory-training courses as the key to a better job and a better life. It is true that exaggerated claims have been

1. For more developed arguments making a case for mnemonics, see K. L. Higbee, *Your Memory: How it Works and How to Improve it* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1988); see also T. W. Richardson, “Chinese Character Memorization and Literacy: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on a Sophisticated Version of an Old Strategy,” in Andreas Guder, Jiang Xin, and Wan Yexin, eds., 對外漢字的認知与教學 [The cognition, learning, and teaching of Chinese characters] (Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press, 2007).

made, but empirical studies over the last several decades have clearly demonstrated that well-conceived mnemonic devices can be very useful for certain memory tasks. This has led many scholars to recommend them as legitimate learning strategies.

These scholarly developments also help address another concern: *mnemonics are simply too bizarre or too silly to use*. Actually, they can be quite sophisticated and elegant. Surely the more important question is whether they work or not. The whole range of possibilities, from the silly to the sophisticated, leaves ample room for personal taste or preference in determining what best facilitates learning.

Still another apprehension some may have is that *mnemonic devices clutter the mind and separate the learner from the matter to be learned*. On the contrary, insofar as such devices provide meaning and organization that would not otherwise exist, they actually unclutter the mind. Besides, once recall for a particular item has become automatic, the mnemonic initially used to fix that item in memory usually falls away of its own accord.

The dominant bias against the use of mnemonics for learning Chinese characters is that *it is inappropriate to overstep the boundaries of current etymological knowledge, even more so when these liberties are taken without drawing attention to the fact. To do so is not to communicate the “truth” about the characters*. This complaint speaks directly to what you will meet in these pages. On one hand, much of the course is grounded in scholarly consensus on the history of the characters. On the other, we have not hesitated to ignore established etymologies whenever doing so seemed pedagogically useful. In fact, the course relies heavily on fictions of our own invention. At least two reasons support this choice. For one thing, even the most comprehensive account of how particular characters were formed may be far from the whole “truth” concerning them. Much remains speculative or unknown. For another, however reliable the etymological information may be, for most learners of Chinese it is not as crucial as finding relief for memory—which is what we have tried to provide here. Should a student later turn to etymological studies, the procedure we have followed will become more transparent, and the fact that we did not indicate each departure from an established etymology should not cause any obstacle to learning. With this, we lay the question of mnemonics to rest.

Two final and related biases require brief comment: (1) *the learning of individual characters in isolation from compound words and grammatical patterns is mistaken*; and (2) *a single key word is often inadequate to cover a character’s meaning*.

We acknowledge that effective reading requires a knowledge of compound words and grammatical patterns; however, we concur with those who stress the

value of learning individual characters well in order to solidify “the network of possible morphemes upon which all dual and multi-character words are built.”² Similarly, we are aware that one-word definitions are of limited use; however, we agree with those who see them as a solid starting point for developing a richer and more nuanced understanding. The study of individual characters, each with a distinct meaning, is only a first step towards literacy in Chinese. For the rest, only a broad and prolonged contact with the written language will suffice.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE COURSE

When James Heisig arrived in Japan some thirty years ago, he came with no knowledge of the language. Travels through Asia had delayed his arrival at the language school where he had been pre-enrolled by his sponsors. He decided to forego classes and “catch up” on his own by working through a stack of books on grammar and structure. Through conversations with teachers and other students he soon realized that he should not postpone the study of the kanji (as the Chinese characters are called in Japanese), which, all were agreed, was the biggest chore of all. Having no idea at all how the kanji “worked” in the language, yet having found his own pace, he decided—against the advice of nearly everyone around him—to continue to study on his own rather than join one of the beginners’ classes. He began studying the kanji one month after his arrival.

The first few days he spent poring over whatever he could find on the history and etymology of 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 these books came to him. The following weeks he devoted himself day and night to experimenting with the idea, which worked well enough to encourage him to carry on with it. Before the month was out he had learned the meaning and writing of some 1,900 characters and had satisfied himself that he would retain what he had memorized. It was not long before he became aware that something extraordinary had taken place.

For himself, the method he was following seemed so simple, even infantile, that it was almost an embarrassment to talk about it. And it had happened as such a matter of course that he was quite unprepared for the reaction it caused. On the one hand, some at the school accused him of having a short-term pho-

2. E. B. Hayes, “The Relationship between ‘Word Length’ and Memorability among Non-Native Readers of Chinese Mandarin,” *Journal of the Chinese Language Teacher’s Association* 25/3 (1990), 38.

tographic memory that would fade with time. On the other, there were those who pressed him to write up his “methods” for their benefit, which he did. The resulting book, originally titled *Adventures in Kanji-Land* and changed in later printings to *Remembering the Kanji*, has gone through numerous editions and been adapted for German, Spanish, French, and Portuguese.³

Timothy Richardson, a language teacher who had studied some Chinese at the university level, came upon a copy of *Remembering the Kanji* in the early 1990s. He quickly became interested in the possibility of adapting the work for students of Chinese. In subsequent doctoral work at the University of Texas at Austin, he focused on the method for his dissertation and subjected it to an extensive examination in terms of relevant theory and research.⁴ This required careful consideration not only of the underlying cognitive processes that the method might be expected to involve but also of its reasonableness in terms of prevailing perspectives on vocabulary development and reading. His work also entailed the compilation of a new list of 1,000 high-frequency Chinese characters and their integration into a skeletal Chinese version of Heisig’s original book. The results were so encouraging that Richardson sent a copy to Heisig with the suggestion that they join forces on a complete Chinese edition. Thus it was that our collaboration began.

Two immediate problems presented themselves: first, whether to opt for traditional Chinese writing or to follow the simplified forms of Mainland China; and second, how many characters to include, and which ones.

The first problem was eventually resolved with a decision to produce two parallel courses, one for each system of writing. Arguments for a learner’s beginning with one or the other each have their points, and it is not our wish to take sides in the debate, even though both of us began with traditional characters. That said, the student should know that certain overlaps in the books would only cause confusion if the two versions are studied simultaneously. If your aim is to achieve fluency in writing both systems, then it is preferable to

3. *Adventures in Kanji-Land* (1978), subsequently reissued as *Remembering the Kanji* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007, 5th edition, 22nd printing). Other language editions include *Kanji para recordar 1: Curso mnemotécnico para el aprendizaje de la escritura y el significado de los caracteres japoneses*, with Marc Bernabé and Verónica Calafell (Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 2005, 3rd printing); *Die Kanji lernen und behalten 1. Bedeutung und Schreibweise der japanischen Schriftzeichen*, with Robert Rauther (Frankfurt-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 2006, 2nd printing); *Les Kanji dans la tête: Apprendre à ne pas oublier le sens et l’écriture des caractères japonais*, Yves Maniette (2005, 2nd printing); *Kanji: Imaginar para aprender*, with Rafael Shoji (São Paulo: JBC Editora, 2007).

4. T. W. Richardson, *James W. Heisig’s System for Remembering Kanji: An Examination of Relevant Theory and Research, and a 1,000-Character Adaptation for Chinese*. Doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1998.

begin with the traditional. If you are sure you will be content with recognizing the traditional and writing the simplified, then begin with the latter.

The first step to resolving our second problem was to settle on introducing a total of 3,000 most frequently used characters. This number may fall below the 3,500 to 4,500 characters that are generally thought necessary for full proficiency, but it also happens to represent about 99.5% of the characters found in running Chinese texts, as large-scale frequency counts show. What is more, students who have learned to write these 3,000 characters will be equipped with the tools for learning to write additional characters as the need arises. Next, since the top 1,000 entries in our complete frequency list account for approximately 90% of characters in running texts,⁵ we decided to include all of them in the first book of both the traditional and simplified sets.

Frequency questions aside, the figure of 3,000 characters also makes available certain “economies of scale” that are possible with the method, which fewer characters would not. In the business world, economies of scale are said to arise when an increase in the scale of production leads to a decline in costs per unit. If we are producing widgets, the production cost per widget goes down as more are produced, because the initial investment in machinery has already been made. Similarly, using the method laid out in these pages to learn 3,000 characters, rather than 1,000, for instance, results in a decrease in learning cost per character, because an investment in basic mental “machinery” is largely made early on. In other words, the return on time and effort expended at the outset yields much better returns as more characters are learned.

When it came to deciding just which characters to include and on what grounds, the challenge proved far greater than we had counted on. Frequency lists compiled by specialists do indeed exist. Some of them list only traditional characters and others only simplified; some of them are more formal and others less so; some of them are more technical and some less so; and so forth. What we wanted, however, was a general-use list of 3,000 characters that would apply to the whole of the Chinese-speaking world. In a strict sense, such a list is not possible. If you were to set two pages of identical Chinese text side by

5. Based on three lists we consulted that include such data, the 3,000 most frequently used characters comprise 99.56%, 99.18%, and 99.43% of the total number of characters in their respective databases, while the top 1,000 characters comprise 90.3%, 89.14%, and 91.12% respectively. The three sources, in order, are: 新聞語料字頻統計表——語料庫為本研究系列之一 [Corpus-based frequency count of characters in Journal Chinese: Corpus based research series no. 1]. Technical Report no. 93-01 (Taipei: Academia Sinica Institute of Information Science, 1993); J. Da, “Modern Chinese Character Frequency List 現代語單字頻率列表,” Chinese text computing. <<http://lingua.mtsu.edu/chinese-computing>> (2004); and C. H. Tsai, “Frequency of Usage and Number of Strokes of Chinese Characters.” <<http://technology.chtsai.org/charfreq/>> (1996).

side, one in simplified characters, the other in traditional, about two-thirds of the characters would have exactly the same form on both sides. In other words, about one-third of characters in common use differ in form from one set to the other. Sometimes the discrepancies are slight, sometimes significant. Occasionally, two or more frequently used traditional characters are reduced to a single simplified character. Taking these and other considerations into account, we assembled a core list that was then adjusted to arrive at 3,000 characters for each of the two courses.

Sparing the reader a full account of the actual mechanics of completing the task, not to mention the many detours and dead-ends encountered along the way, the steps we took were basically these: We compared four major frequency lists, two traditional and two simplified,⁶ and supplemented our findings with yet another frequency list.⁷ All characters that were included among the top 3,050 on at least three of the four major lists—including those of exactly the same form and those of differing form but equivalent meaning across the traditional/simplified divide—were moved to a master list. Some 2,860 traditional characters, and just under 2,800 of their equivalents on the simplified side, met these criteria, the great majority of them appearing among the top 3,050 on all four lists.

In order to select the additional characters needed to bring this common master list up to 3,000 characters, a variety of other factors had to be juggled. Some characters, for example, clearly met the criteria on two lists and fell just outside of them on the two others, while others qualified on two of the four major lists and yet were given a high ranking on the supplemental list mentioned above. In some cases, items falling just outside of frequency criteria are important as components of other characters or often show up in beginning Chinese textbooks. (The character 餃/餃, which figures as the first half of the compound for “Chinese dumplings,” is a clear example of this and has been included in Book 2 of each of the courses.) Taking all these factors into account, we added more than 100 new characters to the master list. Another 14 characters representing useful nouns that did not quite meet the frequency criteria brought the total to 3,000 characters on the traditional side. Completing the simplified list required some 75 characters more to compensate for character amalgamations resulting from the simplification process.

6. In addition to the three lists mentioned in footnote 5, see also 現代漢語頻率詞典 [Modern Chinese frequency dictionary] (Beijing: Beijing Language Institute, 1986), as cited in J. E. Dew, *6000 Chinese Words: A Vocabulary Frequency Handbook for Chinese Language Teachers and Students* (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc., 1999).

7. 國家言文字工作委 [National Working Committee on the Written Language], 現代漢語常用字表 [Modern Chinese frequently-used characters list] (Beijing: Yuwen Press, 1988).

The next step was to extract a selection of 1,000 characters that would serve as a foundation for the Book 1 of each of the courses. As part of the research for his dissertation, Richardson had found 580 characters that figured among the top 1,000 characters in five different sources.⁸ This was the starting point. Another 199 were included by taking characters that were in the top 1,000 in four of those sources and similarly ranked on either of two frequency lists that had not been consulted in the original research.⁹ Another 74 were included by taking characters that occurred in the top 1,000 in three of the original sources and similarly ranked on *both* of the new lists, bringing the total up to 853. An additional 74 characters that had appeared among the top 1,000 items on at least three of the four major lists gave us 927.

At each step of the way, an attempt was made to avoid arbitrariness, but the challenge was to relax frequency criteria only enough to include the number of characters we needed and no more. In selecting the remaining 73 characters of the total 1,000, we felt that pedagogical concerns and personal judgments should be given greater weight, because using frequency criteria alone had generated some anomalies that needed to be addressed. For example, frequency dictated the inclusion of the characters for “winter” and “spring,” but not for “summer” and “fall”; for “mama,” but not for “papa.” We therefore consulted a list of the 969 characters taught in the first four grades of elementary school in the Republic of China (ROC).¹⁰ Of these, 810 were exactly the same as the 927 we had selected based on frequency alone. The remaining 73 characters were drawn from the ROC list, always with an eye on the basic frequency lists. As an added check on the simplified side, we compared our list against one of the original sources, a list of the 1,000 characters most frequently used in textbooks in elementary and high schools in the People’s Republic of China (PRC).¹¹ The two lists had 904 characters in common, confirming the pedagogical value of the final list. Of course, all of the items on both the ROC and PRC lists that did not make it onto our list of the 1,000

8. *Corpus-Based Frequency Count of Characters in Journal Chinese*; M. K. M. Chan and B. Z. He, “A Study of the 1,000 Most Frequently Used Chinese Characters and their Simplification,” *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association* 23/3 (1988), 49–68; R. M.-W. Choy, *Read and Write Chinese* (San Francisco, California: China West Book, 1990); *Chinese Vocabulary Cards* (New Haven: Far Eastern Publications, Yale University, n.d.); Tsai, “Frequency of Usage and Number of Strokes of Chinese Characters.” Note that Choy’s frequency data seem to have been taken from a 1928 study by Chen Hegin.

9. See *Modern Chinese Frequency Dictionary*; Da, “Modern Chinese Character Frequency List.”

10. “Target Characters by School Grade: Taiwan,” as listed by J. Lau at 黃橋 [Yellow Bridge] <<http://www.yellowbridge.com/language/fc-options.php?deck=tw>>.

11. See Chan and He, “A Study of the 1,000 Most Frequently Used Chinese Characters.”

most frequently used characters were included elsewhere in the master list of 3,000, many of them appearing among the 500 supplemental characters found in Book 1 of both the simplified and traditional courses.

THE BASICS OF THE METHOD

There is no better way to understand the method followed in these pages than to start using it. Still, readers have a right to know what they are getting into, so a brief explanation seems in order.

To begin with, all the characters are made up of pieces, or “primitive elements” as we shall call them here. These are the basic building blocks out of which all characters are constructed. Over 200 of these have been singled out as “radicals,” which are used in the organization of character dictionaries, but there are many others. Individual characters can also serve as primitive elements in other more complicated characters. If one is really determined to learn to write Chinese, and not just memorize a small number of characters to meet course requirements, it makes sense to take full advantage of these component parts by arranging the characters in the order best suited to memory.

This course begins, therefore, with a handful of uncomplicated primitive elements and combines them to make as many characters as possible. More elements are then thrown into the mix, a few at a time, allowing new characters to be learned—and so on, until the entire list has been exhausted. This process has a number of important advantages, not the least of which is that learning new elements and characters also invariably reinforces what has already been learned.

Because we are dividing the course into two books of 1,500 characters each and including the most important 1,000 characters in the first volume, not all of the characters that could be learned at a given point are actually introduced in their logical sequence; some of them are saved for later. In the long run, there is no real reduction in efficiency here. It was just a matter of relegating less frequently used characters to Book 2.

Each primitive element is assigned its own concrete image, after which the images are arranged into a composite picture associated with a definition, a unique “key word,” given for each character. The key word is meant to capture a character’s principal meaning, or at least one of its more important meanings. It is often concrete and visually suggestive, but it can also be conceptual and abstract. In any event, it is the key word, or its use in a familiar English phrase, that sets the stage for the composition of the elements into a single “story.” As you will see, the stories are meant to stretch your imagination and get you close enough to the characters to befriend them, let them surprise you, inspire you, enlighten you, resist you, and seduce you; to make you smile or

shudder or otherwise react emotionally in such a way as to fix the imagery in memory.

The whole process employs what we may call *imaginative memory*, by which we mean the faculty to recall images created purely in the mind, with no actual or remembered visual stimuli behind them. 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 associated with *visual memory*. 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 characters, which generally show a remarkable lack of connection to the normal visual patterns with which we are comfortable. It is possible, however, to harness the powers of imagination to give meaning to character elements that visual memory is admittedly ill adapted for remembering. In fact, most students of the Chinese writing system do this from time to time on their own, devising their own imaginative aids, but without ever developing an organized approach to their use.

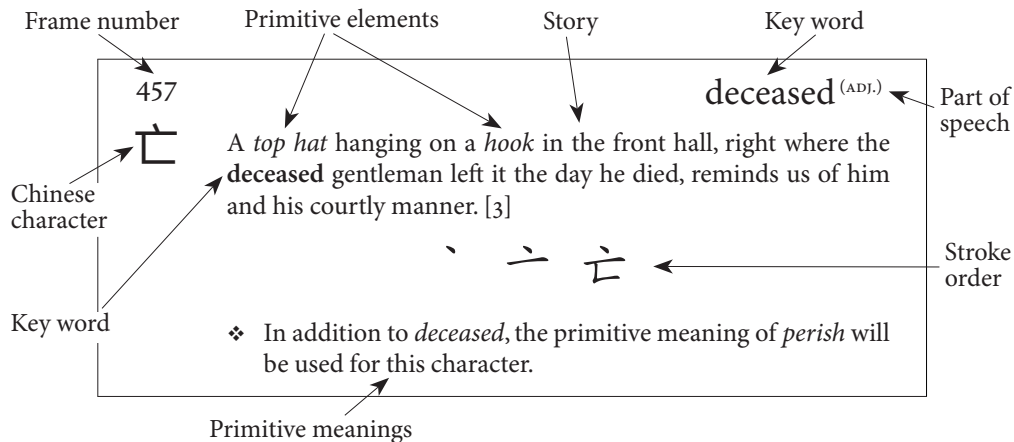
The stories and plots you will meet in these pages are all drawn with words; there are no pictures or cartoons to control or limit the way your imagination handles the information provided. There is no correct way of imagining; the sole criterion is that it work for you (though we will make frequent suggestions). The only thing you will be asked to draw are the characters themselves. But what you *see* when you make your drawing will be all yours, and most assuredly different from what scholars and historians see when they analyze the characters. A whole imaginary world will come to life for you out of the primitive elements. The more vividly you can visualize the things that inhabit this world, the less need there will be to review what you have learned. Many, if not most, of the characters can be remembered at first encounter, with no need to drill them later other than through the normal reinforcement of actually using them.

As you come to write more and more of the characters in practice, you will find that they all but write themselves once you have set pen to paper, much the same as the alphabet already does for you. In time you will find, as previously suggested, that most of the imagery and key-word meanings will have served their purpose and recede from active memory. Some, we should warn you, will stay with you forever.

THE DESIGN OF THIS BOOK

You will be guided at every step of the way, but a few things about the design of this book need to be clarified at the outset. Clusters of characters have been arranged into lessons of varying length. Many, but not all, focus on

a particular class of primitive elements. Nothing more is intended by this than a way to break up the monotony and give you a sense of your overall progress. Each individual character is given its own frame, as in the example below:



Since the goal is not simply to remember a certain number of characters, but to learn *how* to remember them (and others not included in the course), this book has been divided into three parts. The first, *Stories*, provides a full associative story for each character. By directing the student's attention, at least for the length of time it takes to read the explanation and relate it to the written form of the character, we do most of the work, even as the student acquires a feeling for the method. In the next part, *Plots*, only skeletal outlines of stories are presented, leaving it to the student to work out the details by drawing on personal memory and fantasy. The final part, *Elements*, comprises the major portion of the book, and provides only the key word and the primitive meanings, leaving the remainder of the process to the student.

The stroke order is given in a hand-drawn font. You will notice variations from time to time between the printed form and the hand-drawn form of the same character. This is due to the fact that historical variants of some characters are in common use, especially on the traditional side, and to the fact that there has been no strict standardization of character forms. A given element will occasionally appear in different variations within the same Chinese font. Rather than draw attention to each instance of this, and in order to spare the user unnecessary frustration, we have brought consistency of form to all the characters, except where general usage suggests otherwise. It is best to be aware of these character and font inconsistencies from the start, since sooner or later you will run into them in print and will need to know how to process them. In any case, we recommend that you stick with the hand-drawn forms as a model for writing.

There are five indexes included at the end of each volume; those in Book 2 are cumulative for the whole course. Index I shows all the characters in their hand-drawn form, in the order in which they are introduced in this book. Since discrepancies with the printed form do occur, the student would do well to consult this index in case of doubt. Beneath each character in Index I is its pronunciation, provided here for reference purposes. The list of elements singled out as primitives proper and brought together in Index II is restricted to basic elements that are not themselves characters, or at least not treated as such in this course. Index III organizes the characters in their dictionary order, first according to number of strokes and then according to radical. Index IV arranges the characters according to their pronunciation and is intended to facilitate the search for particular characters. Finally, Index V contains all the key-word and primitive meanings.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Before you start out on the course plotted in the following pages, your attention should be drawn to a few final points. First, you 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 you find yourself forced later to retreat to the first stages and start over. Some 20 or 25 characters per day would not be excessive for someone who has only a couple of hours to give to study. If you were to study them full time, there is no reason why all 1,500 characters in Book 1 could not be learned successfully in four to five weeks. Such a claim is bound to raise more eyebrows than hopes among experienced teachers, but Heisig's own experience with Japanese kanji, and reports from students around the world, bear that estimate out. In any case, by the time the first 200 characters have been studied, you 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, you will discover, demand that they be written, there is really no better way to improve the aesthetic appearance of your writing and acquire a "natural feel" for the flow of the characters than by writing them. The method of this course will spare you 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, you can always make do with the palm of the hand, as the Chinese themselves do. It provides a convenient square space for tracing characters with your index finger when riding in a bus or walking down the street.

Third, the characters are best reviewed by beginning with the key word, progressing to the respective story, and then writing the character itself. Once you have 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.

Fourth, it is important to note that the best order for *learning* the characters 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, 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 time and effort. But while the method is *simple* and does eliminate a great deal of inefficiency, the task is still not an *easy* one. It requires as much stamina, concentration, and imagination as one can bring to it. Of that, too, we are convinced.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to Robert Roche for the generous assistance he provided that enabled us to complete these books, as well as for the constant stimulus and many useful suggestions he has given us these past several years. A special word of thanks also to the staff and fellows of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, who provided the facilities and the environment to make a difficult task easier, and to Brigham Young University Hawaii for facilitating our collaborative work at Nanzan during the winter semester of 2007. Among those who lent their expertise to this project, Tsu-Pin Huang and Dr. Yifen Beus were especially helpful and generous with their time. Finally, we wish to acknowledge the support and interest in the project shown by Pat Crosby, Keith Leber, and the editorial team at the University of Hawai'i Press.

Nagoya, Japan
9 August 2007