

REMEMBERING SIMPLIFIED HANZI – BOOK 1

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REMEMBERING
SIMPLIFIED HANZI

*How Not to Forget the Meaning
and Writing of Chinese Characters*

Book 1

James W. Heisig

Timothy W. Richardson



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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., *对外汉字的认知与教学* [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 现代语单字频率列表,” 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/饺, 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 现代汉语频率词典 [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], 现代汉语常用字表 [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.

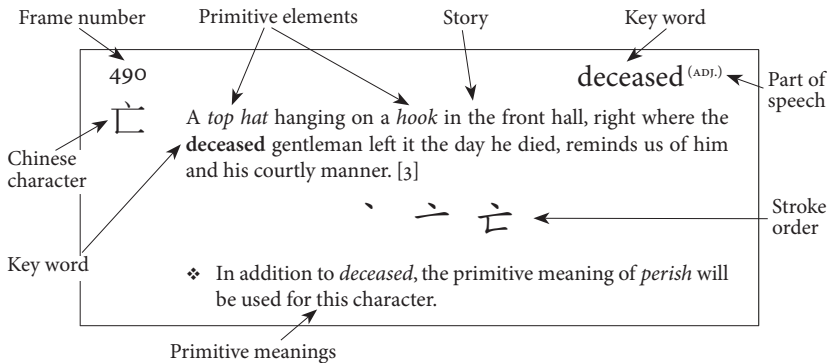
The stories and plots you will meet in these pages are all drawn with words; there are no pictures or cartoons to control or limit the way your imagination handles the information provided. There is no correct way of imagining; the sole criterion is that it work for you (though we will make frequent 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 first by number of strokes, and then by initial stroke. 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, pro-

gressing 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.

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Nagoya, Japan
9 August 2007

Stories

LESSON 1

LET US BEGIN with a group of 15 characters, all of which you probably knew before you ever cracked the covers of this book. Each character has been provided with a *key word*—a simple word or phrase—to represent the basic meaning. Some of these characters will also serve later as *primitive elements* to help form other characters, often taking a different meaning, sometimes a purely fanciful invention, in the process. A remark preceded by a special symbol (❖) has been appended to alert you to the change in meaning.

The *number of strokes* of each character is given in square brackets at the end of each explanation, followed by the stroke-by-stroke *order of writing*. It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to learn to write the strokes of each character in proper order. As easy as these first characters may seem, study them all with a pad and pencil to get into the habit from the very start.

Finally, note that each key word has been carefully chosen and should not be tampered with in any way if you want to avoid confusion later on.

1

one

— In Chinese characters, the number **one** is laid on its side, unlike the Roman numeral 1 which stands upright. As you would expect, it is written from left to right. [1]



- ❖ When this character is used as a primitive element, the key-word meaning is often discarded, since it is too abstract to be of much help. Instead, the single horizontal stroke takes on the meaning of *floor* or *ceiling*, depending on its position: if it stands above another primitive, it means *ceiling*; if below, *floor*.

<p>2</p> <p>二</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">two</p> <p>Like the Roman numeral II, which reduplicates the numeral 1, the character for two is a simple reduplication of the horizontal stroke that means <i>one</i>. The order of writing goes from above to below, with the first stroke slightly shorter. [2]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">一 二</p>
<p>3</p> <p>三</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">three</p> <p>And like the Roman numeral III, which triples the numeral 1, the character for three simply triples the single horizontal stroke. In writing it, think of “1 + 2 = 3” (一 + 二 = 三) in order to keep the middle stroke shorter. [3]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">一 二 三</p>
<p>4</p> <p>四</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">four</p> <p>This character is composed of two primitive elements, <i>mouth</i> 凵 and <i>human legs</i> 儿, both of which we will meet in the coming lessons. Assuming that you already knew how to write this character, we will pass over the “story” connected with it until later.</p> <p>Note how the second stroke is written left-to-right and then top-to-bottom. This is consistent with what we have already seen in the first three numbers and leads us to a general principle that will be helpful when we come to more complicated characters later on: WRITE NORTH-TO-SOUTH, WEST-TO-EAST, NORTHWEST-TO-SOUTHEAST. [5]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">丨 凵 𠃉 𠃊 四</p>
<p>5</p> <p>五</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">five</p> <p>As with <i>four</i>, we shall postpone learning the primitive elements that make up this character. Note how the general principle we just learned in the preceding frame applies to the writing of the character for five. [4]</p>

一 丁 万 五

6

SIX

六

The primitives here are *top hat* and *animal legs*. Once again, we glide over them until later. [4]

、 一 六 六

7

seven

七

Note that the first stroke “cuts” clearly through the second. This distinguishes **seven** from the character for *spoon* 匕 (FRAME 453), in which the horizontal stroke either stops short or, depending on the font, extends just slightly beyond the vertical stroke. [2]

一 七

- ❖ As a primitive, this form takes on the meaning of *diced*, i.e., “cut” into little pieces, consistent both with the way the character is written and with its association with the character for *cut* 切 to be learned in a later lesson (FRAME 85).

8

eight

八

Just as the Arabic numeral “8” is composed of a small circle followed by a larger one, so the character for **eight** is composed of a short line followed by a longer line that leans towards it without touching it. And just as the “lazy 8” ∞ is the mathematical symbol for “infinity,” so the expanse opened up below these two strokes sometimes carries the sense in Chinese of something “all-encompassing.”

Note how the printed character on the left and the hand-drawn character below differ somewhat in form. Be sure to imitate the hand-drawn form when you practice writing. [2]

八 八

9

nine

九

If you take care to remember the stroke order of this character, you will not have trouble later keeping it distinct from the character for *power* 力 (FRAME 732). [2]

- ❖ When this character is used as a primitive, we shall take it to refer to the game of *baseball*, the meaning being derived from the *nine* players who make up a team.

10

ten

十

Turn this character 45° either way and you have the x used for the Roman numeral **ten**. [2]

- ❖ As a primitive, this character sometimes keeps its meaning of *ten* and sometimes signifies *needle*, this latter derived from the character for *needle* 针 (FRAME 283). Since the primitive is used in the character itself, there is no need to worry about confusing the two. In fact, we shall be following this procedure regularly.

11

mouth

口

Like several of the first characters we shall learn, the character for **mouth** is a clear pictograph. Since there are no circular shapes in the characters, the square must be used to depict the circle. [3]

- ❖ As a primitive, this form also means *mouth*. Any of the range of possible images that the word suggests—an opening or entrance to a cave, a river, a bottle, or even the largest hole in your head—can be used for the primitive meaning.

12

day

日

This character is intended to be a pictograph of the sun. Recalling what we said in the previous frame about round forms, it is easy to detect the circle and the big smile that characterize our simplest drawings of the sun—like those yellow badges with the words, “Have a nice **day!**” [4]

丿 冂 月 日

- ❖ Used as a primitive, this character can mean *sun* or *day* or a *tongue wagging in the mouth*. This latter meaning, incidentally, derives from an old character meaning something like “sayeth” (see FRAME 1499) and written almost exactly the same, except that the latter is more square in shape (日) than *sun* (日). In any case, as a primitive element the shape will alter according to its position in the full character and this distinction will become irrelevant.

13

month

月

This character is actually a picture of the moon, with the two horizontal lines representing the left eye and mouth of the mythical “man in the moon.” (Actually, the Chinese see a hare in the moon, but it is a little farfetched to find one in the character.) And one **month**, of course, is one cycle of the moon. [4]

丿 冂 月 月

- ❖ As a primitive element, this character can take on the sense of *moon*, *flesh*, or *part of the body*. The reasons for the latter two meanings will be explained in a later chapter.

14

rice field

田

Another pictograph, this character looks like a bird’s-eye view of a **rice field** divided into four plots. Take care in writing this character to get the order of the strokes correct. You will find that it follows perfectly the principle stated in FRAME 4. [5]

丨 冂 日 田 田

- ❖ When used as a primitive element, this character's most common meaning is *rice field*, but now and again it will take the meaning of *brains* from the fact that it looks a bit like that tangle of gray matter nestled under our skulls.

15

eye



Here again, if we round out the corners of this character and curve the two middle strokes into the shape of an iris, we get something resembling an eye. [5]



- ❖ As a primitive, the character keeps its sense of *eye*, or to be more specific, an *eyeball*. When placed in the surroundings of a complex character, the primitive can be turned on its side (𠃉) and take on the additional meaning of a *net*.

Although only 10 of the 15 characters treated in this lesson are formally listed as primitives—the elements that join together to make up other characters—some of the others may also take on that function from time to time, only not with enough frequency to merit learning them as separate primitive elements and attaching special meanings to them. In other words, whenever one of the characters already learned is used in another character, it will retain its key-word meaning unless we have assigned it a special primitive meaning. Even in these cases, however, the original key-word meaning can be used.

LESSON 2

IN THIS LESSON we learn what a “primitive element” is by using the first 15 characters as pieces that can be fitted together to form new characters—17 of them to be exact. Whenever the primitive meaning differs from the key-word meaning, you may want to go back to the original frame to refresh your memory. From now on, though, you should learn *both* the key-word and the primitive meaning of new characters as they appear. Index 2 contains a complete list of all the primitive elements in the book.

16

ancient

古

The primitive elements that compose this character are *ten* and *mouth*, but you may find it easier to remember it as a pictograph of a tombstone with a cross on top. Just think back to one of those graveyards you have visited, or better still, used to play in as a child, with **ancient** inscriptions on the tombstones.

This departure from the primitive elements in favor of a pictograph will take place now and again at these early stages, and almost never after that. So you need not worry about cluttering up your memory with too many character “drawings.” [5]

一 十 十 古 古

- ❖ Used as a primitive element, this character keeps its key-word sense of *ancient*, but care should be taken to make that abstract notion as graphic as possible.

17

recklessly

胡

Everyone knows what a new *moon* is: the first phase when the *moon* is illuminated 0%. So, presumably, an *ancient moon*, like the one in this character, is lit up at 100% wattage. And we all know what that means: people tend to get a little “loony” and start acting **recklessly**. [9]

古 胡

<p>18</p> <p>叶</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">leaf</p> <p>The Chinese are famous for taking a leaf and turning it into medicine. In this character, there are no less than <i>ten</i> different types of leaves that go into the concoction that the herbal doctor is stuffing into your mouth. The problem is, she didn't take the trouble to grind them up with her mortar and pestle, but is shoveling them into your <i>mouth</i> just as they came off the tree. Look at the character and you can see how the <i>ten leaves</i> are way too much for the one small <i>mouth</i> to handle. [5]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">口 叶</p>
<p>19</p> <p>吾</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">I (literary)</p> <p>There are a number of characters for the word I, but this one is restricted to literary use in Chinese. We need a sufficiently stuffy connotation for the key word, for which the sense of a "perceiving subject" should do just fine. Now the one place in our bodies that all <i>five</i> senses are concentrated in is the head, which has no less than <i>five mouths</i>: 2 nostrils, 2 ears, and 1 mouth. Hence, <i>five mouths</i> = I. [7]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">一 丿 万 五 吾 吾</p>
<p>20</p> <p>朋</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">companion</p> <p>The first companion that God made, as the Bible story goes, was Eve. Upon seeing her, Adam exclaimed, "<i>Flesh of my flesh!</i>" And that is precisely what this character says in so many strokes. [8]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">月 朋</p>
<p>21</p> <p>明</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">bright</p> <p>Among nature's bright lights, there are two that the biblical story of creation has God set in the sky: the <i>sun</i> to rule over the day and the <i>moon</i> to rule the night. Each of them has come to represent one of the common connotations of this key word: the <i>sun</i>, the bright insight of the clear thinker, and the <i>moon</i>, the bright intuition of the poet and the seer. [8]</p>

日 明

22

sing

唱

This one is easy! You have one *mouth* making no noise (the choirmaster) and two *mouths with wagging tongues* (the minimum for a chorus). So when you hear the key word **sing**, think of the Vienna Boys' Choir or the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the character is yours forever. [11]

口 𠂔 唱

23

sparkling

晶

What else can the word **sparkling** suggest if not a diamond? And if you've ever held a diamond up to the light, you will have noticed how every facet of it becomes like a miniature *sun*. This character is a picture of a tiny *sun* in three places (that is, "everywhere"), to give the sense of something **sparkling** all over the place. Just like a diamond. In writing the primitive elements three times, note again how the rule for writing given in FRAME 4 holds true not only for the strokes in each individual element but also for the disposition of the elements in the character as a whole. [12]

日 晶 晶

24

goods

晶

As in the character for *sparkling*, the triplication of a single element in this character indicates "everywhere" or "heaps of." When we think of **goods** in modern industrial society, we think of what has been mass-produced—that is to say, produced for the "masses" of open *mouths* waiting like fledglings in a nest to "consume" whatever comes their way. [9]

口 晶 晶

25

prosperous

昌

What we mentioned in the previous two frames about three of something meaning “everywhere” or “heaps of” was not meant to be taken lightly. In this character we see two *suns*, one atop the other, which, if we are not careful, is easily confused in memory with the three *suns* of *sparkling*. Focus on the number this way: since we speak of **prosperous** times as *sunny*, what could be more **prosperous** than a sky with two *suns* in it? Just be sure to actually SEE them there. [8]

日 昌

26

early

早

This character is actually a picture of the first flower of the day, which we shall, in defiance of botanical science, call the *sunflower*, since it begins with the element for *sun* and is held up on a stem with leaves (the pictographic representation of the final two strokes). This time, however, we shall ignore the pictograph and imagine *sunflowers* with *needles* for stems, which can be plucked and used to darn your socks.

The sense of **early** is easily remembered if one thinks of the *sunflower* as the **early** riser in the garden, because the *sun*, showing favoritism towards its namesake, shines on it before all the others (see FRAME 10). [6]

日 旦 早

- ❖ As a primitive element, this character takes the meaning of *sunflower*, which was used to make the abstract key word *early* more graphic.

27

rising sun

旭

The key word here immediately suggests the islands located to the east of China, which would make it, from China’s point of view, the Land of the **Rising Sun**, a name easily associated with Japan’s national flag. If you can picture two seams running down that great red *sun*, and then imagine it sitting on a *baseball* bat for a flagpole, you have a slightly irreverent—but not

altogether inaccurate—picture of how the sport has caught on in the Land of the **Rising Sun**. [6]

九 九 旭 旭 旭

28

generation

世

We generally consider one **generation** as a period of thirty (or *ten plus ten plus ten*) years. If you look at this character in its completed form—not in its stroke order—you will see three *tens*. When writing it, think of the lower horizontal lines as “addition” lines written under numbers to add them up. Thus: *ten* “plus” *ten* “plus” *ten* = thirty. Actually, it’s a lot easier doing it with a pencil than reading it in a book. [5]

一 十 廿 卅 世

29

stomach

胃

You will need to refer back to **FRAMES 13** and **14** here for the special meaning of the two primitive elements that make up this character: *brain* and *flesh (part of the body)*. What the character says, if you look at it, is that the *part of the body* that keeps the *brain* in working order is the **stomach**. To keep the elements in proper order, when you write this character think of the *brain* as being “held up” by the *flesh*. [9]

田 胃

30

daybreak

旦

The obvious sign of **daybreak** is the *sun* peeking out over the horizon, which is pretty much what this character depicts. If you can imagine the *sun* poking its head out through a hole in your *floor*, however, you will have an easier time remembering this character. [5]

日 旦

We end this lesson with two final pictographic characters that happen to be among the easiest to recognize for their form, but among the most difficult to write. We introduce them here to run an early test on whether or not you have been paying close attention to the stroke order of the characters you have been learning.

<p>31</p> <p>凹</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">concave</p> <p>You couldn't have asked for a better key word for this character! Just have a look at it: a perfect image of a concave lens (remembering, of course, that the characters square off rounded things), complete with its own little "cave." Now all you have to do is learn how to write it. [5]</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> </p>
<p>32</p> <p>凸</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">convex</p> <p>Maybe this helps you see how the Chinese have no trouble keeping convex distinct from <i>concave</i>. Note the odd feeling of the fourth stroke. If it doesn't feel all that strange now, by the time you are done with this book, it will. There are very few times you will have to write it. [5]</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> </p>

LESSON 3

AFTER LESSON 2, you should now have some idea of how an apparently complex and difficult character can be broken down into simple elements that make remembering it a great deal easier. After completing this lesson you should have a clearer idea of how the course is laid out. We merely add a couple of primitive elements to the characters we already know and see how many new characters we can form—in this case, 18 in all—and when we run out, add more primitives. And so on, until there are no characters left.

In Lesson 3 you will also be introduced to primitive elements that are not themselves characters but only used to construct other characters. These are marked with a special symbol [❖] instead of a number. There is no need to make a special effort to memorize them. The sheer frequency with which most of them show up should make remembering them automatic.



a drop of



The meaning of this primitive is obvious from the first moment you look at it, though just what it will be a **drop of** will differ from case to case. The important thing is not to think of it as something insignificant like a “drop in the bucket” but as something so important that it can change the whole picture—like a **drop of arsenic** in your mother-in-law’s coffee. [1]



- ❖ In the first examples that follow, this primitive is written from right to left, but there are times when it can be slanted left to right. In addition, as we will see, the handwritten form used here will sometimes be at odds with the printed form. Finally, the *drop* will occasionally be stretched out a bit. (In cases where you have trouble remembering this, it may help to think of it as an *eyedropper* dripping drops of something or other.) If you follow the hand-drawn forms given here, you will never go wrong. Examples will follow in this lesson.



walking stick



This primitive element is a picture of just what it looks like: a cane or **walking stick**. It carries with it the connotations of lameness and whatever else one associates with the use of a cane. Rarely—but very rarely—it will be laid on its side. Whenever this occurs, it will **ALWAYS** be driven through the middle of some other primitive element. In this way, you need not worry about confusing it with the primitive meanings of *one*. [1]

33

oneself



You can think of this character as a stylized pictograph of the nose, that little *drop* that Mother Nature set between your *eyes*. The Chinese often refer to themselves by pointing a finger at their nose—giving us an easy way to remember the character for **oneself**. [6]

’ 亅 白 白 白 白

- ❖ The same meaning of *oneself* can be kept when this character is used as a primitive element, but you will generally find it better to give it the meaning of *nose* or *nostrils*, both because it accords with the story above and because it is the first part of the character for *nose* (FRAME 617).

34

white



The color **white** is a mixture of all the primary colors, both for pigments and for light, as we see when a prism breaks up the rays of the *sun*. Hence, a single *drop* of *sun* spells **white**. [5]

’ 亅 白 白 白

- ❖ As a primitive, this character can either retain its meaning of *white* or take the more graphic meaning of a *white bird* or *dove*. This stems from the fact that it appears at the top of the character for *bird*, which we shall get to later (FRAME 1438).

<p>35</p> <p>百</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">hundred</p> <p>When the Japanese borrowed the Chinese characters, they often played with their shapes to find interesting connections. For example, they came to refer to a person's 99th birthday as the start of the "white year" because <i>white</i> is the character you are left with if you subtract <i>one</i> from a hundred. [6]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">一 一 一 百 百 百</p>
<p>36</p> <p>皂</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">soap</p> <p>Whatever the color of the soap that this character refers to, it does the same trick of <i>cutting</i> the grease and grime to make things <i>white</i>. That's a bit too abstract and reasonable, though, so you may want to imagine looking at the soap under a microscope and seeing little whirling blades <i>dicing</i> the blotches of dirt one by one until everything turns <i>white</i>. [7]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">白 皂 皂</p>
<p>37</p> <p>旧</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">old</p> <p>Like many of us, when <i>days</i> get old, they, too, need a <i>walking stick</i> to get around. Think of the phrase "the good old days," and the <i>walking stick</i> should take care of itself. [5]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">一 旧</p>
<p>38</p> <p>中</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">middle^(N./ADJ.)</p> <p>The elements here are a <i>walking stick</i> and a <i>mouth</i>. The particular connotation we will associate with the key word middle is that period of life known as middle age, so called because it is the time in your life when you have trouble with your expanding "middle." More often than not, the expansion has to do with eating more and moving around less. This character has the grotesque image of a person with a <i>walking stick</i> jammed into his <i>mouth</i>, the more easily to shovel food in without the interference of the tedious exercise of opening and closing it. [4]</p> <p>Note the indicator that the character for middle can be used</p>

as either a noun or an adjective. Where no part of speech is indicated for a key word, assume the most common. In the case of the former frame, for example, *soap* might be taken as a verb, but one's first thought goes to the noun, which is a good place to start for that character. Be aware, though, that even where one part of speech is indicated for a character, other possibilities may exist.

丶 口 口 中

39

thousand

千

This character is almost too simple to pull apart, but for the sake of practice, have a look at the *eyedropper* above and the *ten* below. Now put the elements together by thinking of squeezing two more zeros out of an *eyedropper* alongside the number *ten* to make it a **thousand**. [3]

一 二 千

40

tongue

舌

The characters for *mouth* and *thousand* naturally form the idea of **tongue** if one thinks of a *thousand mouths* able to speak the same language, or as we say, “sharing a common **tongue**.” It is easy to see the connection between the idiom and the character if you take its image literally: a single **tongue** being passed around from *mouth* to *mouth*. [6]

千 舌

41

liter

升

Think of a one-**liter** carafe (the kind you might serve drinks in) filled not with milk or wine but with a *thousand sharp needles*. You may well wonder what they are doing there, but the answer is simple: it's a kind of sports drink for a robot. [4]

一 二 千 升

42

pill

丸

One of the scourges of sports like modern *baseball* has been the use of performance-enhancing drugs, those tiny little **pills** that have helped turn honest competition into cut-throat business. Now look at the character and picture it as a bottle of **pills** hanging on the thigh of a *baseball* player like a PEZ dispenser, ready for the popping as the need arises. [3]

丩 丸 丸

- ❖ As a primitive, this element takes the meaning of a *bottle of pills*.

We have already seen one example of how to form primitives from other primitives, when we formed the *daybreak* out of *sun* and *floor* (FRAME 30). Let us take two more examples of this procedure right away, so that we can do so from now on without having to draw any particular attention to the fact.

43

divination

卜

This is a picture of a divining rod, composed of a *walking stick* and a *drop*, but easy enough to remember as a pictograph. Alternately, you can think of it as a *magic wand*. In either case, it should suggest images of **divination** or magic. [2]

丨 卜

- ❖ When using this character as a primitive, we will stick with the meaning of a *divining rod* or a *magic wand*.

44

tell fortunes

占

This is one of those characters that is a real joy of simplicity: a *divining rod* with a *mouth*—which are the two ingredients needed to **tell fortunes**.

Note how the movement from top to bottom (the movement in which the characters are written) is also the order of the elements which make up our story and of the key word itself: first

divining rod, then *mouth*. This will not always be possible, but where it is, memory has almost no work at all to do. [5]

卜 占

45

above

上

The two directions, **above** and below, are usually pointed at with the finger. But the characters do not follow that custom, so we have to choose something else, easily remembered. The primitives show a *magic wand* standing **above** a *floor*—“magically,” you might say. Anyway, go right on to the next frame, since the two belong together and are best remembered as a unit, just as the words **above** and *below* suggest each other. [3]

丨 卜 上

46

below

下

Here we see our famous *magic wand* hanging, all on its own, **below** the *ceiling*, as you probably already guessed would happen. In addition to giving us two new characters, the two shapes in this and the preceding frame also serve to illustrate the difference between the primitive meanings for *ceiling* and *floor*: it all depends on whether the single horizontal line stands **above** or **below** the primitive element to which it is related. [3]

一 卜 下

47

card

卡

The key word **card** can stand for all sorts of things, but let's settle on a credit **card** for our image. Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is the picture of a shopkeeper sliding your credit **card** up and down (from *above* to *below* and back again) in the reading machine to record your transaction. Now imagine her doing it fast and furiously, again and again, with increasing impatience until your poor **card** is whittled away to a small strip of plastic. [5]

丨 亅 上 十 卩

48

eminent

卓

The word **eminent** suggests a famous or well-known person. So all you need to do—given the primitives of a *magic wand* and a *sunflower*—is to think of the world’s most **eminent** magician as one who uses a *sunflower* for a *magic wand* (like a flower-child who goes around turning the world into peace and love). [8]

亅 卩 卓

The final two characters of this lesson are a good example of how a primitive element can be used to form a new character, which in turn becomes a new primitive for another character. This will happen often, so it is good to pay attention to it from the start.

❖

mist

卓

Here is the first of many examples of primitives composed of other primitives but not treated as characters themselves. At the bottom is the primitive (also a character) for *early* or *sunflower*. At the top, a *needle*. Conveniently, **mist** falls *early* in the morning, like little *needles* of rain, to assure that the *sunflower* blooms *early* as we have learned it should. [8]

十 卓

49

dynasty

朝

It is easy to imagine one of the great **dynasties** of China in all its glory. Now all we have to figure out is what the elements *moon* and *mist* have to do with it.

Picture a great palace with a powerful emperor seated on a throne in its innermost court. To keep the Wizard-of-Oz illusion that this power is beyond question and beyond the understanding of the masses, the whole complex is kept permanently shrouded in *mist*. How do they do it, you ask. On one side of the

throne is a servant pulling on a cord to wave a gigantic fan back and forth. On the other, a servant with a long cord hooked on a corner of the quarter *moon*. When he pulls on it, the *moon* tilts over and spills out a month's supply of *mist* that keeps the myth of the *dynasty* alive. [12]

十 車 朝

50

ridicule^(v)

嘲

If you read off the elements in the character, you have something like “*mouth*ing off at the *dynasty*.” When we think of what we commonly **ridicule** in civilized society, one of the oldest and most universal targets is the ruling elite. Who better to deride than one's leaders? Again, the explanation is too rational, so turn it into a story that has you **ridiculing** a particular *dynasty's* court with particular buffoonery. [15]

口 嘲

LESSON 4

AT THE RISK OF going a little bit too fast, we are now going to introduce three new primitive elements, all of which are very easy to remember either because of their frequency or because of their shape. But remember: there is no reason to study the primitives by themselves. They are being presented systematically to make their learning automatic.



animal legs



Like the two that follow it, this primitive is not a character in its own right, though it is said to be derived from 八, the character we learned earlier for *eight*. It USUALLY comes at the bottom of the primitive to which it is related. It can mean the **legs** of any kind of **animal**: from the massive legs of an elephant to an octopus's tentacles to the spindle shanks of a spider. (The one animal not allowed is our friend homo sapiens, whose legs will appear in FRAME 56.) Even where the term “legs” will apply metaphorically to the legs of pieces of furniture, it is best to keep the association with **animal legs**. [2]



bound up



The element meaning **bound up** is an “enclosure” that can wrap itself around other elements or be compressed when there is nothing to enclose. When this latter happens—usually because there is not enough room—and it is set on top, the little hook at the end is dropped off, like this: 丿.

The sense of **bound up** is that of being “tied and gagged” or wrapped up tightly. If you have trouble remembering when it serves as an enclosure (with the hook) and when not (without the hook), you might think of the former as a **chain** and the latter as a **rope**. [2]

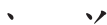




horns

This primitive element USUALLY appears at the top of the element to which it is related, and is usually attached, or almost attached, to the first horizontal line to come under it. The **horns** can never simply be left hanging in the air. When there is no line available, an extra horizontal stroke (like a *one*) is added. The final character of this lesson gives an example.

The meaning of this element is wide enough to embrace the **animal horns** of bulls, rams, billy goats, and moose, but not the family of musical instruments. As with other elements with such “open” meanings, it is best to settle on one that you find most vivid and stick with that image consistently. [2]



51

only

When we run across abstract key words like this one, the best way to get an image is to recall some common but suggestive phrase in which the word appears. For instance, we can think of the expression “it’s the **only** one of its kind.” Then we imagine a barker at a side-show advertising some strange pac-man like creature he has inside his tent, with **only** a gigantic *mouth* and two wee *animal legs*. [5]



52

shellfish

When we learned the character (and primitive element) for *eye* back in FRAME 15, we suggested arching the two middle strokes to get the image of an iris. The simplified primitive element for *eye* does the same thing, just with a more contemporary touch: the three horizontal strokes are replaced with a single vertical stroke running through the *eye*. Note how this line “doubles up” with the first stroke of the element for *animal legs*, the second of the two elements that make up this character. In fact, there are only two cases where this is going to happen, here and in FRAME 58.

To put this all together, imagine a freakish **shellfish** with a

single, gigantic *eye* roaming the beaches on its slender little *legs*, scaring the wits out of the sunbathers. [4]

丨 冂 贝 贝

- ❖ When this character is used as a primitive, in addition to *shellfish*, the meanings *shells*, *oysters*, and *clams* will often come in handy.

53

paste^(v.)

贴

Think here of brushing on an adhesive, as when you **paste** something on a billboard. Here we have an *oyster* **pasting** a poster on his back to advertise his services in the dubious occupation of one who *tells fortunes*. Try to imagine the problem he would have reaching his back with the brush to **paste**, and then see him strutting around and calling out, “Fortunes to tell! Fortunes to tell!” [9]

贝 贴

54

chaste

贞

You have heard of Diogenes running around with his lamp looking for an honest man. Here we have an image of the famous *shellfish*, Oysterogenes, running around with his *divining rod* looking for a **chaste** man. We leave it to you to decide which one has the better luck in his quest. [6]

丨 贞

55

employee

员

How do we get a *mouth* over a *shellfish* to mean an **employee**? Simple. Just remember the advice new **employees** get about keeping their *mouths* shut and doing their jobs, and then make that more graphic by picturing an office building full of white-collar workers scurrying around with *clams* pinched to their *mouths*. [7]

口 员

56

youngster

儿

Imagine these two strokes as the long—really l-o-n-g—legs of a **youngster** who is growing out of his clothes faster than his parents can buy them. In the case of this character, he is literally “all legs.” [2]

丿 儿

❖ As a primitive element, this form will mean *human legs*.

57

how many?

几

In addition to the primary meaning of **how many**, this character can take the secondary meaning of a “small table.” For etymological reasons too involved to go into here, it can also mean *wind*, whether in the same shape as above or with the final stroke more shortly “hooked” (凵). We will meet the full character for *wind* only in FRAME 1170.

To associate the character with the primary meaning, think of the verses to “Blowin’ in the Wind,” Bob Dylan’s anti-war song of the 1960s: “**How many** roads must a man walk down...? **How many** times must the cannonballs fly...?” [2]

丿 几

❖ As a primitive, we will stick with the meaning of *wind* and, at least once, *small table*.

58

see

见

The elements that compose the character for **see** are the *eye* firmly fixed to a pair of *human legs*. As we saw in the element for *shellfish* a few frames ago, the iris of the *eye* is drawn with a single vertical stroke, here doubled up with the first stroke of *human legs*.

Now surely, somewhere in your experience, there is a vivid image just waiting to be dragged up to help you remember this character... [4]

丨 凵 丩 见

59

元

beginning

“In the **beginning**...” starts that marvelous shelf of books we call the Bible. It talks about how all things were made, and tells us that when it came to humanity the Creator made *two* of them, man and woman. While we presume *two* were made of every other creature as well, we are not told as much. Hence we need only *two* and a pair of *human legs* to come to the character that means **beginning**. [4]

二 元

60

页

page

What we have to do here is turn a *shellfish* into a **page** of a book. The *one* at the top tells us that we only get a rather short book, in fact a book of only *one page*. Imagine a title printed on the shell of an *oyster*, let us say “Pearl of Wisdom,” and then open the quaint book to its *one* and only **page**, on which you find a single, radiant *drop of wisdom*, one of the masterpiece poems of nature. [6]

一 丿 丿 丿 页 页

- ❖ As a primitive, this character will often take the unrelated meaning of a *head* (preferably one detached from its body).

61

顽

stubborn

This character refers to a *blockhead*, a persistently **stubborn** person who sticks to an idea or a plan just the way it was at the *beginning*, no matter what comes up along the way. The explanation makes “sense,” but is hard to remember because the word “*beginning*” is too abstract. Back up to the image we used two frames ago—Adam and Eve in their Eden—and try again: The root of all this goes back to the *beginning*, with two brothers each defending his own way of life and asking their God to bless it favorably. Abel stuck to agriculture, Cain to animal-raising. Picture these two seeking the favors of heaven, one of them with an unusually **stubborn** grimace on his face. No wonder something unfortunate happened! [10]

元 顽

62

ordinary

凡

While we refer to something insignificant as a “*drop* in the bucket,” the character for **ordinary** shows us a “*drop* in the *wind*.” To make the image stick as clearly as water dropping into a bucket, stop and think of something really **ordinary** and then say, “It’s just a *drop* in the *wind*”—and imagine what that might actually look like. [3]

丿 几 凡

63

muscle

肌

One of the more common ways of testing the strength of one’s **muscles** is to lock hands with a local hulk on a *small table* top and arm wrestle. This is the image here, depicted by the elements for *part of the body* and *small table*. The **muscle** is, therefore, the *part of the body* you test by literally bringing it to the *small table*. [6]

月 肌

64

defeated^(ADJ.)

负

Above we have the condensed form of *bound up*, and below, the familiar *shellfish*. Now imagine two *oysters* engaged in *shell-to-shell* combat, the one who is **defeated** being *bound and gagged* with seaweed, the victor towering triumphantly over it. The *bound shellfish* thus becomes the symbol for anyone or anything that has been **defeated**. [6]

ㄣ 负

65

ten thousand

万

Chinese count higher numbers in units of **ten thousand**, unlike the West, which advances according to units of one thousand. (Thus, for instance, 50,000 would be read “five **ten-thousands**”

by a Chinese, as if it were written 5,0000.) Given that the comma is used in larger numbers to *bind up* a numerical unit of four digits, the elements for *one* and *bound up* naturally come to form **ten thousand**. [3]

一 万

66

uniform^(ADJ.)

匀

The two primitives *bound up* and *two* (clearer in the hand-drawn form) combine to give the meaning of **uniform**. One of the real challenges for primary school teachers is to keep students from scattering in every which direction. If you think of the final touch to a school outfit, the shoes, and then recall the childhood jingle, “One, two, buckle my shoe,” the solution is near at hand. Instead of having children buckle their shoes, they can be taught to tie their shoelaces together by changing the lyrics to read “One, two, *bind up* my shoes.” This keeps them from straying very far from the group and helps teachers provide a **uniform** education. [4]

匀 匀

67

sentence^(N.)

句

By combining the two primitives *bound up* and *mouth*, it is easy to see how this character can have the meaning of a **sentence**. The *mouth* suggests it is a spoken **sentence**. To be more precise, it is a cluster of words *bound up* tightly and neatly so that they will fit in your *mouth*. [5]

句 句

68

decameron

旬

There simply is not a good phrase in English for the block of ten days which this character represents. So we resurrect the classical term **decameron**, whose connotations the tales of Boccaccio have done much to enrich. Actually, it refers to a journey of ten *days* taken by a band of people—that is, a group of people *bound together* for the *days* of the **decameron**. [6]

勺 旬

69

ladle

勺

If you want to *bind up drops* of anything—water, soup, lemonade—you use something to scoop these *drops* up, which is what we call a **ladle**. See the last *drop* left inside the **ladle**? [3]

勺 勺

70

bull's eye

的

The elements *white bird* and *ladle* easily suggest the image of a **bull's eye** if you imagine a rusty old *ladle* with a **bull's eye** painted on it in the form of a tiny *white bird*, who lets out a little “peep” every time you hit the target.

This is the most frequently used character in Chinese, serving a number of common grammatical functions. But—it ALSO means **bull's eye**. [8]

白 的

71

heads

首

Reading this character from the top down, we have: *horns . . . nose*. Together they bring to mind the picture of a moose-head hanging on the den wall, with its great *horns* and long *nose*. The plural form is used to stress the frequent metaphorical use of the term to refer to various kinds of **heads**, including **heads** of state. It might help to see a number of the latter lined up on the den wall alongside the moose, each fitted out with *antlers* and a whopper of a *nose*.

Here we get a good look at what we mentioned when we first introduced the element for *horns*: that they can never be left floating free and require an extra horizontal stroke to prevent that from happening, as is the case here. [9]

、 丿 一 首

LESSON 5

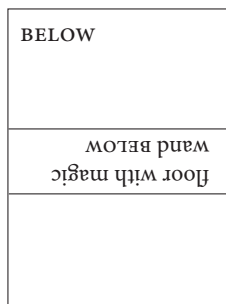
THAT IS ABOUT all we can do with the pieces we have accumulated so far, but as we add each new primitive element to those we already know, the number of characters we will be able to form will increase by leaps and bounds.

If we were not separating into two volumes the 3,000 characters to be treated in this course, there are any number of other characters that we could learn at this time. Just to give you an idea of some of the possibilities (though you should not bother to learn them now), here are a few, with their meanings: 吋 (*English inch*), 罩 (*envelop*), 咒 (*curse*), 咱 (*we, inclusive*), and 囂 (*hubbub*). While many of the stories you have learned in the previous lessons are actually more complex than the majority you will learn in the later chapters, they are the *first* stories you have learned, and for that reason are not likely to cause you much difficulty. By now, however, you may be wondering just how to go about reviewing what you have learned. Obviously, it won't do simply to flip through the pages you have already studied, because the ordering of the characters provides too many hints. The best method for many people is to design a set of flash cards that can be added to along the way.

If you have not already started doing this on your own, you might try it this way: Buy heavy paper (about twice the thickness of normal index cards), unlined and with a semigloss finish. Cut it into cards of about 9 cm. long and 6 cm. wide. On one side, make a large ball-pen drawing of one character in the top two-thirds of the card. (Writing done with fountain pens and felt-tip pens tends to smear with the sweat that comes from holding them in your hands for a long time.) In the bottom right-hand corner, put the number of the frame in which the character appeared. On the back side, in the upper left-hand corner, write the key-word meaning of the character. Then draw a line across the middle of the card and another line about 2 cm. below it. The space between these



two lines can be used for any notes you may need later to remind you of the primitive elements or stories you used to remember the character. *Only fill this in when you need to, but make a card for every character as soon as you have learned it.*



The rest of the space on the card you will not need now; but later, when you study the pronunciation of the characters, you might use the space above the double lines. The bottom part of the card, on both sides, can be left free for inserting character compounds (front side) and their readings and meanings (back side).

A final note about reviewing. You have probably gotten into the habit of writing a character several times when memorizing it, whether you need to or not; and then writing it MORE times for characters that you have trouble remembering. There is really no need to write a character more than once, unless you have trouble with the stroke order and want to get a better “feel” for it. If a character causes you trouble, spend time clarifying the imagery of its story. Simply rewriting the character will reinforce any latent suspicions you still have that the “tried and true method” of learning by repeating is the only reliable one—the very bias we are trying to uproot. Also, when you review, REVIEW ONLY FROM THE KEY WORD TO THE CHARACTER, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND. The reasons for this, along with further notes on reviewing, will come later.

We are now ready to return to work, adding a few new primitives one by one, and seeing what new characters they allow us to form. We shall cover 23 new characters in this lesson.

72

直

straight

Think of the first two elements, *ten eyes*, as referring to a group of five scientists working together on a top-secret, million-dollar project to draw a **straight** line on the *floor* without the aid of special equipment. In the end, all *ten eyes* verify that it is **straight**, leaving no doubt that the use of government funds was fully justified. Time to apply for another grant.

Note how the first two strokes of the element for *eye* are made a little longer so that they can touch the final stroke. The same thing will happen in the following three characters, and later on as well, so pay particular attention to the stroke order below. [8]

一 十 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 直

73

置

set up

Think of having to **set up** the *net* for a badminton or volleyball game. One of the main problems is how to keep the *net* in a

straight line so that it doesn't sag in the middle. Which is just what this character shows us. [13]

、 冂 四 四 四 置

❖

tool

六

Although this primitive is not very common, it is useful to know, as the following examples will show. It is usually drawn at the very bottom of any character in which it figures. The first stroke, the horizontal one, is necessary to distinguish **tool** from *animal legs*.

The sense of the element is a carpenter's **tool**, which comes from its pictographic representation of a small bench with legs (make them *animal legs* if you need a more graphic image), so that any element lying on top of it will come to be viewed as a **tool** in the hands of a carpenter. [3]

一 丿 六

74

tool

具

Here is the full character on which the primitive of the last frame is based. If you can think of a table full of carpenter's **tools** of all sorts, each equipped with its own *eye* so that it can keep a watch over what you are doing with it, you won't have trouble later keeping the primitive and the character apart. [8]

丨 冂 月 月 月 且 具 具

75

true

真

Here is an example of how there can be different ways of identifying the primitive elements that make up a character. The most obvious is *straight* and *animal legs*, but the character could as well be analyzed into *ten* and *tool*. Let's choose the latter.

How do you know if something is **true** or not? What if there were a kit of *ten tools* you could count on to run a test? Well, at least when it comes to asking whether people are really **true** to themselves, the *ten* commandments are a good start. [10]

十 真

❖

by one's side

ナ

This primitive has the look of *ten*, except that the left stroke is bent down toward the left. It indicates where one's hands (all *ten* fingers) fall when the arms are relaxed: **by one's side**. [2]

一 ナ

76

work^(N.)

工

The pictograph of an I-beam, like the kind that is used in heavy construction **work** on buildings and bridges, gives us the character for **work**. [3]

一 丁 工

- ❖ Since the key word can be too abstract when used as a primitive element, we will often revert to the clearer image of an *I-beam*.

77

left^(N./ADJ.)

左

By combining the last two frames and reading the results, we get: *by one's side . . . work*. Conveniently, the **left** has traditionally been considered the “sinister” *side*, where dark and occult *works* are cultivated and carried out. [5]

一 ナ 左

78

right^(N./ADJ.)

右

When thinking of the key word **right**, in order to avoid confusion with the previous frame, take advantage of the double meaning here. Imagine a little *mouth* hanging down *by one's side*—one's **right** side, of course—like a little voice of conscience telling one the “right” thing to do. [5]

ナ 右

<p>79 有</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">possess</p> <p>The picture here is a slab of <i>flesh</i> dangling <i>by one's side</i>, perhaps from a belt or rope tied around the waist. While we normally think of things that we have and possess, we also know that there are things that can have and possess us. Such cases might be likened to an evil spirit possessing one's soul. This character suggests a way to exorcize it: hang a slab of fresh <i>flesh</i> <i>by one's side</i> until it begins to putrefy and stink so bad that the demon departs. Take careful note of the stroke order. [6]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ナ 才 有 有 有</p>
<p>80 贿</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">bribe^(N.)</p> <p>To the left we have the primitive for <i>shells</i>, and to the right, the character we just learned for <i>possess</i>. Keep the connotation of the last frame for the word <i>possess</i>, and now expand your image of <i>shells</i> to include the ancient value they had as money (a usage that will come in very helpful later on). Now people who are <i>possessed</i> by <i>shells</i> are likely to abandon any higher principles to acquire more and more wealth. These are the easiest ones to persuade with a bribe of a few extra <i>shells</i>. [10]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">贝 贿</p>
<p>81 贡</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">tribute</p> <p>A tribute has a kind of double meaning in English: honor paid freely and money (<i>shells</i>) collected by coercion. Simply because a ruler bestows a noble name on a deed is hardly any consolation to the masses who must part with their hard-earned <i>shells</i>. Little wonder that this ancient <i>work</i> of gathering money by calling it a tribute has given way to a name closer to how it feels to those who pay it: a tax. [7]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">工 贡</p>
<p>82 项</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">item</p> <p>To the right we see a <i>page</i> and to the left an element for <i>I-beam</i>. The item referred to here is not some specific object but an</p>

entry on an “itemized” list. Each **item** in the list you have to imagine here is preceded by a little *I-beam*—not a drawing, but an actual iron *I-beam*. Imagine lugging a list like that around the grocery store! [9]

工 项

83

sword

刀

Although this character no longer looks very much like a **sword**, it does have some resemblance to the handle of the **sword**. As it turns out, this is to our advantage, in that it helps us make a distinction between two primitive elements based on this character. [2]

丿 刀

- ❖ In the form of the character, this primitive means a *dagger*. When it appears to the right of another element, it is commonly stretched out like this 丿, and like this 丿 when to the left of another element. In these cases, it will take the sense of a great and flashing *saber*, a meaning it gets from a character to be introduced in Book 2.

84

blade

刀

Think of using a *dagger* as a razor **blade**, and it shouldn't be hard to imagine cutting yourself. See the little *drop of blood* dripping off the **blade**? [3]

丿 刀 刃

85

cut^(v)

切

To the right we see the *dagger* and next to it the number *seven*, whose primitive meaning we decided would be *diced* (FRAME 7). It is hard to **cut** meat or vegetables with a knife without imagining one of those skillful Japanese chefs. Only let us say that he has had too much saké to drink at a party, grabs a *dagger* lying on the mantelpiece and starts *dicing* up everything in sight, starting with the hors d'oeuvres and going on to **cut** up the furniture and carpets.... [4]

一 十 切

86

summon

召

A *sword* or *dagger* poised over a *mouth* is how the character used to **summon** a person is written. Note the immediate—how shall we put it politely?—Freudian implications of the character. (Observe, too, if you will, that it is not at all clear whether the long slender object is **summoning** the small round one or vice versa.) [5]

刀 召

- ❖ The primitive meaning remains the same. Just be sure to associate it with a very concrete image, such as a prosecutor at your door with a document that *summons* you to appear in court.

87

evident

昭

Nothing quite works to make something **evident** like “evidence” that backs it up. Here we see a lawyer who *summons* the *sun* down from the noontday sky to stand as a witness and make the facts as **evident** as can be. [9]

日 昭

88

rule^(n.)

则

The character depicts a *clam* alongside a great and flashing *saber*. Think of digging for *clams* in an area where there are gaming **rules** governing how large a find has to be before you can keep it. So you take your trusty *saber*, which you have carefully notched like a yardstick, crack open a *clam* and then measure the poor little beastie to see if it is as long as the **rules** say it has to be. [6]

贝 则

<p>❖</p> <p>畐</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">wealth</p> <p>To prepare for the following frame, we introduce here a somewhat rare primitive meaning wealth. It takes its meaning from the common image of the overwealthy as also being overfed. More specifically, the character shows us <i>one</i> single <i>mouth</i> devouring all the harvest of the <i>fields</i>, presumably while those who labor in them go hungry. Think of the phrase exactly as it is written when you draw the character, and the disposition of the elements is easy. [9]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">一 口 畐</p>
<p>89</p> <p>副</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">vice-</p> <p>The key word vice- has the sense of someone second-in-command. The great and flashing <i>saber</i> to the right (its usual location, so you need not worry about where to put it from now on) and the <i>wealth</i> on the left combine to create an image of dividing one's property to give a share to one's vice-wealth-holder. [11]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">畐 副</p>
<p>90</p> <p>丁</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">fourth</p> <p>This character is fourth in a system of enumeration from first to tenth based on the ancient lunar calendar and referred to as “the celestial stems.” What it shows us is someone waiting fourth in line, using a giant metal spike as a makeshift chair. [2]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">一 丁</p> <p>❖ When used as a primitive, the character changes its meaning to <i>nail</i> or <i>spike</i>. When it is written with a single stroke (丅) it will mean a <i>thumbtack</i>.</p>
<p>91</p> <p>叮</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">sting^(v.)</p> <p>You know how a bee stings, right? It drives the little barbed <i>spike</i> in its bottom into your skin and then pulls away. Of course,</p>

as we noted way back in FRAME 11, the primitive element for *mouth* can refer to any kind of orifice, but imagine the damage a bee could inflict if it could **sting** with its *mouth* at the same time—a kind of bi-polar attack. [5]

口 叮

92

can ^(AUX. V.)

可

To begin with, you will notice that this character is composed of the very same elements as that of the former frame. Only their arrangement is different.

Remember the story about the “Little Engine that **Could**” when you hear this key word, and the rest is simple. See the determined little locomotive huffing and puffing up the mountain—“I think I **can**, I think I **can**...”—spitting railroad *spikes* out of its *mouth* as it chews up the line to the top. [5]

丁 可

93

older brother

哥

The **older brother** is depicted here as a duplication of the character for *can*. It shouldn’t take too much work to imagine him, for whatever reason, as a *can-can* brother. [10]

可 哥

94

crest

顶

The key word can refer to the summit or **crest** of a mountain, but the **crest** of the *head* works better here. The immediate image this conjures up is the *head* of a rooster with its comb or a cockatoo with its crest feathers. And from there it is but a short step to think of the punk hairstyles that imitate this look by shaping the hair into a row of brightly colored *spikes*. So a *spike-head* becomes a **crest**. [8]

丁 顶

LESSON 6

THE LAST GROUP OF primitives took us pretty far, and probably forced you to pay more attention to the workings of imagination. In this lesson we shall concentrate on primitives that have to do with people.

Remember that even those characters that are given special meanings as primitives may also retain their key-word meaning when used as primitives. Although this may sound confusing, in fact it turns out to be convenient for making stories and, in addition, helps to reinforce the original meaning of the character.

95

second^(ADJ.)

乙

This character belongs to the same series of “celestial stems” as that in FRAME 90 of the last lesson. The **second** person in line is seated in what looks like a rocking chair (much better situated than the *fourth* seat). [1]

乙

- ❖ Since this is also a pictograph of a *hook* or *fishhook*, let us take these as primitive meanings. Its shape will rarely be quite the same as that of the character. When it appears at the bottom of another primitive, it is straightened out, almost as if the weight of the upper element had bent it out of shape: 丩. When it appears to the right of another element, the short horizontal line that gets the shape started is omitted, and the whole character is stretched out and narrowed—all for reasons of space and aesthetics: 丩.

96

fly^(V.)

𠂇

The large *fishhook* has two wee propellers (the two *drops* on the side) attached to them for **flying**. [3]

𠂇 𠂇 𠂇

97

child

子

This character is a pictograph of a **child** wrapped up in one of those handy cocoons that Indian squaws fix to their backs to carry around young **children** who cannot get around by themselves. (Incidentally, this is why English has taken over the word “papoose” from the Algonquin language to refer to the device itself.) The first stroke is like a wee head popping out for air; the second shows the body and legs all wrapped up; and the final stroke shows the arms sticking out to cling to the mother’s neck. [3]

㇀ 了 子

- ❖ As a primitive, this character retains the meaning of *child*, though you might imagine a little older *child*, able to run around and get into more mischief.

98

cavity

孔

A **cavity** is really just a small hole, but the first thing we think of when we hear the word is that little pothole that shows up in a diseased tooth. The Chinese may not use the character in this sense, but what’s to stop us?.

Probably the one thing most *children* fear more than anything else is the dentist’s chair. Can you remember the first time as a *child* you saw your dentist hold an x-ray up to the light and pronounce the ominous word “**cavity**”? Even though you were not likely to know that the word meant that you have an extra hole in your head until you were much older, it did not take long before the sound got associated with the drill and that row of shiny *hooks* the dentist uses to torture people who are too small to fight back. [4]

子 孔

99

roar^(v.)

吼

A *mouth* and a *cavity* combine to create the character for **roar**. It shouldn’t tax your memory banks too much to think back to how you howled and **roared** the first time you had a *cavity*

drilled by a doctor poking around inside your *mouth* with his weapons of dental destruction. [7]

口 吼

100

chaos

乱

When things get **chaotic**, manners are laid aside and tempers get short, even in the most courteous of circles. This character shows what happens to a *tongue* caught up in **chaos**: it gets “barbed” like a *fishhook*, and becomes sharp and biting. Be sure you see an actual *tongue* actually *hooking* people, and not rush over the metaphor with an abstract sense. [7]

舌 乱

101

(-ed)

了

This character is most frequently used as a grammatical particle. Since it can indicate completion of an action, it is here assigned the key word **-ed**. Learn this character by returning to FRAME 97 and the image given there. The only difference is that the “arms” have been left off (actually, only tuck-**ed** inside). Thus a *child* with its arms wrapp-**ed** up into the backpack is the picture of a job successfully complet-**ed**.

Incidentally, you should be aware that this grammatical particle has generated a great deal of debate among specialists. [2]

了 了

102

woman

女

You have probably seen somewhere the form of a squatting **woman** drawn behind this character, with two legs at the bottom, two arms (the horizontal line) and the head poking out the top. A little farfetched, until you draw the character and feel the grace and flow of the three simple strokes. Remembering the character is easy; being able to write it beautifully is another thing. [3]

㇏ 女 女

- ❖ The primitive meaning is the same: *woman*. It will help if you have a particular person in mind.

103

good

好

The sense of **good** carried by this character is very broad in range. And what better image for this than a *woman* holding her *child*. [6]

女 好

104

be like

如

Pardon us if we revert to the venerable old Dr. Freud again, but his eye for symbolism is often helpful to appreciate things that more earthy imaginations once accepted more freely but that we have learned to cover over with a veneer of etiquette. For instance, from ancient times things like the *mouth* of a cave have served as natural ritual substitutes for the opening through which a *woman* gives birth. This is just one example of the way in which one thing can **be like** another in a metaphorical sense and can help unlock the hidden meanings of ritual and symbolism. [6]

女 如

105

mother

母

Look closely at this character and you will find the outline of the character for *woman* in it, the second stroke of which has been expanded to make space for the two breasts that help a **mother** be a **mother**. [5]

㇏ 𠂇 𠂇 母 母

- ❖ As a primitive we shall add the meaning of *breasts* in accord with the explanation given above. Take careful note of the fact that the form is altered slightly when this character

serves as a primitive, the two dots joining together to form a longer stroke: 𠄎. An example follows in the next frame.

106

贯

pierce

If one is asked to think of associations for the word **pierce**, among the first to come to mind is that of **piercing** one's ears to hold earrings, a quite primitive form of self-mutilation that has survived into the twenty-first century. The character here is read, top to bottom: *mother . . . oyster*. All you need to do is imagine **piercing** an ear so that it can hold a *mother-of-pearl* you have just wrested from an *oyster*. [8]

丿 口 母 𠄎 贯

107

兄

elder brother

The difference between “older brother” (FRAME 93) and **elder brother** is ever so slight in English, the latter sounding just a bit less colloquial. The same is the case in Chinese.

By now characters like this one should “look like” something to you even though it is more of an “ideogram” than a “pictograph.” The large *mouth* on top and the *human legs* below almost jump off the page as a caricature of **elder brother**, the one with the big *mouth* (or if you prefer a kinder image, the one who “has the say” among all the children). [5]

口 兄

- ❖ As a primitive this character will take the meaning of *teenager*, in accord with the familiar image of the big *mouth* and the gangling, clumsy *legs*.

108

克

overcome^(v.)

In this frame we get a chance to use the character we just learned in its primitive meaning of *teenager*. The *needle* on top indicates one of the major problems confronting the *teenager* growing up in today's world: drugs. Many of them will fall under the shadow of the *needle* at some time during those tender years.

Only when a whole generation rises up and declares, “We Shall **Overcome**,” will the *needle* cease to hang over their heads as it does in this character. [7]

十 克