



Mastering Chinese Characters:

A Modern Approach



汉字图解学习手册

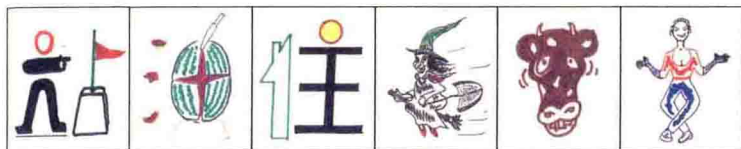
David Su Liqun / 编著



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PREFACE

During my twenty years teaching at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) I began to develop an interest in different ways of teaching Chinese as a written language, but a serious attempt to explore the subject did not come about until 2004. Frequent interruptions meant that the work was only completed seven years later, in 2011. The following year, the Commercial Press in China agreed to be my publisher. It was with their unwavering support and practical advice that this handbook, 'Mastering Chinese Characters: A Modern Approach', was finally able to reach its current and final form.

Written Chinese has been taught traditionally by taking each character apart and tracing the roots of its radicals to their sources. Though fascinating for Chinese students already familiar with their own history and culture, this approach has not been particularly effective for foreign students learning the language from scratch. In hindsight, this strategy was perhaps both too academic and too localised. It tended to assume a basic knowledge of China—its national and folkloric heritage, its geography, social values and codes of behaviour.

In an attempt to avoid similar pitfalls, it became something of an obsession of mine to figure out an alternative way to inspire and support foreign students in our classes, a way which does not require prior knowledge of all things Chinese. The resulting handbook is an

attempt at a more intuitive approach, one which employs fresh visual tools. As the saying goes, the novice monk has to be led through the temple door. Once over the threshold however, it would be up to him to pursue his own knowledge as far as his interest dictates. In time, it is quite possible, even likely, that the dedicated student would return to more traditional paths of academic pursuit. In this way, the handbook does not seek to replace valuable research and established practices, only to initiate the novice and to serve as a light-hearted aide memoire.

During the time between the first and last drafts of the text, we were fortunate to be able to put it to practical use in the classroom. The fact that almost all of the students were beginners was a huge bonus, and their response to the efficacy of the book was extremely constructive. This period of experimentation began on 18th June in 2012 and spanned three terms, the first and second of which catered for absolute beginners. Each term lasted 30 weeks, lessons were one and a half hours long, averaging 45 hours per term. The full three terms therefore required the commitment of 90 weeks to complete. After more than a year of study, the results of the final tests were encouraging. The students' average score was 72.9%, which meant that 608 out of 835 characters were successfully memorised, the equivalent of one every 4 minutes 45 seconds.

A result like this was possible because of a two-pronged approach: on the one hand, students were provided with basic knowledge of the development of Chinese writing from its inception in the Shang Dynasty until today; on the other, they were given tools with a contemporary flavour to enhance their memory.

At this point perhaps it is worth pointing out that the structure of Chinese characters mainly relies on three kinds of building blocks—pictograms 象形(4%) ideogrammic compounds 会意(13%) and phonosemantic compounds 形声(82%). The other three ways of building a character are less used. They are ideograms 指事, transformed cognates 转注, and rebus 假借 (all less than 1%).

Since both pictures and sound are regular components of Chinese characters, we have included a cartoon on every page, supported by a short piece of text in English where the students are encouraged to read aloud. Whatever proved most helpful to the class ended up on these pages, the priority being always practical use over established convention.

Right now, in the west, there seems to be tremendous interest in learning Chinese. In order to sustain this trend, it would seem prudent to focus on a couple of things: first, to remind those of us who are teachers that a spoken language and its written form are intimately connected. In other words, to teach the spoken language, it is paramount to teach reading and writing at the same time. Secondly, our attention ought to turn towards children and teenagers, for whom Chinese has become one of the most popular subjects at school. It is with this age group in mind that we hope to take on a serious subject in a relaxed and playful manner.

As this volume prepares to face the world, I would like to take the opportunity to thank all those who have given their time from conception to completion. I am grateful to the teachers at the school of Meridian Chinese Studies: Jian-Ling Shen(沈建玲) and Michelle Marshall(徐江秀); all the teachers who assisted in the lessons, including Jian-Ling Shen(沈建玲), Susie Zheng Liu(刘铮), and Si Chen(陈思), and the technical assistants Su Zi-han(苏子涵) and Maha H Ibrahim. I would also like to thank my poet friend Stephen Pucci and the artist Daniel Pheloung. Although their work does not appear in the final pages of the handbook, their generous contribution during the course of our journey was very much appreciated.

Finally, my special thanks extend to Carolyn Choa(蔡敏仪) whose thoughtful work on the English text in the ‘read aloud’ sections is invaluable.

This handbook is one of 6 volumes of work entitled ‘Su’s Origin of Language and Literature’(SOLL). The first volume being ‘SOLL’s TDR Zoom in Chinese Grammatical System’; the second, ‘SOLL’s Teaching of Chinese as a Foreign Language’; the third, which consists of four separate volumes, contains ‘SOLL’s TDR text books: Zoom In Mandarin Everyday Chinese for Beginners 1 to 3, and Lower Intermediate’; the fourth, ‘SOLL’s Selected Advanced Classical Studies’; the fifth, ‘SOLL’s Guide for Chinese as a Written Language—its Origins and Evolution’; and the last volume, ‘A Compilation of SOLL Talks, Publications and Lectures’. The six volumes together total over a million words.

David Su Liqun

前 言

任教英国伦敦大学亚非学院（School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London）的20年期间，我一直都在寻找一种向欧美学生介绍汉字的方法。说起写“汉字图解学习手册”（以下简称“手册”）已经是2004年的事了，又由于中间时有其他的事情插进来，全书到2011年才完成，历时7年。2012年，商务印书馆表示愿意出版其中的一部分。其后，我得到了他们的大力支持和具体的指导，于是“手册”才会有今天的样子。

诚然，此书之前，也曾有人尝试过以“图片解析汉字”的方法来编写教材，不过总体来说收效不明显，原因是这些书对汉字的解释过于“学术化”与“地域化”。“学术化”是指“以文解文，以字解字”，忽略了读者对中国是“零知识”；“地域化”是指著书者大多对欧美受众群体的社会及价值观缺乏切身的了解，因而在文化的沟通和语言的表达两个方面都受到了局限。这本“手册”尽量避免这些短处，而采用了“授人以渔”的方法。第一，把学生领回到甲骨、金文和籀文时代，用汉字后面的故事来启发、引导学生；并且在选择和绘制卡通画的形象时，尽可能地与汉字的外观相贴近。第二，以“声”来加深学生对“字形”的记忆，在每一页中都设计了“把汉字说出来”的板块——用一句英文把这个汉字的形、声、义都归纳、融合进去，达到“只要记得住这句话，就知道这个字的意思、写法和发音”的目的。“手册”在图片的风格和诠释的语言方面尽量做到“本土化”，而且在“不伤及汉字筋

骨”的原则下，用启蒙与幽默相结合的方式，达到“亦庄亦谐”的效果。另外我还在图片的下端加注了比较严谨的解释，这部分是用汉语写的，目的是让那些已经有了较高汉语水平的使用者更深地了解汉字。需要说明的是，这本手册的目的是普及汉字，而非学术研究。换句话说，在两者相冲突时，我取“普及”。

幸运的是“手册”从初稿的完成到最后交稿一年多的时间里，都一直能作为教本在课堂上使用。实验课程是从2012年6月18日起始，先后共三轮（第一、二轮是并行班），每轮30个星期计45个小时（每个星期上一个半小时的课）；三轮一共为90个星期。一年多的时间下来，测验的结果令人欣慰：在所教的835个汉字（含本书的300字）中，经过45个小时的学习，学生平均的成绩是能认识72.9%，即608个汉字。若以每分钟来计算，他们可以在4分45秒的时间内记住一个汉字。

在“手册”问世之际，我要衷心地感谢那些在“手册”成形的各个阶段都予以我诸多协助的子午文院的老师：沈建玲（Jianling Shen）和徐江秀（Michelle Marshall），在实验班中担任助教与统计的沈建玲、刘铮（Susie Zheng Liu）与陈思（Si Chen）老师以及在电脑技术上协助我的苏子涵和Maha H Ibrahim，还有我的诗人朋友Stephen Pucci 和美术家Daniel Pheloung等。

尤其要提及的是Carolyn Choa（蔡敏仪），她对手册英文部分“把汉字说出来”的整理与润色更是功不可没。

最后要说明，此次由商务印书馆出版的《汉字图解学习手册》是“苏氏文源丛书”中“汉字‘解字说文’卷五”中的一部分。“苏氏文源”卷分为六：卷一，苏氏“天地人——趋真性汉语语法体系”；卷二，苏氏对外汉语教学理念与教学法；卷三，苏氏“天地人”对外汉语教本（初级本、中级本）；卷四，苏氏对外汉语古今文选（注释及评述）；卷五，汉字“解字说文”；卷六，苏氏文选（在世界各地的讲座、研讨论文以及报刊文章）。

苏立群

A QUICK GUIDE TO USING THE HANDBOOK

I. This handbook is suitable for :

- 1) Beginners living in English-speaking countries
- 2) Beginners who speak English but reside in other countries
- 3) Beginners living in China for whom English is their first language
- 4) Beginners living in China who speak English adequately
- 5) Chinese language teachers living in China or abroad

II. This handbook contains 300 characters

III. Reasons behind this selection:

- 1) They are the most frequently used Chinese characters
- 2) When the character exists in both full and simplified scripts, an explication is only given for the latter.
- 3) Most of the characters included are part of the official syllabus of the Chinese Proficiency Test(HSK) for beginners and intermediate students.

IV. How to use the handbook :

There are three different ways to look up a character :

- 1) Using English as a basis :

Say a student wants to look up the character for 'home', they would go to the letter 'H' to find the page number and then be directed to the character, 家.

- 2) Using Chinese radicals as a basis :

Employing the same example of 家—if the student can only remember the top part of the character, he will know that this radical contains 3 strokes. Sifting through all the radicals with this number of strokes will enable him to locate the one he requires, which will in turn lead him to the page for 家.

3) Using Pinyin as a basis :

If the student can remember the pronunciation of a character but not how it is written, he can look it up on the pinyin index. Using 家 as an example again, the pinyin for this character is 'jia', so the student will simply go to 'J' inside the pinyin index, then locate the relevant page.

V. Each page of the handbook contains 8 different pieces of information :

Using 家 as our example again :

HOME/FAMILY 家 Radical

Ancient character: 宀 (roof)

Meaning: roof

家 = 宀 + 豕

豕 (pig)

Pig in Chinese: 豕 = 宀 + 豕
豕 是猪的象形。在猪的尾巴上有一个尖儿。

HEAD-ALIGNED
In the old days, farmers used to keep their pigs inside the HOME (HOME 在猪 家 里).

Stroke order: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

pinyin/meaning	radical/meaning
family 家庭 jia2ting	messengers 信使 xintishi
residence 住所 jia2su	other people 别人 bieren
family-education 家规 jia1gui	writer 作家 zuojia
family letters 家书 jia1shu	a shop 家商店 jia1shangdian

A. On the page header are :



- 1) The page number for the character No. 108
- 2) The English meaning of the character and the original form of the character. If there is a full script for the character, this would be given in brackets
- 3) The radical for looking up this character in a dictionary, in this case Radical 宀

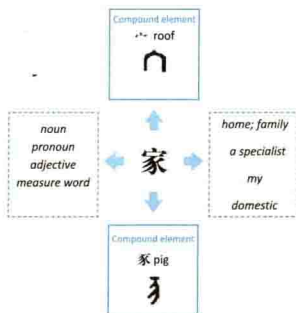
B. On the upper left hand corner are :

Ancient
character



It's the ancient character of 家.

C. In the middle of the page on the left are the character's structure, part of speech, and meaning. The top and bottom squares relate to its structure, to the left, its part of speech, and to the right, its meanings and nuances.



- D. Moving to the right side of the page, from top to bottom are :
- 1) A cartoon reflecting the form and meaning of the character



- 2) The individual components which make up the character

家 = 宀 + 豕

- 3) The structure of the character analyzed in Chinese, for those who already have a basic knowledge of the language

E. This is the READ ALOUD section where a simple line in English is offered as a light-hearted aide-memoire and to support the cartoon.

 **READ ALOUD**

In the old days, farmers used to keep their pigs inside the HOME. HOME is jiā (家).

F. At the bottom of the page is a demonstration of the stroke order for each character.



G. Degree of Composite Capability :

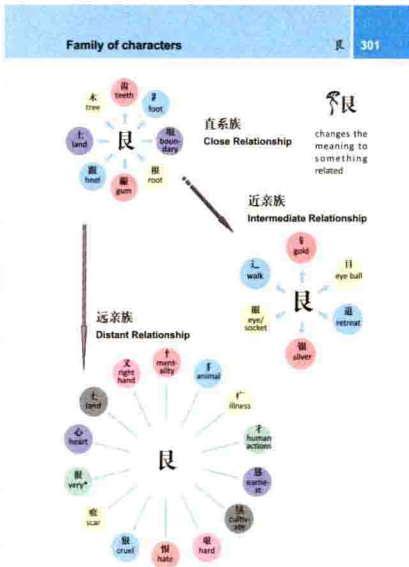
A number between 1-10 is assigned to each character depending on how often it is used as part of a term or phrase. In the case of 家, its capability is 10 because of its frequent and flexible usage.

Composite capabilities: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

H. The character as prefix or suffix :

prefix/phrase	suffix/phrase
family 家庭 jiāting	everyone 大家 dàjiā
member of family 家人 jiārén	other people 人家 rénrén
family education 家教 jiājiào	writer 作家 zuòjiā
family letters 家书 jiāshū	a shop 一家商店 yí jiā shāngdiàn

VI. The last section is for beginners who would like to explore the language further. Here, each character is grouped with some others related to it in sound, meaning or structure, presented in a simple diagram.



From the family album of 良, we get to know some of its immediate family, cousins, and more distant relatives. These include 根, 跟, 眼, 银, 退, and 很, all of which have an asterisk

next to them, meaning that these characters are also included in the handbook separately.

VII. All pronunciations follow the Official Pinyin. If a character has more than one pronunciation, the alternative is also given.

VIII. Frequently used terms and phrases :

- 1) When a character combines with others to form new terms and phrases, the most frequently used are included
- 2) If a character has multiple meanings, the most common usage is given

Index of Chinese Pinyin

Character	Pinyin	English	page
爱	ài	love	229
安	ān	peace; safety	103
八	bā	eight	52
把	bà	handle	128
办	bàn	manage; do	90
半	bàn	half	55
包	bāo	bun; wrap	77
饱	bǎo	be full	159
报	bào	report	129
被	bèi	quilt	245
本	běn	origin	193
比	bǐ	compare; compete	202
必	bì	certainly; must	183
边	biān	edge; side	113
表	biǎo	appearance	266
冰	bīng	ice	32
不	bù	not; no	8
步	bù	step; pace	204
菜	cài	vegetable	122
草	cǎo	grass	121
长	cháng/zhǎng	long; grow	21
唱	chàng	sing	142
超	chāo	surpass	284
吃	chī	eat	136
船	chuán	boat	280
春	chūn	spring	210
达	dá	reach	114
打	dǎ	strike	126