

TURBO CHINESE

HOW AN INDIAN LEARNT
CHINESE CHARACTERS

涡轮汉语

SAURABH SHARMA

Turbo Chinese is a fun and insightful approach
to learning.

Mark Rowswell "Dashan", TV Host

AND YOU
CAN TOO!



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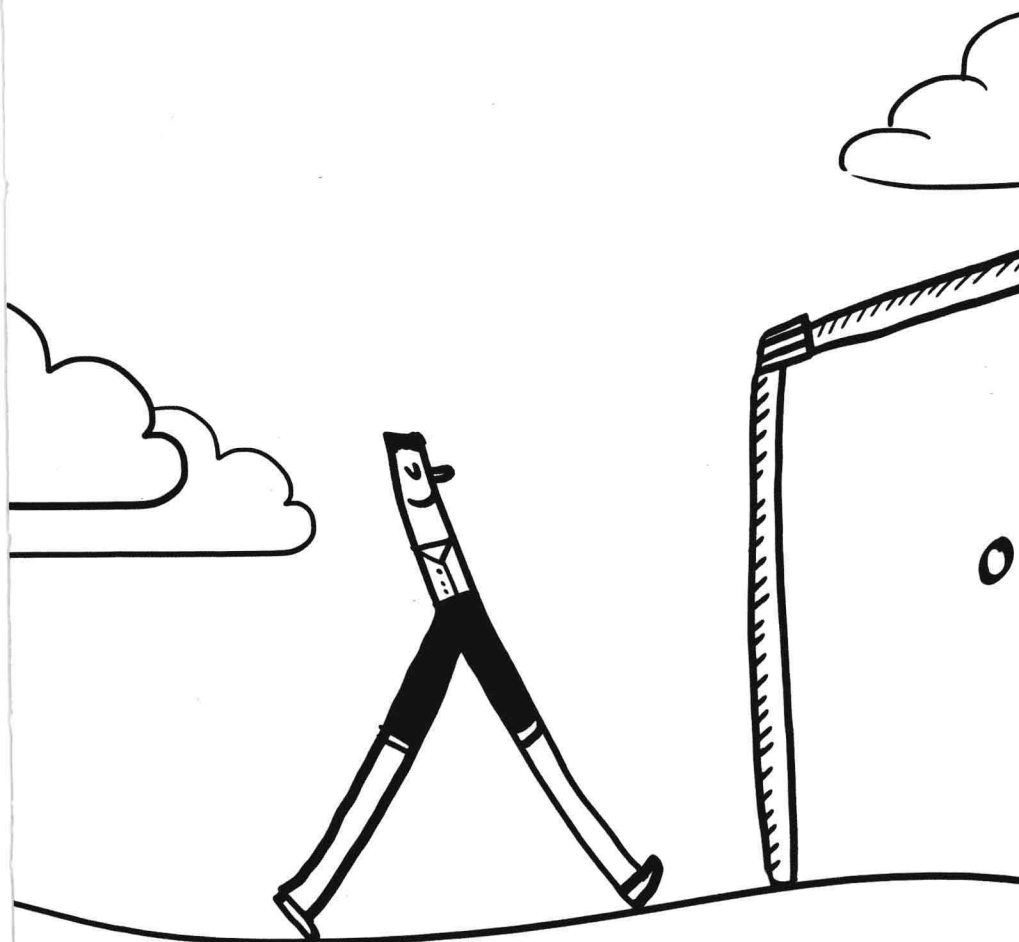
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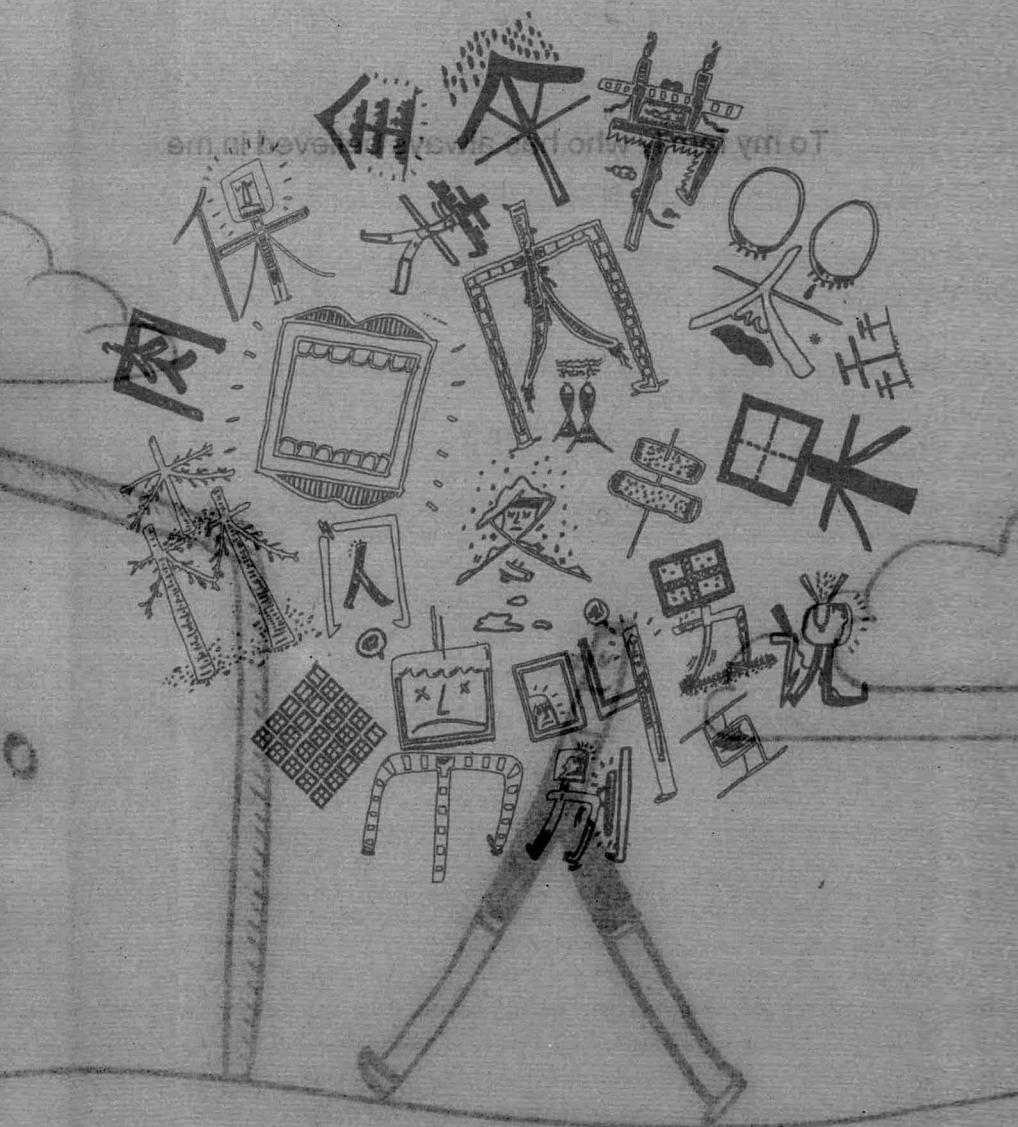
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To my family who has always believed in me





Thank you

I can never be grateful enough to my mother, Vineeta Sharma and my father, Omesh Sharma - for being the parents, partners and friends that they have always been. I will always be grateful to know of this idea first and they all through this. I will always be grateful to my elder brother, Irfan Sharma who is always reminding me not to lose my innocence for in innocence lives imagination.

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I will always be hugely indebted to Mr. Jia - my teacher at Beijing Modern School for his patience and understanding. I will always be grateful to him for his teaching techniques which helped me learn and understand a new life in China as I understand and experience a new culture.

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I owe a big thank you to my very good friend Wang Lamei who has seen this compilation and helped me with the language of all.

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I do not know how to thank Mr. Jia for his help in making these visualizations come to life and packed them into this book that you are holding now. I cannot draw two straight lines, but Eshawn who has illustrated all the characters in this book, are not just written characters from a language but ideas that can be energized into many interesting forms and media.

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Thank you

I can never be grateful enough to my mother Vineeta Sharma and my father Dinesh Chandra Sharma – for being the parents, partners and friends that they have always been to me. They were the ones who got to know of this idea first and they are the ones who supported me all through this. I will always be thankful to my elder brother Rohit Sharma who is always reminding me not to lose my innocence, for in innocence lives imagination.

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book, never made me feel that I could have done these better myself. He saw my vision and ideas just the way I meant to show them, and the result is for all of you to see.

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**THE BEST WAY TO
LEARN SOMETHING
IS TO THINK ABOUT
HOW YOU WOULD
HELP SOMEONE
ELSE LEARN IT.**

Introduction

Mark Twain once said, “Never let your schooling interfere with your education.” In hindsight whatever Chinese I have learnt in the past two years is because unknowingly, I was doing what Mark Twain suggested many years ago. Even today, every time my teacher and I have conversations about my speed of learning, we end up in disbelief about how I could learn so fast! I have a full time job and work pressures, which meant that I missed my classes often, I had no prior knowledge of Mandarin, I did not follow any particular book. And yet I progressed. How?

I missed my classes but I did not miss the lessons.

First lesson is what my professor once told me: “The best way to learn something is to think about how you would help someone else learn it”. This has stuck in my mind since then. Learning by thinking that you have to teach makes you more curious because you question more, and this way you understand better and remember more.

Second lesson is the one that my mandarin teacher always reminds me of – “There cannot be any substitute for hard work.” This sounds simple but only a few who want to learn Mandarin internalize it. In my case I did not just work hard to remember Chinese characters; I also worked hard to learn the right way to work hard i.e. learning in a way that was just right for me.

Third lesson is the one from the classroom of life experiences. Steven Pinker has noted that while education is an admirable thing, it is worth remembering, from time to time, that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught. This line of thought has inspired my journey of learning Chinese characters. I have kept my learning close

to my life experiences rather than classrooms. These life experiences are intertwined with my background as an Indian. An Indian experiences a multitude of things as he grows up, from cows, pigs and elephants that can still be seen roaming the streets, to fortune-tellers who cannot afford two square meals, glitzy state-of-the-art 'Cyber Parks' sitting alongside slum clusters. India, to say the least, is a living circus where a mish mash of colors, sounds, smells and human heat cohabits serene spiritual relief. A strange mix of nonsense alongside nirvana! India is a place where indulgence, detachment, emotion and apathy, all walk hand in hand. I often say that an average Indian, like myself, is a product of a life-sized juicer, mixer and grinder¹ with an additional blending function. The average Indian might not travel much, but he has seen a lot; he might not always be highly educated but he still knows a lot. As an Indian, I have grown amidst all kinds of diverse experiences, thus almost nothing comes as a surprise and almost everything can be related to something else that has already been heard, seen or experienced. This book is a result of such experiences and the resulting ability to relate two seemingly unrelated things.

Fourth lesson is the one that my ex-boss used to remind me of – 'horses for races'. No two situations are the same and thus no two responses can be the same. All problems are not made from the same fabric; thus every problem needs a solution tailored specifically for it. We need to bend our mind and think afresh. Mandarin, for example, is not a scientific language. It is more artistic than logical. Thus learning such an artistic language requires an artistic and imaginative approach. We cannot and we should not pigeonhole it into boundaries defined by logic that does not apply to it in the first place.

INDIA, TO SAY THE LEAST, IS A LIVING CIRCUS WHERE A MISH MASH OF COLORS, SOUNDS, SMELLS AND HUMAN HEAT COHABITS SERENE SPIRITUAL RELIEF. A STRANGE MIX OF NONSENSE ALONGSIDE NIRVANA! INDIA IS A PLACE WHERE INDULGENCE, DETACHMENT, EMOTION AND APATHY, ALL WALK HAND IN HAND.

¹ An electrical appliance that you will see in almost all middle class Indian homes.

CURIOSITY AND REFLECTION HELPS BUILD A MENTAL MAP OF THE LANGUAGE WHICH SPEEDS UP LEARNING THROUGH DEEPER APPRECIATION OF THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE.

Fifth and final lesson is about being curious, reflective and imaginative. It is often said discovery is seeing what everyone has seen and thinking what no one has thought. Only by reflecting upon the day to day and looking at alternative interpretations of what we observe and experience can we evolve new perspectives. The process of learning Mandarin helped me understand and practice this principle. By constantly visualizing an alternative world, different from the one that I was seeing and observing the Chinese characters in, I was able to visualize newer worlds for the same words. Curiosity and reflection helped me build a mental map of characters and the language. Finally, I could not only remember the characters but also appreciate the language and its nuances.

How this book came about

I had decided early on that I did not want to learn 'writing' Hanzi.² This would have taken too much time. I had instead decided to focus on 'speaking', 'reading' and 'typing'. But in spite of this, my progress was really slow. Every week my teacher would test my memory from the last week's class and every week I would end up getting frustrated with my abysmal performance. Besides, my full time job did not grant me the luxury of dedicating 6-8 hours of daily study the way many foreign students do. I soon realized that if I were to learn the characters faster, I had to approach things differently. The need for faster learning prompted me to improvise the methodology. This is when I started using the characters as visual triggers for images embedded in my mind. I tapped into my experiences to develop my own interpretation of the character in a way that could help me remember it. This of course did not work for all the characters, so instead of trying to learn them all at once, I focused on those characters for

² Hanzi (汉字) – the written Character in Mandarin or pu tong hua (普通话) – Chinese as it is spoken & written in Mainland China

which I could build relevant associations from my experiences. Once I got past 50 characters, I realized that my visualizations were not just making sense to me but many others around me. More importantly, knowing 50 characters also gave me the much-needed confidence that I could learn more and the motivation to share my learning technique with others like myself.

**THE BEST WAY
TO LEARN IS TO
START WITH THOSE
CHARACTERS
THAT YOU CAN
REMEMBER EASILY.**

Ideas first, rules later

One realization that dawned upon me early in the learning process was that the best way to learn the characters is to start with those characters that you can remember easily. Only when you are getting along with some – say about 100 of them – should you look at the elaborate rules of learning as stipulated in many of the formal books on the subject. For someone with limited time to learn, it makes more sense to learn this way. Starting with a foundation of about 100 characters motivates and has a multiplicative effect on the number of characters that one knows when one starts to learn the more formal rules³. You will observe that I have not discussed tones throughout the book, except at the very end. This is because I did not learn the tones first. I, instead, focused on remembering the character and the words and tried to use them as much as possible by observing how my Chinese friends were using and pronouncing them. Whenever I went wrong in my pronunciations (read got my tones wrong), my friends corrected me. This is a much more realistic way of learning the tones rather than trying to copy tones from a book.

What this book is

My intention in writing this book is to be illustrative not prescriptive. If anything, this book tells that one doesn't need a book. That is, at least, one

³ For More Rules See Section V – Rules After The Ideas

**THIS BOOK AIMS
TO COLLAPSE
THE GENERATION
AND GEOGRAPHY
GAP BETWEEN
THE CHINESE
CHARACTER AND
THE AVERAGE
FOREIGNER.**

does not need a book to tell us how to learn Chinese. One needs to learn the way one learns best and enjoy in the process.

The book industry has more than its share of experts who love to give rules of thumb. Especially many books that I have seen about shortcuts to Chinese have ended up with elaborate rules. If you are looking for something like that, this compilation will not excite you. This book is not based on empirical evidence. Instead it is a combination of imaginary visualizations and commonsense view of about 100 Chinese characters in a rather free-style way. With this book, I hope to bring forth my experiences during the process of learning and share it with you so that you can learn too. I hope you will find some of these useful for your own learning. I also hope you do not agree with some of the visualizations and my explanations for it. I then hope you email me to tell me your different point of view because I will also learn a thing or two from it. The learning is my favourite part – I am a student, not a guru.

The book uses visual connections to link up the meaning and its representation. I call this visual pun⁴ – random association of images with some of the Hanzi and the meanings that they represent. There are no set rules but only broad strokes of imagination and abstraction.

This compilation is unique in a sense that on one hand it can make almost anyone think about Mandarin and Hanzi in a new way and on the other hand it can be a boon for beginners because suddenly now they have a way of remembering many of the Hanzi and they develop motivation to know more.

⁴ Pun in China, as you will discover over a period of time, is integral to written and oral Chinese. A lot of humor, especially in stage performances, like *xiang sheng* 相声 or Cross Talk, uses a pun and such play of words.

Are 100 characters too less?

I believe that for someone who cannot read and write the language at all, 100 are a great way to start!

Who is this book for?

This compilation can be of great value to foreigners who want to learn Mandarin as the second language but do not have enough time to devote and learn the conventional way. This can also be very valuable for foreigners who have developed some basic understanding about pin yin⁵ or have just about started to speak and understand basic Mandarin but are yet to learn reading or typing the characters. It can also be interesting for anyone who is generally fascinated by the Chinese Characters or is interested in some modern commentary and interpretations of an age-old script.

How this book has been organized

There are five sections in this book

Part 1 – Talks about my experiences with the inner nature of Chinese – An overview of some interesting observations about "the personality of Mandarin as a language".

Part 2 – Covers the visualizations for 100 Hanzi – a compilation of about 100 Chinese Characters, with descriptions of how I remembered them by relating it to my personal experiences.

Part 3 – Introduces some Chinese Words that have been derived from English or other languages. I have identified over 80 words in Mandarin that sound the same as their counterparts in English. Similar sound as English words makes it easier to remember these Mandarin words, even if we can't immediately learn to read and write them.

Part 4 – Outlines about 20 words that describe relationships. The mere sound of these words makes them very interesting and thus potentially easier to memorize.

Part 5 – Introduces more formal rules of remembering the characters and pronouncing the pinyin. Mandarin has a set of particles that are widely

⁵ Pin yin literally means, "spell sound". It is a system for the romanization of Chinese words using the English alphabet.

used to form the characters and have an important role in determining the meaning and look of it. This section focuses on these rules and begins to contextualize the learning by offering building blocks to remember more characters on top of the 100 that we learnt in section II.

Similarly pin yin (peen yeen) helps in remembering pronunciations of characters and words learnt in earlier sections.

Having fun not making fun

The aim of this book is to help people learn Mandarin faster by looking at Hanzi in a less conventional way. It is aimed at creating fun. It is aimed at collapsing the geography and generation gap between the Chinese character and foreigners by triggering curiosity and generating alternative interpretations. Through such imagination, visualization and abstraction, our mind can actually create a fun-map for Mandarin that can help memorize the characters in new and interesting ways. In no way this is meant to make fun of the language. Chinese language has rich tradition and a long history – this work does not intend to undermine or trivialize the depth and width of the language and the culture.

So relax, visualize and wallow in broad strokes of imagination on the infinite canvas of being. You will enjoy the Mandarin journey more this way.

