

# A Key to Chinese Speech and Writing

*Joël Bellassen Zhang Pengpeng*

字

启蒙

Volume I

SINOLINGUA

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# 汉语语言文字启蒙

## A Key to Chinese Speech and Writing

### I

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# Preface to the English Edition

The two volumes that make up this method of learning Chinese were published in France at the end of 1989 (I) and 1991 (II) respectively. They are intended for students with no previous knowledge of the language.

We would like to express our gratitude to those colleagues in Germany, America, England, China and Scandinavia who, acquainted with the French manuals, first put forth the idea of an English edition. Our thanks go to them for the continued interest they have shown in the present volumes, in which there is, no doubt, room for improvement. This interest, we feel, has been kindled by an entirely different conception of learning Chinese. Departing from the usual form of teaching in vogue for the last forty years, this new approach is nevertheless intrinsically traditional, in that it shows a great respect for the originality of the Chinese language.

In every aspect of life, only when we chose to look reality in the face, can we avoid encounters with conflict and disorder. In terms of learning Chinese, the written language is not merely a graphic duplicate of the oral sounds. Bearing this consideration in mind, Chinese students as well as their professors must adopt two separate approaches of the language which consist of distinguishing two systems of logic of thought. Those two systems are not identical and they may even conflict with each other. Meanwhile, one has to keep in mind that the Chinese characters as fundamental unit of written language should always be entitled to a specific place and that is what I strove to do in this book. We would like to thank Mrs. Anne Alexis and Ms Jocelyne Finazzi for their attentive editing.

J. B.

# INTRODUCTION

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“Once upon a time in the north of China, there lived a farmer who, wanting to hasten the growth of his new shoots, went every morning to pull them up slightly. After a short time the shoots withered and died. ”

**T**he ancient wisdom of the Chinese teaches us through this story that we must not fight against the nature of things. This is the first idea that guided me in devising this method. Many textbooks (Chinese ones included) westernise and “alphabeticise” Chinese. It is surely far more appropriate, however, to present the language as it really is, to reveal its own logic, its own spirit.

**I**t is generally agreed that learning Chinese is a question of memory. Memory, however, is afraid of emptiness; it needs supports. Any method of learning Chinese must be constructed accordingly, providing where possible the essential elements for learning every Chinese character or sinogram (we have borrowed this new term from Delphine Weulersse and Nicolas Lyssenko, authors of *Methode programmée du chinois moderne*).

**T**hese supports will be visual (the student will readily observe a character’s original design), auditory (the student who remembers things when he hears them will benefit from saying out aloud the elements that compose a character) and gestural (the stroke order and positioning).

**F**urthermore, considering the effort involved in memorising them, the number of new sinograms in a text must not exceed a certain threshold: it is often far better to have two texts of ten lines than one of twenty.

**T**he Chinese language is made up of signs. This is an unavoidable fact generally ignored by textbooks that present only words without paying attention to the characters that make them up.

**O**ur method proposes to give characters the place they deserve and to reveal them in their many different facets .

Some sinograms are extremely rare whilst others are very frequently used. Frequency of usage is a major, although not absolute criterion in selecting the characters that make up this book. The naming of the characters in the dialogues for example was used as a chance to integrate other frequently-used sinograms that had not previously appeared in the book. The 400 characters used in the texts were chosen in such a way as to permit the recognition of 66.27% of all characters appearing in current reading material. They also constitute almost the entire list entitled SMIC ("Seuil Minimum Indispensable de Caractères" i.e. Indispensable Minimum Threshold of Characters) established by "L'Institut national de la recherche pédagogique" that serves as a standard for the level required for the (French) Baccalaureat.

Chinese characters are constructed with a puzzle-like logic and they are combined with a logic much like that of dominoes. The character "bright" for example is composed of two "pieces", the "sun" and the "moon" and when this character is combined with the character "white" it forms the word "to understand". Is it not therefore advantageous to learn these new signs and to explore the different possible combinations? This type of synthesis as utilised in all three sequences of this book is the application of a "snowball" effect that is unique to Chinese.

"Once upon a time in ancient China, a musician who had just finished composing a piece of music caught sight of a buffalo in a field and played for it the tune on his lute. The indifferent buffalo continued to browse on the grass."

Let us know how to marry our thoughts and acts with our objectives. Let us know how to adapt to those we communicate with as this story tells us. The originality of a language such as Chinese can neither be without consequence for the way we learn it, nor for the writing of a textbook such as this one.

If this Fundamental Approach manages, not to bring solutions, but at least to outline the overall picture and open new doors, it will have served its purpose.

Joël Bellassen

Paris, Septembre 1989

# CHINESE WRITING

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**O**n its own, Chinese writing gives the whole of the Chinese language a radically different appearance. It is a non-alphabetic, non-phonetic writing. Unlike the Latin, Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic and Hebrew alphabets it is not a code that indicates sounds. It is the painting of meaning, of ideas. The meaning of a character can be learnt without going through the stage of learning its pronunciation. A sinogram in isolation, to a certain extent, seems to be just like a logo, a road sign or an Arabic numeral.

**O**wing to this fact, China, a true tower of Babel with regards to its different pronunciations and dialects, has found in its writing system a unifying element. Furthermore, such different languages as Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese have also adopted these Chinese signs. Leibniz, a German philosopher from the Age of Enlightenment even saw in Chinese a possible universal writing system.

**C**onsequently the present Chinese world is the only great civilisation of which writing has not known the tremendous leap towards abstraction that the appearance of an alphabet constitutes. Language and writing being far more than simple instruments of communication, we can appreciate that this is a major fact of which all the consequences are undoubtedly still far from being measured.

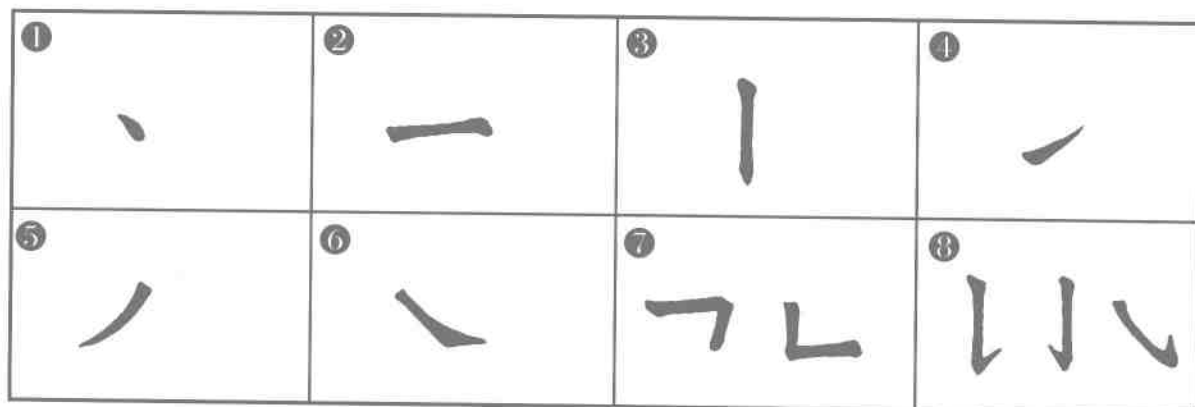
**O**n their own, sinograms are a whole world to be explored. Apart from the different meanings they can have, they also possess their own structure, their rhythm and their history.

**O**ne can never “read Chinese”; one can know a certain amount of characters, and it is preferable that the number be as high as possible! However one is always at the mercy of “Meeting a tiger in one’s path” i. e. an unknown character. On the other hand, Chinese writing is such that a child can learn several signs at two or three years of age.

Sinograms have a consistent and independent form. They must be centred inside an imaginary square without occupying the entire square.

The strokes, with their interior movement, order and orientation are the basis of sinograms in the field of calligraphy. There are eight fundamental strokes:

- |   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| ① The point                             | ⑤ The left descending stroke  |
| ② The horizontal stroke (left to right) | ⑥ The right descending stroke |
| ③ The vertical stroke (top to bottom)   | ⑦ The bending stroke          |
| ④ The upcutting stroke                  | ⑧ The hooked stroke           |



The essential rules of stroke order are as follows:

	Horizontal then vertical	一 十
	From top to bottom	一 三
	From left to right	丿 川
	The outside then the inside	月 月
	Close after filling the frame	冂 囧 囧
	Left descending then right descending stroke	ノ 人
	The middle stroke then the left side then the right side	丨 小 小
	The point comes last	王 玉



With regards to memorising sinograms, it is the graphic elements, true “puzzle pieces”, making up each character that are the base units. Seen from this angle a sinogram with many strokes is not necessarily a “complicated one”.

Sinograms can be classified into four large families:

- 1) Pictograms: Stylised or symbolic representations of reality (e. g. the sign “tree” showing its branches, trunk and roots).
- 2) Ideograms: associations of ideas from simple elements (e. g. the sign “forest” is composed of two trees).
- 3) Ideophonograms: composed of a pictographic root or “radical” and another element suggesting the pronunciation of the new whole thus formed (e. g. the sign “to listen” *wén* is composed of the semantic root “ear” and a phonetic element which in isolation is pronounced *mén*). In a considerable number of cases the phonetic also plays a semantic role at the same time.
- 4) Borrowings: e. g. there once was a character “waist” which was pronounced *yào* like the verb “to want” which did not have a sign of its own. This character was therefore borrowed to mean “to want” and in order to distinguish the two meanings, the flesh radical was added to the character “waist”.

The phonological scheme of a sinogram is a tonal syllable. There are about 400 syllables.

One must not confuse the terms word and sinogram. A sinogram is not necessarily a word and in this case it cannot be used on its own. For example, the sinogram *guó* means “country” but it must be combined with *jīā* (“family”) to form the word “country”.

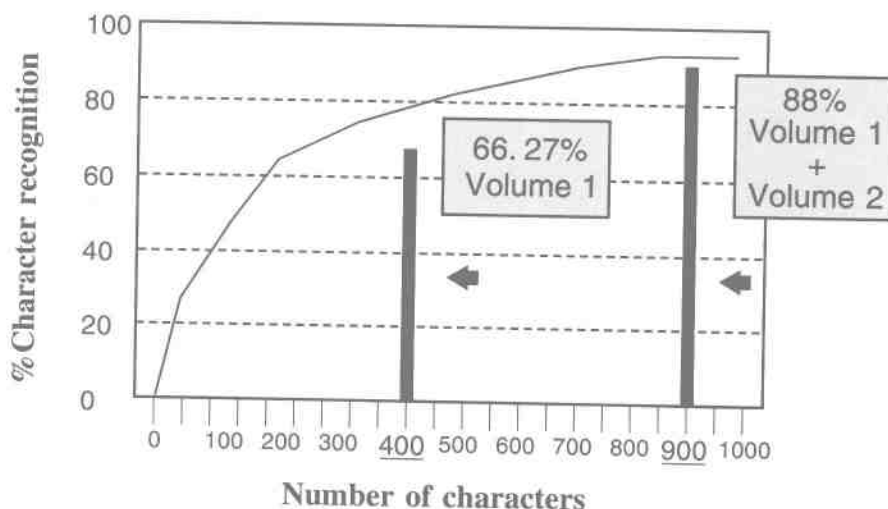
Towards the end of the 1950’s the People’s Republic of China began to simplify a certain number of characters by reducing the number of stroke. Books and newspapers are now printed in simplified characters as is also the case in Singapore. These are written horizontally from left to right. In Hong Kong, Taiwan and in foreign China towns the unsimplified characters written in the traditional way, vertically and from right to left, are still in use.

- There is a magical dimension to Chinese characters. Some sinograms are believed to be good luck charms (on or above doorways). Furthermore, the act of writing certain signs with a brush can have a deep symbolic significance. It confirms the prestige of their author and honours the person or the place they are dedicated to.
- There is a gymnastic dimension to Chinese characters: To write a character presupposes breathing control, steadiness of gesture and great concentration. . . all those concepts that are found in martial arts.
- There is an aesthetic dimension to Chinese characters: Calligraphic signs beautify homes and make up gallery exhibitions in just the same way as paintings.
- Finally, Chinese writing by its own originality even leaves its mark on the brain. By the manner in which characters are used and the commitment of images to memory they necessitate as well as by the very special motor skills required, Chinese writing employs the right brain as much as the left which is normally associated with language.

## FREQUENCY TABLE

### Frequency of usage of characters in modern readings

(Source: *Chinese Character Frequency Dictionary* – Beijing 1986)

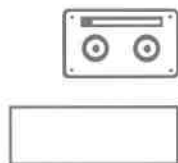


# PINYIN

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There have been many different systems of transcription used for learning to pronounce Chinese. Once, the name of the Chinese capital could be written “Peking” or “Pekin”. Today the official transcription accepted on an international basis is the PINYIN alphabet developed in China at the end of the 1950’s. Peking must now be written “Beijing”.

## 1 – INITIALS



b	p	m	f
d	t	n	l
g	k	h	
j	q	x	
z	c	s	
zh	ch	sh	r

- ➡ **m, f, n, l, h,** and **sh** are pronounced as in English
- ➡ **d** like “t” in “straight” (unaspirated)
- j** like “g” in “genius” (unaspirated)
- z** like “ds” in “beds”
- zh** like “j” in job
- ➡ **b** like “p” in “spin” (unaspirated)
- g** a soft unaspirated “k” sound
- x** like “sh” in “sheep” but with the corners of the lips drawn back
- r** somewhat like “ge” in lodge

- ➡ Particular attention should be paid to the pronunciation of the so called “aspirated” consonants.

It is necessary to breath heavily after the original consonant is sounded:

**p** = p' (like in “pop”)

**q** = ch harder than “ch” in cheap

**t** = t' (like in “tap”)

**c** = ts' (like in “cats”), with aspiration

**k** = k' (like in “kangaroo”)

**ch** = ch' (tongue curled back, aspiration)



- ➡ Distinction between certain initials:



**b/p    d/t    g/k    j/q    z/c    zh/ch**

## 2 – FINALS

Vowels do not present any particular difficulty in pronunciation. When they are combined they must not be pronounced separately.

	i	u	ü
<b>a</b>	ia	ua	
<b>o</b>		uo	
<b>i</b>	ie		üe
<b>e</b>			
<b>er</b>			
<b>ai</b>		uai	
<b>ei</b>		uei	
<b>ao</b>	iao		
<b>ou</b>	iou		
<b>an</b>	ian	uan	üan
<b>en</b>	in	uen	üen
<b>ang</b>	iang	uang	
<b>eng</b>	ing	ueng	
<b>ong</b>	iong		



- ➡ **ie** like “ye” in “yes”

- ➡ **e** like “e” in “her” (open)

- ➡ **-r** (final) like “er” in “sister” (American pronunciation)

**ai** like “y” as in “by” (light)

**ei** like “ay” as in “bay” (light)

**ou** like “o” in “go”

**an** like “an” in “can” (without stressing the “n”)

- ➡ **-ng** (final) a nasalised sound like the “ng” in “bang”  
without pronouncing the “g”

- ➡ **an** preceded by **y** or **i** = “yen” without stressing the “n”
- ➡ In **zi**, **ci**, **si**, **zhi**, **chi**, **shi** and **ri** the **i** is not pronounced. It indicates that the consonant only is pronounced.  
E. g. **zi** = “ds” as in “beds”  
**ri** = “r” as in “right”
- ➡ The consonants **j**, **q** and **x** are all followed by long vowels like the “ee” in “bee”.
- ➡ When placed in the initial position **-u** and **-i** are written as **w** and **y** respectively.



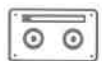
➡ Distinction between certain finals;



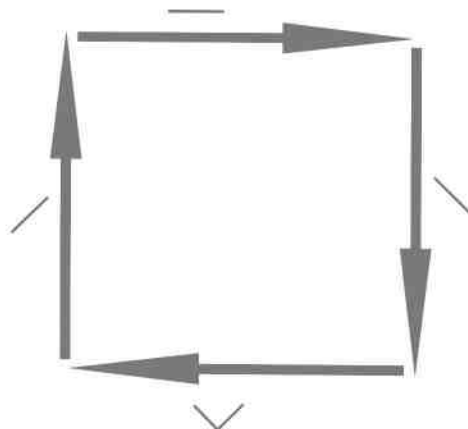
**in/ing**      **en/eng**      **an/ang**

### 3 – TONES

The pronunciation of each syllable i. e. each sinogram includes a tonal melody. There are four accented tones, a high tone, a low tone, a rising tone and a falling tone. On a chart of the movement of the vocal chords and the muscles that control them, the high tone consists of a prolonged stretch, the low tone a prolonged retraction, the rising tone consists of a normal tension followed by a stretch, and the falling tone consists of a slight stretch and then a sharp retraction.



<b>mā</b>	mother
<b>má</b>	hemp
<b>mǎ</b>	horse
<b>mà</b>	to insult



The four tones are usually called:

**First tone:** this is the high tone, high in pitch and even. It is conveyed (only above a *pinyin* transcription and not above sinograms) by the sign – (mā).

**Second tone:** this is the rising tone, starting from a low pitch and rising briefly. It is conveyed by the sign / (má) and corresponds roughly to the intonation of the English “Eh?”.

**Third tone:** this is the low tone and is naturally inflected. It is conveyed by the sign v (mǎ).

**Fourth tone:** this is the falling tone, starting from a high pitch and descending briefly. It is conveyed by the sign \ (mà) and corresponds roughly to the intonation of “NO!”.

➡ There is also a neutral tone. It is short and unaccented. Its pitch relies on a natural extension of the preceding tone. It is conveyed by the absence of a sign (ma).

➡ When one low tone follows another, the first one becomes a rising tone.

Having a good pronunciation depends greatly on getting the tones right (of the sounds only the aspirated consonants pose any real problem). Of all the difficulties found in learning Chinese, the problem of tones is undoubtedly the most difficult. It would therefore be advisable to listen often to the cassette and to try to imitate the melody of the sentences as a whole.



# PRONUNCIATION EXERCISES

—	—	Shāndōng Shandong	fēijī aeroplane	fāyīn pronunciation	guānxīn to care for
—	/	Zhōngguó China	huāchá jasmine tea	jīnnián this year	huānyíng welcome
—	✓	kāishuǐ boiling water	gāngbǐ fountain pen	shēntǐ health	jīchǎng airport
—	\	gōngzuò to work	chīfàn to eat	yīyuàn hospital	shāngdiàn shop
—		tāmen they	zhīdao to know	duōshao how many	gēge older brother

/	—	Nánjīng Nanjing	shíjiān (period of) time	zuótiān yesterday	Chángjiāng the Yangtze River
/	/	hóngchá black tea	tóngxué schoolmate	Huánghé the Yellow River	chángcháng often
/	✓	cháguǎn tea house	liángshuǐ cold water	chíjiǔ lasting	rénkǒu population
/	\	niúròu beef	nánkàn ugly	báicài cabbage	yíyàng the same
/		míngzi name	shíhou (point in) time / moment	xuésheng student	péngyou friend

✓	—	lǎoshī teacher	Běijīng Beijing	xǐhuān to like	huǒchē train
✓	/	Fǎguó France	xiǎoshí hour	kěnéng maybe	shuǐpíng level
✓	✓	nǐhǎo hello	Kǒngzǐ Confucius	guǎngchǎng square, plaza	Běihǎi Beihai
✓	\	mǐfàn rice	hǎoxiàng it seems	zhǔyào main	hǎohàn brave
✓		jiǎozi ravioli	mǔqīn mother	wǎnshang evening	zǎoshang morning

\	—	Sìchuān Sichuan	shàngbān to go to work	qìchē car	kètīng parlour
\	/	jiùxié old shoe	pàiren to be afraid	dìtú map	sìshí forty
\	✓	Rìběn Japan	Hànyǔ Chinese	Shànghǎi Shanghai	fànguǎn restaurant
\	\	guìxìng surname	Hànzì sinogram	huànbào illustrated magazine	zàijiàn goodbye
\		àiren spouse	dìfang place	xièxie thank you	bàba daddy, papa

-r final	nǎr where?	zhèr here	nàr over there	yìdiǎnr a little
	nánhái boy	nǚhái girl		

# GRAPHIC ELEMENTS (RADICALS)

犛	animal with claws	力	strength	止	foot
木	tree - wood	冫	ice	石	stone
弓	bow (archery)	爪	claw	殳	stake, mace
竹	bamboo	斤	axe	雨	rain
户	single door	戈	dagger-axe, halberd	鱼	fish
虫	insect	艹	grass	门	door
青	blue - green	欠	person with mouth open	寸	thumb
口	mouth	亻	person	厶	private
牛	cattle	匕	upside-down person, dagger	礻	rites
田	field	足	leg	米	rice
车	chariot - vehicle	舌	tongue	王	king or jade
马	horse	士	scholar, literati, soldier	酉	container
心	heart	月	moon or flesh-meat	八	dividing up
忄	heart	才	hand	纟	silk
贝	seashell	又	right hand	豆	soya bean or vessel
刀	knife	攴	hand holding a stick	日	sun
刂	knife	疒	sickness	立	standing up
瓜	melon	走	walk	几	small table
禾	cereal	辵	walk quickly	其	sieve
鬼	ghost	羊	sheep	土	earth
卜	divination	金	metal	阝	mound, knoll (when on left of a sinogram)
龙	dragon	母	mother	巾	cloth
氵	water	食	food	宀	roof (two strokes)
口	wall, enclosure	目	eye	宀	roof
乍	collar	隹	bird with short tail	工	work
子	child	鸟	bird with long tail	页	head
方	place	耳	ear	阝	town (when on right of a sinogram)
女	woman	彡	ornament	见	see
火	fire	西	west	衤	clothing
灬	fire	讠	word		
儿	son	彳	step with left foot		
矢	arrow				



# TABLE OF 400 SINOGRAMS

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T

- |    |                      |
|----|----------------------|
| 1  | 啊爱安八把吧白百班半办包报杯北本比笔边便 |
| 2  | 遍别病不才菜茶差长常场唱车成城吃出处川春 |
| 3  | 次从错打大带当到道的得等底地第点电店丁定 |
| 4  | 冬东懂动都对多饿儿二发法饭方房放非飞分份 |
| 5  | 风夫服父干刚钢高告哥歌个给跟更工公共古关 |
| 6  | 馆光广贵国果过还孩海汉好喝河和黑很红后候 |
| 7  | 湖虎花画化话欢黄回会活火机鸡几己家间见江 |
| 8  | 讲饺叫教今金近进京九酒久就旧觉开看可课刻 |
| 9  | 孔口快筷块来老乐了累冷离李里立连凉两辆0 |
| 10 | 零六龙楼路马吗买卖慢忙毛么没美每门们梦米 |
| 11 | 面民名明母拿哪那男南难脑呢能你年念鸟您牛 |
| 12 | 女旁朋皮片票平七期骑起气汽千前钱亲轻请秋 |
| 13 | 区去然让热人认日肉如三色山商上少谁身什生 |
| 14 | 声升师十时识始是事市室收手书水睡说思四诉 |
| 15 | 算虽岁所他她它太疼提题体天田听同头图外完 |
| 16 | 晚万王往忘为位文问我无五午物西息喜下先现 |
| 17 | 香想象小校些鞋写谢新心信星行醒姓兴休学呀 |
| 18 | 言阳羊样要药也夜一医衣以意因音影硬用有友 |
| 19 | 又鱼语雨元园远院月在再早怎站张找这着真正 |
| 20 | 知只中钟种重主住祝庄子字自走租最昨作做坐 |