Introduction 前言

Rationales for the book

When learning a foreign language, we generally learn to listen and speak first and then learn to read and write words we can understand and speak. After all, this is the natural sequence of acquiring one’s own native language, and it might seem to be the most efficient and effective approach to learning a foreign language. Teachers of Chinese as a foreign language have been using this approach for the past few decades. Consequently, students of Chinese in American universities learn to understand and speak Chinese first and then learn to read and write Chinese. In other words, you usually learn to write what you can say and rarely learn to write what you cannot say.

However, written Chinese is very different from alphabetic languages such as English in that the Chinese logographic writing system uses characters, which do not provide beginners with any clues as to pronunciation. Conversely, being able to speak a Chinese word does not help beginners know how that word is written. Unfortunately, the approach commonly adopted in the past several decades has been to teach students to write the characters for what they have just learned to speak. Therefore, the characters for the most commonly used daily expressions in Chinese are also taught in the first few lessons. The characters in such frequently used daily expressions as “Hello” (你好), “How are you” (你好吗), “I am fine” (我很好), and “Thanks” (谢谢) have quite complicated written structures. Teaching students how to write these characters is like teaching students who have no knowledge of the English alphabet how to spell a multisyllabic English word. Teaching Chinese characters in this way violates the pedagogical principle of teaching the easy first and proceeding gradually and systematically to the difficult. This approach presents students with a bigger challenge than is necessary, making the learning of Chinese characters a very difficult and painful process. In the past few decades, only a few very talented and hardworking students have met the challenge and survived; most students unfortunately get discouraged and discontinue their efforts to learn Chinese. A new approach that accommodates the unique features of the Chinese writing system must be found to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Chinese language teaching.

The new approach that I have been contemplating and experimenting with is to “proceed separately and strike together,” which can be referred to as the Dual-Track Approach. The idea is to offer a separate course on Chinese characters alongside the regular elementary Chinese course, with each course having its own focus in the beginning (i.e., the first semester). Thus, spoken Chinese can be taught without being hampered by the written forms that are usually presented in a regular Chinese language course, and fundamental knowledge of Chinese characters can be taught systematically according to the intrinsic regularity of Chinese characters and in compliance with the pedagogical principle of going from the easy to the difficult. Later (i.e., in the second semester), when students have mastered a couple hundred basic Chinese characters and several dozen radicals, and when students have become familiar with Chinese sounds and the tonal system and have learned some useful daily expressions, they will be ready to learn to speak and write the same thing at the same time.

On the Chinese characters track, characters should be taught according to their intrinsic regularity as shown below:
To implement this new approach, I have found no suitable and adequate book on the market. I have written this book in the hope that it will make it possible to teach and learn the fundamentals of Chinese characters using this new approach. A lot of the materials included in the book have been used in the Chinese characters course I have offered since the fall of 2002 at the University of Vermont. I also conducted an experimental study at the end of the fall semester in 2002. The resulting statistical analysis showed that students who took the Chinese characters course (one third of whom had never learned Chinese before and did not take the regular Chinese language course at the same time during the semester) did significantly better in a test on Chinese radical recognition and application than those who took only a regular Chinese language course.¹

We should not burden the students who have no Chinese language background with the task of memorizing the pronunciation of each character. Forcing them to memorize the pronunciation of each character in the beginning creates cognitive overload and prevents students from quickly accumulating the basic characters needed to continue to learn more characters. I have found that my students can quickly establish the link between the shape and the meaning of many basic characters without being bothered with learning how to pronounce them. The advantages of offering a separate course on Chinese characters have been or are beginning to be recognized by many of my colleagues in the field of Chinese language teaching. This book will assist Chinese language instructors offering a course of this kind at their universities to help their students learn Chinese characters with ease and confidence.

**Structure of the book**

Taking a new approach, the book presents Chinese characters according to their intrinsic regularity rather than the sequence of the characters used as follow-ups in teaching spoken Chinese. The book focuses on the connections between the shapes and meanings of basic Chinese characters and makes it possible for students to learn to identify the meanings of these characters from their shapes without bothering to learn their pronunciations at the elementary level.

The book first provides basic knowledge of the history (Chapter 1) and the characteristics of Chinese characters (Chapter 2). This allows instructors to present a whole picture of Chinese characters at the beginning of the course. The book then introduces the strokes and correct stroke order for writing characters by focusing on 14

¹ The paper reporting the result of the statistics analysis, entitled “The Necessity and Practice of Offering a Course on Chinese Characters at the Beginning Level,” was presented at the 4th International Conference on Chinese Language Pedagogy, held in Kunming on July 2-4, 2004, and was published in the 2004 Supplementary Issue of the Journal of Yunnan Normal University (Teaching and Research on Chinese as a Foreign Language Edition) on pp. 98-101.
characters used as numbers (Chapter 3). In the next five chapters (Chapters 4-8), 100 basic pictographic single-component characters as well as the strokes and correct stroke order are introduced. Based on these characters, 20 indicative characters are presented next (Chapter 9). Then 15 characters for directions and positions, containing not only pictographic and indicative characters but also phonetic loan characters, are presented (Chapter 10), serving as the transition from learning single-component characters to learning multicomponent characters. In the next four chapters (Chapters 11-14), 80 multicomponent characters are presented, exemplifying how the characters introduced in the previous chapters can be used as components in forming multicomponent characters. These include 20 associative characters (Chapter 11) formed by two or more basic characters, 20 reduced forms of basic characters used as semantic components (Chapter 12), another 20 commonly used semantic components (Chapter 13), and 20 pictophonetic characters (Chapter 14). The problematic and more-complex strokes, the basic structures of multicomponent characters, and the methods used to simplify the traditional forms of some Chinese characters are also discussed (Chapters 9-14). As the conclusion of the book, Chapter 15 addresses four important questions related to learning Chinese characters after using this book.

The book not only provides students with a fundamental knowledge of 229 basic characters (including 120 of the most frequently used and most productive single-component characters, 80 of the most frequently used multicomponent model characters, and 29 frequently used characters for numbers, positions, and directions) but also gives them interactive exercises designed to help them retain the knowledge they get from each chapter and acquire the skills of recognizing and writing these characters.

For each of the characters covered in the book, its forms in the oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions, in the seal, clerical, regular, and normalized scripts, and in the semi-cursive and cursive scripts are presented after the explanation of the character. If a character has more than one form in the oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions, usually only the earliest one is presented. If no form of a character in the oracle-bone or bronze inscriptions has yet been discovered, there will be a blank in the box for that form of the character. The purpose of presenting the various forms for each character is to help students gain a sense of the historical development of a character. Although the semi-cursive and cursive styles were developed concurrently with the regular script, they did not become printing types later on as the regular script did. They have remained handwritten forms used for daily practical purposes; in addition, they have been a form of art (calligraphy). Therefore, the semi-cursive and cursive styles for each character are also presented for students to learn to recognize, appreciate, and imitate.

Recognizing that students have different Chinese language backgrounds, learning purposes, and motivations as well as abilities, each of the chapters (Chapters 3-14) that introduce Chinese characters has five sections to address the needs of different learners. The more Chinese language background students have, the more sections in each of these chapters they should take on. While the first section (i.e., Fundamental Knowledge) is the minimum for everybody, the next two sections (i.e., Challenge 1 and Challenge 2) are for more serious students with no Chinese language background, and the last two sections (i.e., Challenge 3 and Challenge 4) are extra, for students who have already had some Chinese language background. Instructors and independent learners can decide if only the first, the first three, or all of the five sections in each chapter should be used.
Suggestions for instructors using this book

With a good understanding of the rationale and the structure of the book as well as of one’s own students, an instructor may already know very well how this book can be best used. The following suggestions are provided for instructors.

Offer an independent course of 1-3 credits on Chinese characters alongside a regular elementary Chinese language course in the very first semester. If scheduling a separate course on Chinese characters is difficult, then set aside one Chinese language class time each week to learn Chinese characters with this book.

The first section (Fundamental Knowledge) of Chapters 3-14 focuses on the connection between the meaning and the shape of each character by using illustrations and etymological explanations. This section is designed to help students recognize the meaning of each basic character from its shape. For true beginners (i.e., students without any Chinese language background), instructors may choose to use this first section in Chapters 3-14 and then let students take on Challenge 1, which requires them to be able to write these characters. We can also consolidate what students have just learned by asking them to take on Challenge 2, which has exercises that require students to apply their knowledge.

Students who have no Chinese background are encouraged, but should never be required, to take on Challenges 3 and 4 unless they have learned the Chinese sound system and know pinyin, the Romanized Chinese alphabet.

As there are also a good number of students who can already speak a little Chinese but are not able to read and write Chinese characters, each of the chapters (except Chapters 1, 2, and 15) has two additional sections that provide more knowledge about the characters as well as pronunciation and writing exercises. These sections may be used to challenge more ambitious students. Challenging students does not mean making Chinese characters more difficult and painful for them to learn. To facilitate learning I have composed a four-line verse with all the characters introduced in each respective chapter. The character verses can be used to help those students with some Chinese speaking skills to appreciate and enjoy the sounds of the language as well as establish the link between the shape and the sound of each character with ease.

This book will also benefit independent learners without a Chinese language background. Simply reading it will also help students at all levels to learn and appreciate Chinese characters.