

THE ULTIMATE **GUIDEBOOK** TO LEARNING **MANDARIN CHINESE**

CHINESE LEARNING ADVICE FROM 10 LANGUAGE SPECIALISTS



CONSTRUCTED AND COMPILED BY **LTL MANDARIN SCHOOL**

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PRONUNCIATION AND TONES

GETTING YOUR MOUTH AROUND CHINESE

BY CHRIS PARKER

Let me give you some good news: there are fewer sounds in Mandarin Chinese than there are in some other languages.

This means you are going to hear and have to produce the same sounds again and again over time. It can be a bit confusing when you are listening and you hear a lot of similar sounds, but it's something that plays into your hand in terms of speaking Chinese.

One thing I always tell people is that as with any language, it's a good idea to practice speaking or at least get your mouth moving as early as you can. This is doubly so with Mandarin, because some of the sounds may seem unusual to you, and you need to physically get your mouth used to the mechanics of producing these sounds.

The other thing, which you might have heard before, is that Mandarin Chinese also has four tone contours (four different ways of pronouncing any given syllable, plus other unstressed syllables that are pitch neutral).

In fact, every language uses intonation in some way or another, but as Chinese is a tonal language, the pitch and the way you say a syllable not only 'changes the feel' but can determine the meaning of what you are saying.

It sounds really difficult at the beginning, but it's not really. To put it simply, the four tones are 1) saying a syllable with a constant pitch 2) saying a syllable but raising your pitch slightly towards the end almost like you are asking a question 3) a syllable that falls then rises in pitch and 4) a syllable that falls in pitch (almost like how you lower your intonation at the end of a sentence).

This is the kind of thing that isn't going to make much sense in writing. The best thing is to start listening to the sounds of Chinese and start learning to recognize and produce them.

To do that, you can go to a website that has a Pinyin table, such as the [Yoyo Chinese Pinyin Chart](#), the [chart from Pinpin Chinese](#) or the [Chinesepod Pinyin Chart App](#).

Pinyin is China's Roman alphabet transcription system for Mandarin. It is also used as a pronunciation guide in dictionaries, beginners' courses, and you use it to type Chinese on a computer or phone. Learning how to represent Chinese sounds in Pinyin is therefore very important.



Go through the interactive table, checking through each sound, and practising saying them yourself in all four of the tones. It is worth getting over the embarrassment of ‘sounding strange’ on your own first, so you become more and more comfortable with reproducing the sounds in Mandarin Chinese. What sounds like an ‘unusual sound’ at the beginning will quickly become just like talking to you. After a long practice session or when you feel comfortable, get a friend to test you.

Pick any syllable and tone combination, and try to pronounce it yourself, then click on the syllable to compare your pronunciation to the native speaker’s. When you find out which syllables or tones you find difficult to pronounce, practice by imitating and comparing yourself to the recording, until you improve.

Arch Chinese has a [website](#) where you can listen to syllables and test whether you are able to recognize their tones. It’s also worth giving a go.

When you are getting the hang of single syllables, you can also try recognizing tones in pairs of syllables, or words. Sinosplice has [a great free resource](#) for practicing tone pairs. You can also [try this game](#) on the BBC learning Chinese website.

At the beginning stage, it is important to get your mouth moving as much as possible, and imitate and practice the language. When you know Pinyin and you have practiced the sounds of the language, you will be able to take to a course much more easily.

It is really important to focus on the accuracy of your tones from the beginning – even though it is slow and painful. It may feel frustrating when you feel that you have to speak slower just to get the tones right.

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It might be tempting to try and speed up at the expense of your tones, but I would advise you not to, as the pay-off from paying more attention at the beginning and speeding up slowly will be clear later, when you find that you have built a good foundation and your Chinese is more accurate.

It is easy to pronounce everything in a flat tone if you are learning Chinese, however if your tones are inaccurate, it will be very difficult to correct later, so it is worth concentrating on pronunciation at the beginner stage.

And most importantly, try to relax as you practise your speaking. Everybody makes mistakes with their tones, I still do sometimes even after more than 8 years, and don't worry, people's can generally understand even when you get them wrong, so don't get discouraged, and remember: **practice makes perfect!**



CHRIS PARKER

Chris Parker has been speaking Mandarin since 2006. He has worked as a translator and simultaneous interpreter between Chinese and English, and has taught interpretation in the UK and in Beijing. He now works in the media, specializing in international communications strategy and training. He blogs at [Fluent in Mandarin](#).

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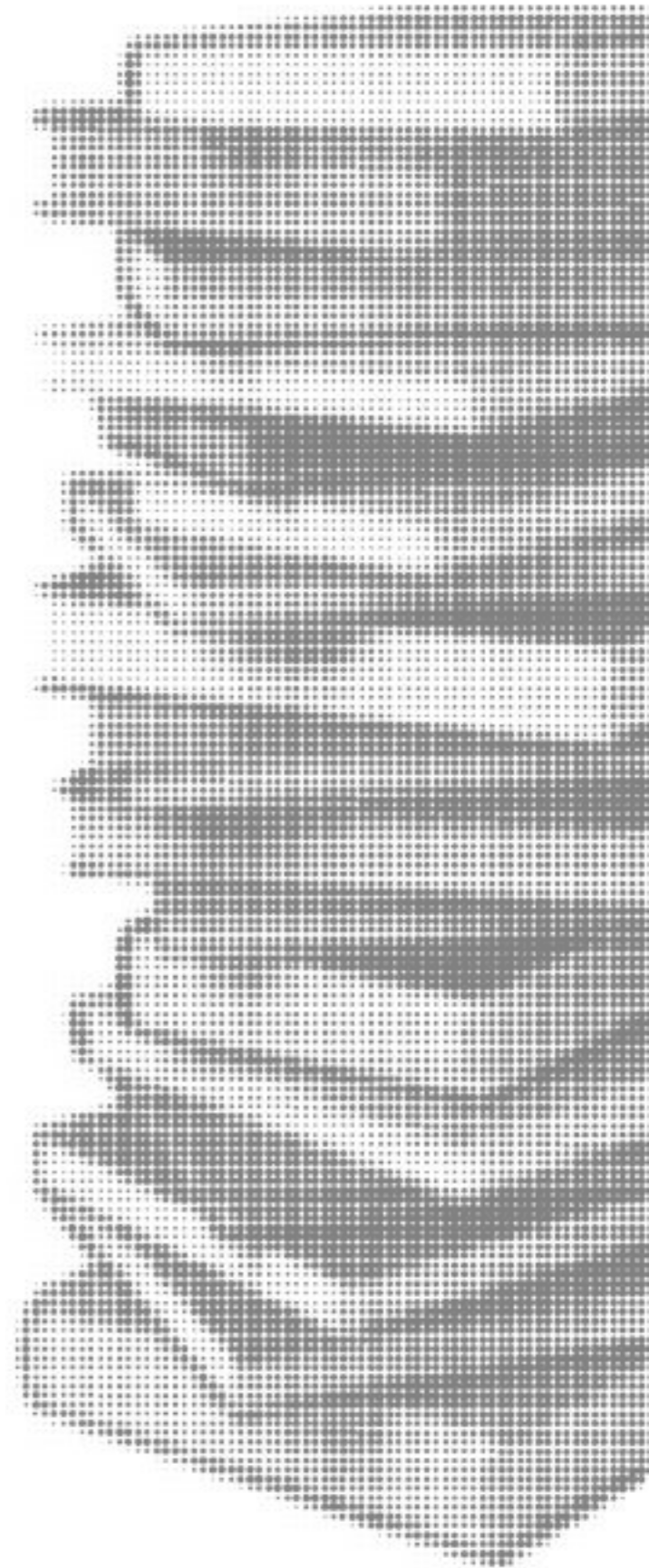
REMEMBERING CHINESE WORDS

BY BENNY LEWIS

When learning Chinese, it can feel like you're starting from absolute scratch, especially when compared to European languages, which have much more of an overlap with English than Chinese does.

There are two tips I want to give to help you learn words faster – first I want you to notice some words you already know, and then I'll give a tip for remembering the majority of unfamiliar words you'll come across much faster.

While it's true that most words you learn don't resemble English at all, you'd be surprised at how many Chinese words you know already. You would recognize these while spoken, and with a few minutes effort to get the tones right, you would be able to say them yourself without much mental effort.



Here are just a few to get you started!

- **Country names** in many cases, especially for western countries, sound very similar to how they do in English. For instance, 意大利 (Yìdàlì) for Italy, 波兰 (Bōlán) for Poland, 加拿大 (Jiānádà) for Canada, 哥伦比亚 (Gēlúnbiyǎ) for Colombia. Many other countries have the first letter or similar sound to the country followed by 国 guó (which means country), like 美国 (Měiguó) for America, 英国 (Yīngguó) for England and 法国 (Fàguó) for France.
- **Some brand and person names** like 可口可乐 (Kěkǒukělè) for Coca-Cola, 爱因斯坦 (Àiyīnsītǎn) for Einstein, and 奥巴马 (Àobāmǎ) for Obama.
- **Food and international concepts or words** that Chinese would have borrowed recently, like 拜拜 (bàibài) for bye-bye, 咖啡 (kāfēi) for coffee, 巧克力 (qiǎokèlì) for chocolate, 沙拉 (shālā) for salad and 咖喱 (gālì) for curry.

That being said, you will have to learn a lot of new words. Mnemonics will make the job much easier. Let me demonstrate through an example.

When I started learning Mandarin, I needed to say the word “target” or “goal”, as I’d often describe my milestone three-month goal in the language. This word in Mandarin is pronounced mùbiāo. This doesn’t look or sound anything like its English equivalent. So I came up with a story by trying to think what I could do with “moo” (falling tone) then “bee-ow” (first tone), and try to tie that story into the concept of “target”.

If you're attempting to come up with mnemonics yourself, use any idea that comes to mind! It doesn't matter how silly, nonsensical, politically incorrect, sexual, or personal to your tastes it may be.

When I first saw this word, I gave it a minute and then this story came to me:

I'm walking through a field with a bow and arrow in the early evening as the sun is setting. I want to practise my shooting skills, but don't see something challenging to aim for. Suddenly a cow falls from the sky!

MOOOooooooo [CRASH].

She stumbles to find her ground, and I see my opportunity! Conveniently, a bulls-eye of concentric red and white circles has been pre-painted on her rear, and I position myself by kneeling a little so that the bow is at the same height as the poor cow's ass.

This is no ordinary bow and arrow though! My arrow is made entirely of bees. I pull it back and launch it straight ahead – since I positioned myself correctly it flies straight into the target and hits the cow's bum!

The poor animal forgets itself, and rather than moo she can't resist but yelling a loud "OW!"(No animals were harmed in the making of this mnemonic).

The story takes a couple of minutes to write out, but our brains work much faster when we don't need to verbalise our thoughts. Basically all I see in this story is [target: mu (falling tone), bee-ow (first tone): target].

The visual aspect of this mnemonic also helps me remember the tones, and making sure that the actual meaning is ever present allows it to be practical for both recognition AND for production.

Try it out for yourself!



BENNY LEWIS

Benny Lewis could only speak English when he was 21, but in the last 12 years he has travelled the globe, diving deep into other cultures and even winning the title of National Geographic's Traveler of the Year. His blog **Fluent in 3 Months** is read by over a million visitors each month, and his book of the same title was an international best seller. He has tackled many languages including Chinese, and after successfully reaching basic conversational stage in Mandarin in just a few months, has written a guide to encourage Chinese beginner learners called **Why Chinese is Easy**.

NI MINGBAI MA?

How to improve your Chinese Listening ability

BY OLLE LINGE

Why and how to improve listening ability

You ask for directions, but don't understand the answer. You get what your teacher says, but strangers seem to speak a different language. You hang out with Chinese people, but find it hard to catch what they say among themselves.

Does this sound familiar? These are all common complaints from students, partly because listening practice is often overlooked by both students and teachers of Chinese. Yet, I think listening ability is the most fundamental skill. Good listening ability opens many doors, while poor listening ability confines you to your own bubble and slows down your long-term progress. In this article, I'm first going to explain why this is true, then move on to how you can improve your listening ability.

Why is listening ability so important?

Listening ability is important for many reasons. First, it helps you integrate with native speakers. Not being able to understand what's going on is often worse than being unable to express yourself.

Furthermore, the more you understand, the more likely you are to absorb the language simply by exposing yourself to it. This will never happen if your listening ability is poor. Better listening ability also carries over to other skills in some unexpected ways. For example, many studies show that you can improve pronunciation simply by training your ability to hear the sounds of the language. However, you don't learn to understand others by speaking yourself. Listening and paying attention to how native speakers express themselves is the best source for learning words, phrases and grammar.

But wait, if your goal is to be able to speak Chinese, doesn't it make more sense to practice just that? In a conversation, you're not the only person speaking and you certainly learn from what other people say. Communication is the purpose of language after all. This is all true, but the problem is that for most people, getting enough listening practice through real conversations is impractical. You have to find people who are willing to talk to you and you become dependent on them. They also adjust their language. You should of course speak as much as possible with native speakers, but to truly reap the benefits of good listening comprehension, you need to do more than that.

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How can you improve listening ability?

The first step should be to listen more. You can combine listening with many other daily activities, so even if you're studying in your home country and work full time, you can still fit in many hours of listening each week. Try listening while doing household chores, working out, going for walks, eating and before falling asleep at night. The key here is to make sure you always have audio with you and that it's easy to access. Buy a few extra pairs of earphones, download audio in case you don't have internet access, get a small mp3-player to use in case of emergencies.

What should you listen to?

Listen to different types, genres and topics. Also listen to many different speakers. As far as possible, choose audio you can mostly understand, at least after listening a few times. Finding good listening material can be difficult, especially at a beginner level. To start with, you can check out textbook audio (not just your own), various podcasts and audio courses. Remember, you don't have to use these as your main learning method; you're just after more listening. To help learners find such resources, I curate a large number of links at [Hacking Chinese Resources](#). Simply select your level, then listening ability and you will be shown all the available resources.

How should you listen?

The more actively you process the audio, the more you learn. For instance, if you do something active like interpreting or shadowing the speakers (repeat in your mind what they say), you will learn more. However, you will also become tired more quickly than if you just listen. Thus, try to be as active as you can, but not so active that you burn yourself out. Step it down when you feel tired, but don't stop listening! If you're really tired, at least play Chinese music in the background.

Conclusion

I think listening ability is extremely important. It's also something that learners are left to figure out pretty much on their own. I hope that I have convinced you that you should step up your listening effort. This might not boost your overall level immediately, but the long-term gains are handsome.



OLLE LINGE

Olle Linge is a language teacher, educator and writer from Sweden, best known for Hacking Chinese, a popular website that offers insights into learning Chinese successfully as an adult. He started learning as an adult himself, and his studies have led him to a master's degree programme in teaching Chinese as a second language. He also likes gymnastics, unicycling, Rubik's cubes and horses.

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MASTERING CHINESE SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Learn Chinese grammar by creating your own phrasebook

BY VERENA MENZEL

My method of mastering Chinese is one that may work when studying many other languages: learn full sentences, not single words or characters. This strategy is especially useful when learning Chinese as the whole grammatical structure of Mandarin is so strikingly different to Western languages like English, French or German.

It's very unlikely your aim will be to articulate yourself in single words but instead, in understandable chains of them – namely grammatical sentences. The only way to use these sentences and to be understood is to learn them.

How is Chinese Grammar so different?

Chinese has many grammatical structures and ways of using the new vocabulary you've learnt, which at the beginning appear very strange to Western learners. For example, the usage of the particle 了, the 把 sentence structure or the abundance of complements like 完, 掉 or 光, to name just a few.

All of these structures in some way have to do with the change of the status of the objects or situations you talk about. In Chinese, the focus lies on what happens to things and how they change, not on a distinction between certain chronological orders like past, present or future, like in Western languages.

Another difficulty in Chinese is that there are many fixed expressions like 我有事情 (wǒ yǒu shìqíng), 没事 (méishì), 还好 (hái hǎo) or 你吃了吗 (nǐ chīle ma) that are closely connected to certain contexts or specific situations and you won't understand them just by knowing their literal meaning. The peak of this phenomenon is definitely the usage of Chinese sayings and proverbs.

CREATE YOUR OWN PHRASEBOOK AND LEARN CHINESE

1 Step 1. Finding sentences and making sure they're relevant

Just copying the examples from your textbook's grammar section and learning them by heart will surely send you to sleep and after a few lessons you may even lose your motivation to learn Mandarin. You'll only remember phrases and expressions that you will need and use in your own conversations or that you believe you may at least use some day in the future.

So I believe the trick is to find sentences that in some way or other, relate to you!

HOW DO YOU FIND YOUR OWN “LEARNING SENTENCES”?

In your textbook

The most obvious resource for useful sentence patterns is your Mandarin textbook. The only problem is that many of these sentences might not really suit you. However, there may be some useful grammar or vocabulary that you can still work with. If you can't find any example sentences that relate directly to you, try to modify them. Of course, you want the grammar to stay correct, so small modifications and swapping of nouns is best, just so that the sentences fit your needs. Sometimes it helps to make your sentences funny as people often remember phrases they find amusing.

E.g. a sentence that may not relate to you like 这位一定是您太太吧! (zhè wèi yīdìng shì nín tài tài ba) “This must be your wife!” can be modified to 这位一定是你前男友吧! (Zhè wèi yīdìng shì nǐ qián nán yǒu ba) “This must be your ex-boyfriend!”, a sentence you could use while a friend shows you some pictures on her (or his) smart phone. Here is a great place to find some modern **vocabulary inspiration**.

Through Baidu

If you are not satisfied with the textbooks choice, search for model sentences through China's biggest search engine **Baidu.com**. For example, if you want to find more interesting or useful examples for a sentences structure like 虽然...但是 (suī rán... dàn shì...) meaning “although...nevertheless...”, just enter it as a keyword and push the search button. If you add the word 造句 (zào jù) “sentence-making/syntax” to your search you might even get better results!

”
The trick
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Through Chinese videos

It would be great if we could just learn sentences and phrases directly from conversations with Chinese people or a language partner and then imitate their natural sentence usage. In reality, it isn't always easy to write down or remember single sentences during a conversation; working with online videos is a good compromise. There are a lot of Chinese movies and short films, television shows, soap operas and documentaries on the web, some also include English subtitles. **Here you'll find a small selection.** Although you might not understand every single word, you can still look out for striking sentences. When you come upon something useful or interesting, just press the pause button and write it down to work with it later.

2 Step 2. Record your sentences in the best way suited to you

Once you've found the sentences you think it would be best to learn, that demonstrate an array of different sentence structures, you need somewhere to record them. The best place to do this really depends on the individual and how you plan to study these sentences. Each individual will suit a different learning method (**read the final chapter of this Ebook** for this topic.) Some people might find it best to create a spreadsheet and rote learn from this. Other may find creating flashcards much easier. Those of you who have more time, might even like to record yourself saying the sentences on your phone so you can play them back to yourself. The most important thing is that you have your sentences listed all together, somewhere that is easily accessible to you like your mobile, your tablet or in your handbag.

3 Step 3. Practice

Once you've created your own personal phrase book with example sentences, they can function as models to create similar sentences with the same patterns once your vocabulary increases. Learning grammar just got easier. Make sure you try and use these sentences in daily conversations, both in person, on the phone and on social networks such as WeChat (Wēixìn). Repetition is extremely important is remembering these sentences and using them in different contexts is great for your Chinese language understanding.

Finally, don't forget to keep adding to your phrasebook as time goes on. You'll be chatting like a local in no time!



VERENA MENZEL

After graduating from my German university in 2008, finding work connected to Chinese seemed like a faraway dream, as this was not my major. I'd just attended some language courses during my studies but the language had fascinated me, as well as its speakers, the culture and China itself. After one and half years of learning Chinese in Hangzhou, I started to work for the German department of a Chinese newspaper. Today, I work as an editor and translator in Beijing and with a Chinese friend, founded the German-speaking Chinese learning website [Niu Zhongwen 牛中文](#).

MAINTAINING MOTIVATIONS TO STUDY CHINESE

BY HUGH GRIGG

One of the biggest realisations I have made in my Chinese learning journey is that motivation is a finite resource. You don't have total control over your motivation and recognising that lets you use your time and energy in a more effective way.

You can improve your motivation in general and you can make the best use of the level of energy you have at a particular time (more on that below); but you can't just decide to have more motivation when you'd like to. This now seems obvious to me, but in the past I failed to recognise that and I'm sure many other people learning Chinese have too.

In this article, I'll explain what I've learnt about motivation and how you can make the best use of it to learn Chinese. Not everything here will apply to everyone, of course, but I hope you will find something that is useful in your situation.

Accept it when you have low motivation

When you know that motivation is a finite resource that you don't have total control over, you have a different reaction to those times when you're lacking the motivation to study. You can try forcing yourself to do something that you don't want to and in some situations this may work. For example, if you have an important exam the next morning, you're likely to overcome even quite a strong disinclination to study.

But at other times, trying to force yourself to study is quite a futile goal. Even if you manage it, you'll quickly burn out and be even less motivated later. So what can you do? I've found that a good approach is to have a repertoire of tasks that all require different levels of energy and motivation to do.

At one end of the spectrum, I have passive listening. For me this requires the least amount of motivation and I can do it even when I really don't feel like studying. At the other end of the spectrum I might put 听写 or interpreting. For me, those tasks require a lot of motivation. Your list might look different, but the point is to be aware of how best to use the level of energy you have available.

Another good thing is that doing the low-energy task may have the effect of inspiring you to do something more taxing, which leads me on to the next point.

Just do five minutes

Here's one of the best motivation tricks there is. When you're not motivated to learn Chinese and find yourself procrastinating, just do five minutes of study. You'll nearly always find that it's easy to carry on and turn the five minutes into twenty or an hour (and after all, even if you just do five minutes, it's better than nothing).

If you can't bring yourself to do five minutes, aim for one minute or just thirty seconds. Or, if you wish you could study for three hours, aim for half an hour. The amount of time doesn't really matter; the point is to just start.

This works because what's holding you back from getting some Chinese learning done often isn't an unwillingness to study or a lack of energy, but inertia. When you're not studying, the path of least resistance is to carry on not studying. But this can work the other way round: when you're studying, the path of least resistance is often to carry on studying. This is why aiming to just start -- instead of aiming to complete something -- can be all you need to get on with improving your Chinese when you lack motivation.

Remove obstacles to studying Chinese

My final suggestion is about preempting the times when you lack motivation. I used the term "path of least resistance" above -- what you end up doing with your time can be influenced by what's easiest to do at a particular time. Why not try to influence that in advance so that you're more likely to spend time learning Chinese than doing something less worthwhile?

”
Even if you
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nothing.

There are endless ways you can build this in to your life. Take books, audio and flashcards wherever you go. This is easy to do if you have a smartphone, but paper books and MP3 players are cheap and just as portable. Make everything to do with learning Chinese on your computer as easy to access as possible: create shortcuts everywhere, and make programs and web pages open automatically on start up. There will be many more ways you can apply this idea to your situation.

You can also apply this in the opposite direction by making it harder to do things that don't improve your Chinese. Decide how extreme you want to be, but you can sell, block or uninstall things that are unhelpful to your Chinese. Even better, replace them with alternatives that do improve your Chinese.

The point here is to accept that you won't always have the highest motivation, and make it as easy as possible for yourself to spend time studying Chinese.

That's about all I've got space for here. I hope you find it useful. I write things like this on my [blog](#) -- come and have a look and leave me a comment!



HUGH GRIGG

Hugh Grigg graduated from Churchill College, Cambridge with a degree in Chinese Studies. After living in Qingdao and Shanghai, he is now based in London and works as a programmer. He runs several websites about Chinese and language learning, including [East Asia Student](#) and [Chinese Boost](#).



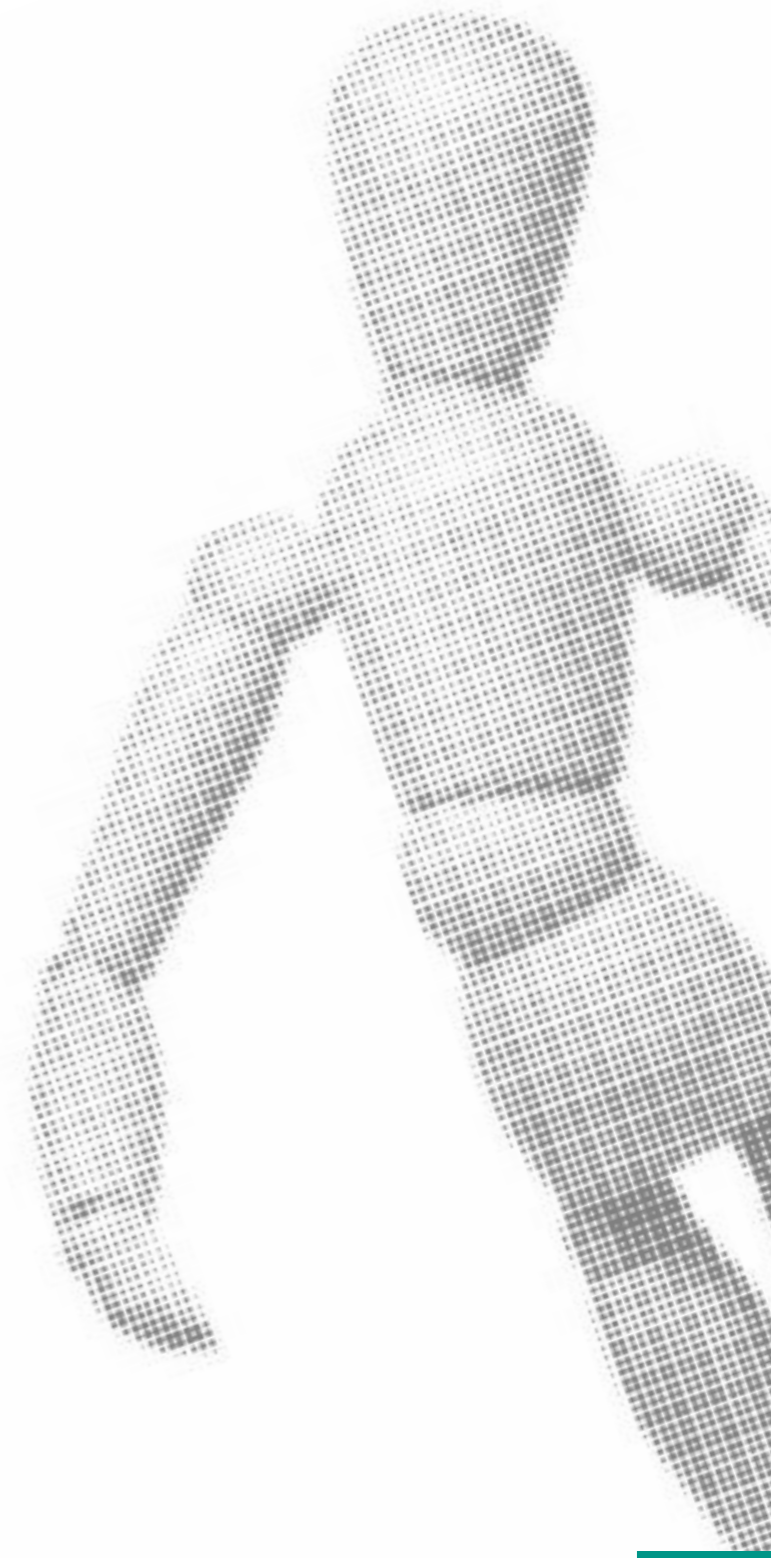
IMMERSION CHINESE FOR DUMMIES

BY ANDREAS LAIMBÖCK

I almost couldn't graduate from high school because of my low English marks. When I did, I had already been kicked out of Italian for poor performance. A few years later my Chinese University wouldn't give me a graduation certificate for my language course because my exam scores were too low. Some people are talented language learners; unfortunately I was never one of them.

Yet, today I can read a Chinese newspaper, understand Chinese movies and Mandarin is my daily working language. Some people just naturally hear tones and some remember characters by just looking through them. I never did and it took me a long time to figure out how to learn Mandarin. Once I did, I finally mastered the language. However, I could have learned it much faster if someone had just told me how I should have done it when I started. Everyone is different, however here are the ten tips I wish someone had given me when I started learning Mandarin in China.

*While studying at my Chinese university, I tried practicing my language skills with the school secretary every day and once she heard that I was not given a graduation certificate, she was so outraged that she simply went into the office, printed one out, stamped it and gave it to me. **There is always a way in China.***



1 Learn your tones properly at the beginning.

Characters, vocabulary, grammar etc. simply get better over time. Tones however do not. Once you got them wrong, they will simply stay wrong.

2 Live with Chinese people who want to be friends with you.

That one I kind of knew when I started, but it took me six months to finally find such a flatmate - and compared with most of my class mates I did pretty well. In China most people see sharing a flat as a rent sharing agreement and not much more. Most see no reason to have any kind of communication or even consider yourself friends with someone just because you live in the same flat. It took me a long time of unsuccessfully trying to invite my flatmates for dinner and moving apartment five times until I found two guys from Anhui who did not want to practice their English with me, but still were willing to develop a friendship.

3 Try to understand characters, not just rote memorize them.

Just like a .jpg of a character takes up more memory space on a computer than a word document describing that same character, I found it much easier to remember a character once I turned it into a story. Start learning radicals from the beginning so you know the building stones characters are made up of and then make yourself stories for each character that helps you to remember it. If it is not obvious make up your own story. For me, the more stupid the story, the better it worked. Use stories you can remember and don't worry too much if they are linguistically correct.

”
the more
stupid the
story, the
better it
worked

4 **Speak Mandarin from day one.**

Like most people learning Chinese, I really wanted to practice my Mandarin. However, when I started I quickly realized that many people did not understand what I said and when I listened to Chinese people talking I understood almost nothing. My conclusion was that I need to first learn more Mandarin before I can start speaking it. That was wrong! Speak and listen from day one. Once you learn 厕所(cèsuǒ – toilet), ask in every restaurant where the loo is – regardless if you have to go or not. When Chinese people speak, do not tune off, but listen. Try to recognize words you know in the conversation.

5 **Change your phone to Mandarin.**

It might sound scary, however you will be surprised how well you can navigate your phone by just looking at the symbols and you will never forget the characters for 电话(diànhuà – phone), 信息(xìnxī – sms) again. Once you mastered that, do the same with your computer.

6 **Chat with random people on the internet.**

Use the friend finding options of QQ and WeChat to chat with whoever is around in Chinese. Chatting is a great way to practice your characters and it gives you the time to look up characters you don't know and memorize them. It can also be quite fun.

7 **Messages in Mandarin only.**

If the person you are sending the message to does not speak Mandarin, too bad for them. We are in China and in China we speak Chinese – let them use translation software to figure it out. If they care about you they will. If they won't, then they probably weren't worth talking to in the first place.

8 Do not spend your day surfing non-Chinese language websites.

Switch to Chinese Social Media, websites and newspapers. The New York Times and BBC both have Chinese language websites (you need a VPN) which will give you all the information you need in Mandarin. It might take you half a day to read an article, but it is worth it.

9 If someone tries to practice their English with you: do not!

Do not speak English with Chinese people, whatever your or their language level. If a Chinese person really speaks that good English that you cannot convince him to switch to Mandarin, then either wear him/her down over time or find another friend.

10 Have fun, love China

Know that everyone else struggled just as much. I have not met a single fluent learner of Mandarin who did not at least once (in most cases many) times want to give up. It is part of the game and as long as you keep speaking, listening and learning you will learn Mandarin.



ANDREAS LAIMBÖCK

Andreas Laimböck originally from Austria, started to learn Mandarin in Beijing at Beijing Language and Culture University in 2002 and later graduated with an MSc in Management for China from SOAS in London. Today, he runs LTL Mandarin School, is a certified HSK examiner and is especially involved in the schools Chinese homestay and immersion courses.

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EXPANDING YOUR CHINESE FROM OUTSIDE OF CHINA

BY RICHARD SIMCOTT

It's no secret that living in the country where a language is spoken means that you are confronted with the language on a daily basis whether you want to be or not. However some people can live in a country for years and never learn more than 20 words in the local lingo. How is that possible? Simple - they become language blind. They walk around, looking at the written language like it's a picture to be noticed for a minute and hear the spoken language like birdsong that you don't retain.

This is why learning Chinese in China does not mean you will learn it better than someone learning it outside China. You simply need to access the language from where you are. This is exactly what I did when I started learning Chinese in Macedonia. We simply need to take some steps to integrate Chinese into our lives. Here are some things I did on my learning journey.



Finding the Chinese

Fortunately Chinese people are numerous and widespread in the world. By extension so are their culture and language too. More and more Chinese tourist groups can be found. More and more institutes offer the language and for that reason we see more Chinese people around the world. These are often a good source of practice. We can say what we know to them when we see them and watch their eyes light up. I've done this several times from going into Chinese shops and restaurants to making polite chit chat in my basic Chinese with tourists I come across when I see them. The reactions have always been extremely positive, motivating and uplifting. Failing that, you can interact with Chinese people online, as I did.

Where can you hear and see the language?

Online there are a number of places where we can find Chinese language with Internet portals, displaying Chinese TV, songs, movies and even slowed down version of the above with subtitles for the interested learner. These sources of the language helped to consolidate my studies and provided exposure to the way people speak in China today.

There are courses for sale in bookshops and online in their hundreds nowadays. There are also some great teacher-led courses all over the world, through various institutes, including the official Chinese Confucius Institutes dotted around the globe. I used the free courses in Chinese at Dalarna university in Sweden, which is free for EU citizens. The course provided a teacher in an online classroom with assignments and targets to meet. I found it useful to have a good structure in place for my studies. The classes were also conducted as much as possible in Chinese with our Chinese native speaker teacher to maximise exposure to the language.

To be a successful learner whether you are inside or outside China, you need:

1. Regular (preferably daily) contact with the language (music, books, people or courses)
2. Clear objectives and goals (i.e. this week I will learn to talk about the weather)
3. Practice with a native (there are plenty of native Chinese speakers to be found online) and you can lead the discussion to talk about the subject of your objective for the week - make the lesson just 30 minutes in the beginning to avoid tiredness and slipping into English. When the conversation runs dry, read a dialogue or text together. Then swop out the information in the text for words relevant to your situation, i.e. if the weather was sunny in the dialogue, say “but it was rainy in England today”.
4. Think about what you are learning whenever and wherever you can. This helps cement the vocabulary and phrases in your mind. After all, we all need a lot of repetition to get it right.
5. Keep it relaxed. It’s not a race and studying stressed or unhappy will hinder your progress. Be realistic with what you can do with the time you have available and your other commitments in life.

If you keep all of this in mind, you can succeed in your Chinese learning.



RICHARD SIMCOTT

Richard Simcott has studied over 40 languages and is the Ambassador for Multilingualism (Goethe Institute). He is the Head of Languages at Emoderation, an online social media management agency. He runs **Polyglot Conferences** worldwide to present language-related topics to a wide audience. For the individual learner, he also runs **Polyglot Workshops** to teach how to best learn languages.

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HOW NEW TECHNOLOGIES CAN HELP YOU STUDY CHINESE

BY SBORTO ZHOU

In the past few years, new technologies have experienced impressive developments, in particular in the field of language study. However, these advances are arriving in classrooms very slowly, as studying remains centered around the use of books, many of which were written twenty years ago and which have been questionably updated. Which are the main tools that the new digital age offers to obtain a greater efficiency in studying Mandarin?

Social Networks

One of the main challenges which students face is immersion, or better said, the lack of it. It doesn't make sense for you to learn hundreds of grammar rules and know how to write thousands of characters and words if you're not capable of articulating one single sentence without having to think for half an hour. If you don't use the language, it doesn't matter if you study it for years; you will never master it.

To solve this problem, you have two options: either you go to China to live for a while or you use the enormous possibilities offered by the internet. Social networks offer you the possibility of interacting with native speakers and therefore putting to use your knowledge by using the language in real life. However, as you likely know, **Facebook and Twitter are blocked in China**. The other option is to use the numerous communities of language students that exist online, which, although they are very useful, have certain limitations. Finally, you can use Chinese social networks.

Chinese social networks are constantly evolving and their users are highly active. While a few years ago, I would have recommended that you use QQ (similar to Skype), Renren (similar to Facebook) or Weibo (similar to Twitter), today the most popular and active network is WeChat. WeChat is a combination of Whatsapp, Skype and Facebook. The good thing about WeChat is that apart from the fact that the majority of its users are Chinese, it has three very useful tools to meet new people (People Nearby, Shake and Drift Bottle).

Apps for studying Chinese

Apps for mobile devices have turned into one of the most powerful tools to improve the efficiency of studying Chinese. However, finding something which is really useful among the onslaught of apps found in the market can be very difficult. Personally, the tools which I use the most are the following:

- **Offline dictionaries:** There exist dictionaries which you can download for free onto your mobile device which work offline. These dictionaries allow you to search in English, Pinyin or characters, and even draw the character on the touch screen. I personally recommend the Pleco (Android and iOS) and Hanping (Android) dictionaries.

- **Flashcards:** These tools will surely help you save a lot of time learning new vocabulary. The advantage of flashcards is that they are an active learning process (they force you to remember what you learn) and are much more efficient than passive processes (for example, studying vocabulary lists). Even though there exist hundreds of apps with flashcards, the majority of them are useless, as they offer a limited vocabulary which can't be personalized, and they don't allow you to "learn" from your mistakes. It's important that when you choose a flashcard app, you make sure that you can input your own word lists and that it has an SRS system (spaced repetition software); that's to say, that it learns from your mistakes. Even though there exist good free flashcard apps such as Anki, they are somewhat limited. So, I recommend that you invest a bit of money and buy a good app, which, for example, also allows you to practice writing.

- **OCR Software:** OCR (optical character recognizer) software is very useful for carrying out fast word searches for words you don't know. These applications allow you to use the camera of your cell phone to search for words in the dictionary. This option is normally a paid add-on for the majority of offline dictionaries. I sincerely believe that it's worth investing a few bucks for this fantastic tool.

Videos and podcasts

To increase your exposure to the language; videos and podcasts are a great help. There are currently many podcasts of excellent quality and for all levels, some of which offer a portion for free. Regarding videos, there are websites that offer videos of television programs, series and Chinese movies with subtitles in Chinese and sometimes in English for free. The most popular are [Sohu](#), [iQIYI](#), [QQ video](#), [YouKu](#), [LeTV](#) and [CCTV](#). The problem is that many videos can only be watched from continental China, and because of this, I suggest the CCTV website, as it has a lot of material available in all parts of the world.

Online resources

The internet is packed with **free online resources**, with applications as diverse as: dictionaries, a Wikipedia for Chinese grammar, Chinese text readers, databases of sentences and their translations, short texts for Mandarin students, the evolution of Chinese characters, pages which teach you stroke by stroke how to write characters, pinyin tables with recordings of each of the sounds, mnemonic techniques for remembering each one of the characters, exercises to pass HSK exams and forums where you can share your exercises with other students. All of these can easily be found with a simple google search. Choose what you think will be the most useful for you to maximize your studying!



SBORTO ZHOU

Sborto Zhou is a Spanish researcher who lived and worked in China nearly five years. Today he alternates his career with his passion for writing about the Middle Kingdom on the web **Sapore di Cina**. In January 2015, he also co-founded **EsChina Space**, a project aimed to bring the Chinese culture, gastronomy and language to the city of Barcelona.

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LEARN CHINESE BY HAVING FUN!

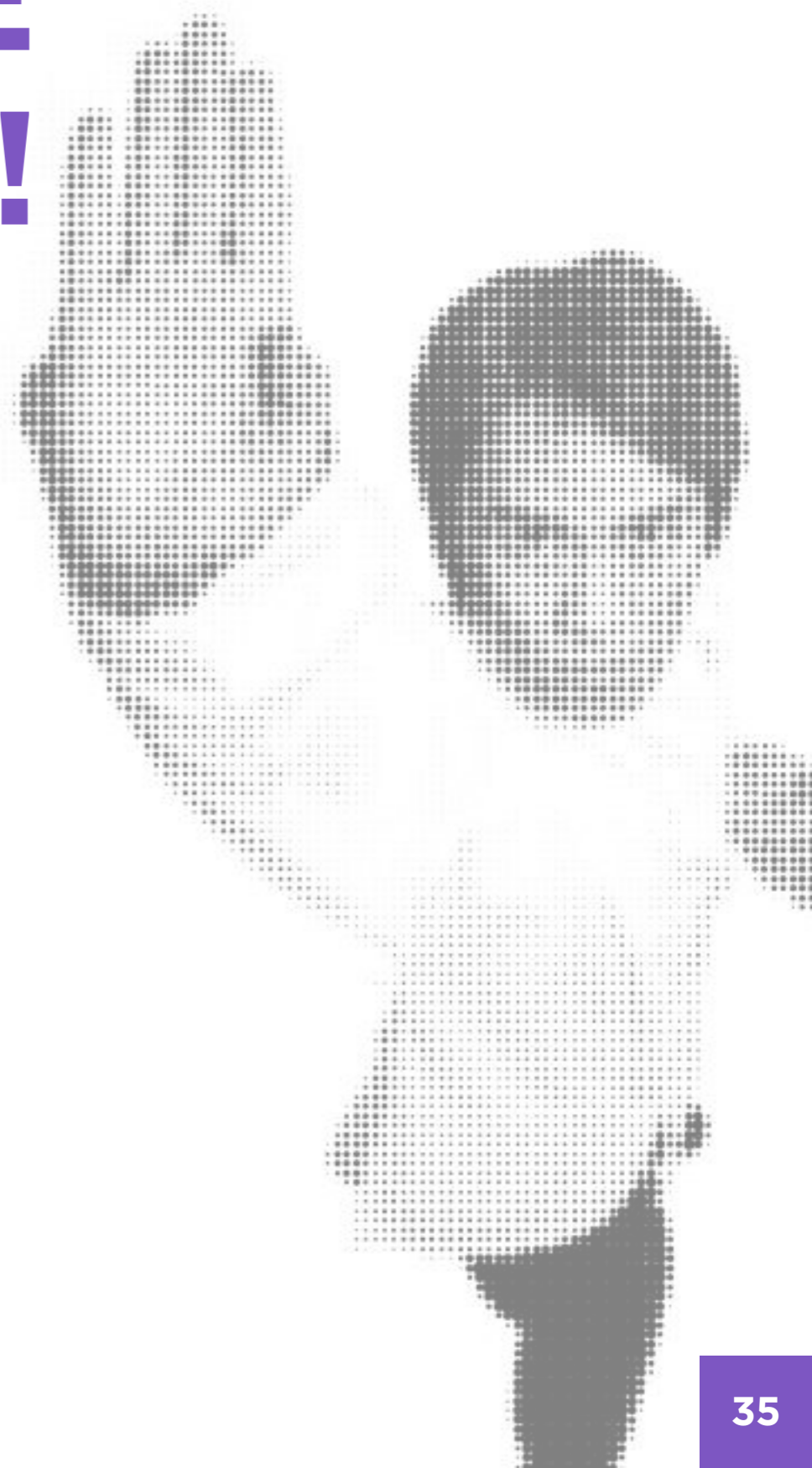
BY GREG BELL

Perhaps one of the greatest secrets to learning Chinese may not really be a huge secret after all: follow your passions and learn by having fun!

What does this mean? It is learning by playing video games, watching movies, reading comic books, following recipes while you cook... doing all the things you enjoy but in Chinese! So, I say go find a TV show, a video game, a book, a magazine—anything—that you could read, play and watch for hours on end.

A real world example, but first some context:

Among friends, we've often grown up seeing the same movies and TV shows or reading the same books. Often we're able to quote them, working them into our conversations without even thinking about it.



Chinese pop culture is no exception. One specific example I've noticed are quotes from Stephen Chow (周星馳) movies. Lines from his movies have entered pop culture, from referring to cockroaches as 小強 to making commentary on food in similar veins to the titular character in 《食神》. This is quite similar to how my friends and I will throw back and forth lines from Back to the Future or use nicknames from Star Wars (padawan anyone?).

I've only really noticed this because I enjoy Stephen Chow's movies and have watched them for hours on end, to the point that I was able to start picking up on some of these lines. It's been really fun catching these references during regular conversation, or seeing them quoted by forum-goers online.

But where should you start? One thing I did was make a list of what I was interested in. Here's a small sample from the list I created:

- Stephen Chow movies (surprise, surprise!)
- Science fiction novels and movies
- Lighthearted TV Dramas (something similar to the American sitcom)
- Manga
- Video Games (Chrono Trigger, Final Fantasy, etc.)
- Music genres (rock, heavy metal)
- Technology related: computers, programming, latest tech trends.
- History
- Chinese literature
- Disney movies

After I had compiled a pretty decent list, I then went to Google and Wikipedia to find the Chinese names for those items. I also looked on app stores to see if any of the video games I had downloaded for iOS had Chinese translations. I also went and found top 10 lists for music in the genres I liked, then looked for those artists on YouTube. Great bonus tip: often times they have videos with subtitles for Karaoke, really helps out when you're learning!

So really, the fastest way to learn and improve is to find what you like and enjoy in English, then find the Chinese equivalent.

Trust me, it's out there. You just need to look for it!

All of the above works as you branch into other languages too and it's how I've started looking into picking up Cantonese. In this case though, since I already have some background in Mandarin, I found movies in Cantonese but with Mandarin Chinese subtitles. This has helped me out a lot, for both languages and I really recommend this method if you decide to move on to another language from Mandarin Chinese.

Spending too much time on textbooks and not spending time with real materials or out in the real world using the language is one of the greatest mistakes that anyone can make when learning the language. There's a large variety of materials out there just waiting to be consumed by learners. The internet is your best friend! Let a textbook set the general foundation but branch out as soon as you can.

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**Find what
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in English,
then find
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equivalent.**

In Summary

The tools and materials that you surround yourself with have such a huge influence in how you learn and how fast you learn.

Surround yourself with great materials, find things you enjoy doing in Chinese as early as possible and get out there and just enjoy the language!



GREG BELL

One study abroad trip and I was sold: after graduating university in 2008 I've spent my time in Taiwan, learning the language, the culture and writing about it in my blog En Route to Fluency. My academic background is in Chinese and Japanese language and culture, as well as History. While in Taiwan I pursued a Master's degree in History. Mostly though, you can find me at the local night market eating all the delicious 小吃 I can find.

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YOUR BEST METHOD FOR LEARNING CHINESE CHARACTERS

BY MARCUS PENTZEK

A friend of mine calls them birds' foot scratches in the sand – I see pictographs in them representing images and ideas. But either way you look at them, from a foreigners point of view, at first sight Chinese characters will look like a puzzle to be solved!

Some Chinese characters are actually based on images that were intended to describe people and ideas in a visual way. Over the centuries their appearance has changed and the images have become harder to guess (if they can be seen at all in today's simplified form as it is used in mainland China).

But honestly, most of the Chinese characters in use nowadays can hardly be seen as pictographic. You simply need to learn them if you really want to dive deeper into understanding the Chinese language and culture.



DIFFERENT APPROACHES ON HOW TO TACKLE THE COMPLICATED WORLD OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

There are many different methods out there. I will try to explain some of them without judgement because a few don't fit my personal way of learning new things but might be the perfect way to go for someone else.

1 Etymology

This is the scientific way to tackle Chinese Characters. Get yourself a good book on Chinese Characters Etymology and learn about their evolution, the forms they used to have in the very early beginnings of the Chinese writing system and about their usage in these times.

You will learn a lot about Chinese culture this way and you will learn to understand why certain words are written the way they are written. This is probably going to be a part of your sinology studies at university or at college if you choose this area of studies as your subject.

2 Deconstruction the radical way

Another way to approach the learning of Chinese characters is by deconstructing them into smaller parts. You might have noticed already that there are many really complicated looking characters out there with many strokes. Well, if you look closer, you will notice that almost all of them are constructed by combining some easier Chinese characters into new pieces of Chinese writing art.

It is actually true that there are about 214 basic characters, called radicals, that are being used to build the thousands of other ones.

214 doesn't sound too bad, right? If you learn how to write them, you can much easier learn how to write more complicated characters, no matter how difficult it might look. Learning these radicals will also help you to work out the meaning of characters at a later date.

3 **Deconstruction – the Heisig way**

The author Heisig has chosen to build a mnemonical method that will help you learn the meaning (not the pronunciation) of thousands of Chinese characters.

He breaks down the characters to even smaller pieces than the 214 radicals. Each character will get a little story that explains what it looks like and how this makes up the meaning of the character itself.

When combining some characters into new more complex characters Heisig will use the initial story to build new stories that will explain the meaning of the newly built character.

His first book, Remembering Simplified Hanzi, helps the reader to memorize the meaning of 1000 Chinese characters. If this is the way for you, you will learn a method that enables you to create your own stories for the next 1000 Chinese characters easily.

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4 Visual Mnemonics

Learners that have problems visualizing images using the Heisig approach, might like visual mnemonics better. I have seen many Chinese language teachers drawing their own images for their classrooms, so this is also a proven method.

There are some publishers offering this kind of technique with finished illustrations already. One online system you can find on www.lenaia.com - it gives you visual mnemonics for all 214 radicals.

Another hyped system is called **Chineasy**. While being a very cool system you need to know one point about Chineasy: the creator Shao Lan herself is Taiwanese. In Taiwan people use traditional Chinese characters while in mainland China people use simplified hanzi. Her visual mnemonics and illustrations are really helpful and very nicely drawn for most cases but sometimes her illustrations cover the traditional character and not the simplified one. For deep studies of the Chinese writing system, this might even help you (she will always state – at least on her website – if the illustrated character is simplified or traditional) but if you only want to concentrate on the characters being used in mainland China it might be confusing.

5 Learning by heart

While the above systems are all aiming to help you to understand these different Chinese characters meanings, there are still people who do not need mnemonics, pictures or explanations. For those people it simply works to learn characters and meanings by heart, just by looking at your dictionary. If you are this kind of a learner (I admire people who can learn this way) you might not want to focus on single characters but on vocabulary right away (many words are built up by 2 or more characters).

DIFFERENT LEARNING CHANNELS

Besides these different methods on understanding the meaning of Chinese Characters, we need to have a (quick) look at the different learning channels. Most people won't restrict themselves to following just one of these channels, but you may find one is more suited to you than the others and better to focus your efforts on.

The visual way to learn

If you liked the visual mnemonics mentioned above or even if you liked the Heisig method (building stories explaining the shape of the Chinese Characters) you are probably more a visual kind of learner.

It doesn't matter if you actually see those images or if your mind makes them up while you read the stories that explain why the character you are learning looks the way it does, the same regions of your brain get stimulated.

Actually for most people, the visual learning method is very useful!

The auditive way to learn

If you can better memorize and understand matters that are orally explained to you by another person, you belong to the auditive category of learners.

The kinesthetic way to learn

There are people who better remember things by simply writing them down or by doing and using them. Writing, speaking, discussing and even roleplaying or dancing are methods proven to work for kinesthetic learners.

Mix it all up to be successful

You are probably like most other people and respond positively if you get exposed to a mixture of all these ways to learn using a mixture of systems.

Find yourself a teacher that explains the Chinese language to you, you can ask questions, get them answered (auditive) you can talk with him or her and maybe do some roleplaying to practice (kinesthetic).

You should get yourself some good reading materials and a dictionary – either in ink on paper or as software or on the internet and maybe play some memory games (visual and kinesthetic).

You might want to be exposed to some good stories and images by your teacher or the materials you have chosen to learn from (visual).

And do not forget to immerse yourself, get exposed to Chinese characters in real life, walk through China, take the subway, try to read/understand the signs you encounter, try to read some newspaper or comic books (kinesthetic, visual) and ask people to explain to you what you see (auditive, kinesthetic).

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Self studies – For those without a teacher

You still want to start learning Chinese Characters all by yourself? I always recommend starting to learn characters with a teacher but some of you may not have the time or money.

Well, in this case let me just share one quick tip with you www.hackingchinese.com. Olle Linge, the creator of this website taught himself to read Chinese and he shares his best practices with you on his website. He breaks down learning into sections of the most used and therefore useful characters. He says...

There are only like 1000 Chinese characters (out of 50,000 in total and out of 3,000-5,000 used in every day life) that make up like 90% those characters that are used everyday life.

Of the 214 radicals, only 100 will build 90% of those 1000 Characters.

Concentrating your studying hours on these 100 radicals first (instead of learning all those 214 right from the start) will boost your Chinese Characters studies and save you a lot of time.

After learning those 100 radicals, you will concentrate on the most commonly used combined characters that are made up of these 100 radicals – which adds up to about 900 characters you can learn more easily than the others.

See? This way you learn around 88% of the most commonly used Chinese Characters in no time.

The methods for learning them you can still use whatever fits your learning behaviour best – but the simple preselection of which characters to learn first will help you to much faster and easier access the written Chinese language.



MARCUS PENTZEK

Marcus started teaching ESL in Fayetteville North Carolina, studied educational sciences in Germany and ended up in the Online Marketing Business with focus on International SEO Strategies (Google, Yandex & Baidu). After marrying a Chinese woman and moving to Beijing he started learning Chinese with LTL. The “mysterious” appearance of Chinese Characters caught his attention and he started to invent an easier way to recognize and memorize them: [Womingbai](#). Initially based on etymology, then shifting into a more modern picture based approach that tries to build images, even for characters, that are not pictographically based. For him it works.

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WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED READING!

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We hope you found the Ebook useful. If you did, please share it with all your Mandarin learning friends.

Constructed and compiled by: