

Introduction to Chinese Characters 5: Tips for learning

There are various reasons why Chinese characters are so hard to learn. First of all, compared with any non-logographic literacy systems, the total number of characters needed by functional literacy (3000-4000) is overwhelming, which means it will take years for learners (including first language learners) to master them. Secondly, although the Phono-semantic compounds account for over 90 percent of all characters, they do not record phonetics strictly and accurately, and the same syllable can be represented by many different characters. This may cause confusion for learners from non-sinosphere background at the beginning. Thirdly, though the semantic radical may help the learners to a certain extent, the total number of radicals (phonetic parts too) is still very big and their learning would be time consuming, and the idea that characters express meaning (alone and in combinations) will be novel to learners for a quite long period. In sum, successful acquisition of characters takes tremendous effort and long time, for L2 learners and L1 learners as well. However, if you have made up your mind to learn Chinese characters, there are still some tips that can facilitate the process greatly.

Tip 1: know your options

Though characters are hard, you should know at the beginning that you have the option to learn pinyin only. If your goal is to learn basic spoken Mandarin, and your time is limited, you may simply following a course with all its materials demonstrated in pinyin (as we do in this course). The pinyin system is very easy to

learn and records the phonetic system loyally. Though a pinyin-only course cannot teach you literacy, it is worth trying if your goal is only to use Chinese in daily communication. Chinese will seem pretty “easy to learn” under this mode.

Tip 2: remember the radicals

Remembering the radicals of Chinese characters helps you to get some clues to the meaning and sound of characters. Learning most commonly used 30-40 radicals would be rewarding, since they are used in different characters frequently, and the general pattern of how Chinese characters are formed will emerge in the process of leaning and using them.

Tip 3: use flashcards

Because the total number of characters is big, and you will need to learn many characters in every book chapter, it is very helpful if you can make flashcards for every character (or every word) that is supposed to be learned. The recurrence of the target characters will greatly enhance your memory of them and lead to consolidation. Note that flashcards are not necessarily real paper cards, they could be made by using apps such as “Quizlet” or so.

Tip 4: keep practicing

No matter how good the pedagogical design is, the characters cannot be learned without assiduous work. Copying the new characters for multiple times at the beginning, and later review them by recognizing them on flashcards and writing them in dictations and quizzes are the tedious but proven useful ways to learn. Keep doing so for a year, you will find that most of commonly used characters are learned.

(Adapted from threads on www.wikipedia.org)