

Lesson 1 (Di4 Yi1 Ke4) As Simple as One Two Three

Let's imagine you are an eight-year-old kid who is going to school for the first time (as would be the norm in the Zhou Dynasty over 2000 years ago). The Master's first lesson would be how to write the words for one, two, and three. Although back in those days you would use a brush to write, today you can use whatever is handy and write with your teacher.

The Master would say "Draw one horizontal stroke," 一. "That's one." [Isn't it obvious?]

"Draw two horizontal strokes," 二. "That's two." [That's just what I was thinking.]

"Draw three horizontal strokes," 三. "That's three." [I got it ALL! It's so simple that I don't even need to learn more.]

According to a journal (Ying4Xie2 Lu4) written by Liu2 Yuan2Qing1 in the late 16th century (Ming Dynasty), that's exactly what happened when a worthy landlord hired a teacher to homeschool his son so that the son would become the first literate person in his family. As indicated in the story, this first lesson turned out to be the boy's last since the boy insisted that he "got it ALL" and made his father send the teacher away. The boy was then asked to write a dinner invitation to Mr. Wan, his father's friend. After waiting a whole morning for the invitation, the father found his son struggling in the study. "It's not my fault," the son said. "It's all because this guy's name is 10,000. [That's what the word Wan4 means when used as a number.] I can only manage to draw 500 strokes so far!"

Don't worry about how to write other number words for the moment. We have a more urgent question to answer: How are the three little words pronounced?

Let's list the three characters under their phonetic symbols. (For more see Appendix A.)

yī' èr sān
一 二 三



There are four tones (or sì4 sheng1) used in Mandarin Chinese.

The horizontal stroke is called heng2. We'll learn more numerical words and more strokes in the next lesson.

Read Out Loud

一 二 三, 三 二 一。

一 二 三 sì4 wu3 liu4 qi1。 [Can you make the sounds for numbers 4 through 7?]

Lesson 2 (Di4 二 Ke4) More Number Words: All the Way to Ten.

Let's continue with what we learned in Lesson One and learn how to write and pronounce numbers one through ten. Listed below are the strokes and phonetic symbols used.

We'll learn these out of order. Let's learn to write ten (or shí2) next: 十, which is 一heng1— shu4 (or vertical stroke) as pronounced in Mandarin Chinese.

[When writing a character with multiple strokes, it's important to write the strokes in the right order. Check out other rules in Appendix C. The rule here is: "First draw heng2 and then shu4."]

Next comes the character for eight, 八, with two new kinds of stroke, pie3 and na4 (diagnose strokes to the left and right). [The rule applicable here is: "First draw pie3 and then na4."]


Next, let's write the character for six, 六, which has a new kind of stroke, dian3, for the "dot" on the very top and at the bottom right. [The rule here is: "From top down."]

Next comes five, 五, where an elbow stroke, heng2-zhe2, is used in the middle.

An extension to heng2-zhe2 is used in the character for nine, 九, which has 一 pie3 and heng2-zhe2-wan1-gou1. In this new term, wan1 means curve, and gou1 means hook.

The character for seven, 七, includes another type, wan1-gou1, and, as you can see, is shu4-wan1-gou1.

Finally, let's introduce the character for four: 四, which includes 一shu4, heng2-zhe2(-gou1), (inside the half-open enclosure formed by the first two strokes) pie3, shu4-wan1, and 一 heng2 ("to close the box after it's filled with its contents," a rule applicable here).

Now let's take a look at the ten characters with phonetic symbols labeled above them:	<p>yī èr sān sì wǔ liù qī bā jiǔ shí</p> <p>一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十</p> 	<p>The numbers we learned here are not as intuitive as 一 二 三. Why?</p> <p>It's said that rope knot-tying was the way to keep records before scripts were invented. Ancient scripts (as shown in Small Seal Script) might be based on those knot patterns.</p>
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Read Out Loud

<p>一 二 三, 三 二 一。</p> <p>一 二 三 四 五 六 七。</p> <p>七 六 五 四 三 二 一。</p> <p>bù guǎn</p> <p>不 管 三 七 二 十 一。</p>	<p>不管 bu4guan3 : don't care. Just do it willy-nilly.</p>	<p>qí lí</p> <p>一 畦 二 三 里,</p> <p>yān cūn jiā</p> <p>烟 村 四 五 家。</p> <p>tíng tái zuò</p> <p>亭 台 六 七 座,</p> <p>zhī huā</p> <p>八 九 十 枝 花。</p>	<p>畦 qí2: furrow; 里 lí3: 500-meters.</p> <p>烟 村 yān1cūn1: village with cooking smoke; 家 jiā1: house(hold).</p> <p>亭 台 tíng2tai2: pavilions; 座: count word for buildings.</p> <p>枝 zhī1: stem (count word); 花 huā1: flower.</p>
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Lesson 3 (Di4 三 Ke4) Numbers within a Hundred and Date Expressions

Now that we know the words for numbers, we will see how to express any date (month and day) in the Gregorian calendar. This system was adopted by China in 1912, right after the fall of the Qing1 Dynasty. (We will learn about the traditional Chinese calendar later, which is often referred to as the Xia4 Li4 or the Xia4 System, named after the very first Dynasty of which archeological evidence is yet to be found.)

We need to know the characters for month and day since a calendar date is expressed using the YYYY Year MM Month DD Day pattern.

日 rì4 represents “day,” which is the time it takes for the Earth to make one full rotation. Since, in ancient times, people believed that the Sun revolved around the Earth, it is not surprising that the form for “day” in Jin1 Wen2, or Bronze Script, resembles the circular shape of the Sun.	
月 yuè4 represents “month,” which is roughly the time it takes for the moon to revolve around the Earth once. Its form in Bronze Script is shown to the right, which clearly resembles the moon’s crescent shape. Why is there a short stroke inside? To me, that stroke emphasizes the fullness and brightness of the heavenly bodies. With the evolution of writing systems, the strokes became straight. The overall form became a square (or a rectangle, to be more exact) when the Kai3 Script became the norm about 1400 years ago (during the Sui2-Tang2 Era).	

The first day of a month is 一日, the fifth 五日, and so on. What about the eleventh? It’s simply 十一日. And 二十三日? Yes, it’s the 23rd.

Congratulations! You’ve just learned how to express a day in a month and a number less than one hundred as a bonus. It’s so simple, right? What is more: There is no need to learn new words for the twelve months, or 十二月. (Plus, there is normally no plural form in Chinese; instead, a count word like ge4 is used.) The twelve months are simply 一月, 二月, ..., 十月, 十一月, and 十二月.

To put it together, New Year’s Day is 一月一日, Christmas 十二月二十五日, Halloween 十月三十一日, and April Fool’s Day 四月一日.

Read Out Loud

<p>一三五七八十腊， tiān zǒng bù chā 三十一天总不差。 dōng 四六九冬三十日， wéi yǒu 唯有二月二十八。</p>	<p>腊 lā4: the 12th and coldest month in the traditional Chinese calendar. 天 tiān1: day or sky, and 三十一天 = 31 days where using 天 is more conversational; 总 zong3: always; 不 bu4: not; 差 chā4: differ, change. 冬 dōng: winter; here it means the 他 and 11th month in the traditional Chinese calendar. 三十日 = 30 days. Using 日 makes it sound better. Notice that no count word is needed in either case. 唯 wéi2: only; 有 yǒu3: there is.</p>
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Lesson 4 (Di4 四 Ke4) – Days of the Week

Our schedules are usually built around the week, which is the norm in modern day China as well as the rest of the world. How can I express days of the week in Chinese then? This is the focus of this lesson, and the word for “week” has two characters that are written as 星期 and pronounced Xing1 Qi1.

You might have already found two big challenges here. On the one hand, these two characters look much more complicated than the ones we learned so far, and they appear to have parts in them. On the other hand, how do we make the sounds represented by the phonetic symbols X and Q?

First off, let’s analyze the forms. Of the many thousands of Chinese characters in use today, most of them are built with two or more parts known as bu4 shou3, which is commonly translated as “radicals.” Each of the two new characters in this lesson has two radicals. It’s very important to understand and memorize the meaning and/or sound of several dozen frequently used radicals in learning Chinese characters.

Let’s first focus on 星, which literally means “star” (or any kind of heavenly body that twinkles in the night sky). This character uses 日 (introduced in Lesson 3) on the top and the radical 生 (sheng1) at the bottom. This method of forming a new word is referred to as picto-phonetic, since one radical (日 in this case) indicates the meaning (which is a heavenly body, a star) and the other indicates its sound (ing rhymes with eng). [Actually, its ancient bronze script form, as shown above, may more clearly illustrate this point: a sky full of stars.]



期 is also picto-phonetic, with 月 on the right indicating the meaning (period) and 其(also qi1) indicating the sound. Put together as 星期, “period of stars,” or, more accurately, “heavenly bodies,” is a perfect translation of the term “week,” a period of seven days that are named after the Sun, the Moon, and the five planets Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, in that order.

Please check Appendix B for how to make the sounds X and Q.

Now, let’s see how to express the seven days in a week. Sunday through Saturday are expressed as 星期日, 星期一 through 星期六.

[In daily conversation, 星期日 is also said 星期 tian1.]


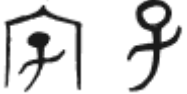
生 means “to produce” or “to give birth to.” Guess what 生日 means? You are right! It actually means “birthday.”

What about 日期? It’s the generic term for “date.”

Lesson 5 (Di4 五 Ke4)

We have learned a dozen characters up till now, but we don't know the Chinese character for "character" yet. Let's do it.

The Chinese writing system originated in prehistoric times (ruled by the 三Huang2 and 五Di4). It is believed that Fu2 Xi1 invented a trigram system using simple strokes of --- and - - to denote happenings in the world and that rope knot tying (similar to what we saw in Lesson 2) was used during the Sheng2 Nong2 era to record societal activities. The first symbols that could be classified as characters were invented by the scribe (or historian shi3) of Huang2 Di4 (the Yellow Emperor), who was inspired by paw/claw prints and feather/hair patterns that could be used to identify animals.

Characters that do not resemble real world objects are referred to as 文 (wen2). As shown in this Bronze Script rendition, in this system of writing, both real world objects and abstract concepts are represented by a number of crossing strokes. Thus, the character is indicative (or 指事) of the object or idea but is not pictorial.	
The character that is commonly used for the term "character" in the modern context is 字 (zi4), which has two parts: 宀 on top and 子 at the bottom. The 宀 radical depicts shelter or the top of a house, while the 子 (zi3) radical resembles a child with visible head and upper limbs and wrapped lower body.	

So, originally, 字 means characters that are "assembled" in-house or derived from combining radicals together in an associative way (meaning that both radicals indicate meaning) where the 子 (zi3) radical also indicates the sound. In Shuo1文Jie3字, the (first?) comprehensive dictionary which was compiled in the early second century, more than 10,000 字 (with variations) are listed under 540 radicals (like 文).

When used together, 文字 can mean a "writing system" or an "instance of writing."

Sample Words

Zhong1(中)文 = Chinese (language)

日文 = Japanese (日本 Ben3 = Japan)

Ying1(英)文 = English

Han4(汉)字 = Chinese character (with Han4 representing the first long lasting dynasty after the unification of China by the First Emperor of Qin2).

一ge4(个)字

三字经jing1

过guo4日子 = live one's life, where 过 = pass or live ; 子


Expressions

Zhe4个字 中文 zen3mo shuo1? = How to say this character in (Mandarin) Chinese?



这个字中文怎么说?

Di4 六 Ke4 -- 人大天, etc.


We now know the difference between 文 and 字, or, in modern terms, monolithic and composite 字. We also know how radicals can be used to form more complex 字. In this lesson, we will start to learn 字 by groups and how they are related to each other.

人 ren2 means “a person” or “humankind” (as in 人 lei4). It has only two strokes, 一 pie3 and 一 na4, and resembles the upper body resting on two legs as in a walking posture. Its ancient form (as in the Seal Script) was used to depict a humble bowing posture.	
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When talking about one person, you may use 一个人, where 个 (a count word) literally has 一 (as a shu4) and 人 in it.

大 da4 means “big” or “great.” It also resembles a human form but with head up and four limbs stretched out in a king-like boastful posture which indicates greatness.	
Indeed, the word for “king” (sounds wang2) is rendered as shown to the right: a great man on land.	

天 tian1 means “heaven” or “sky,” with a heng2 stroke above 大, indicating the top or summit that lies beyond the reach of even the greatest of humankind.

地 di4 means “earth” or “land” and is feminine as opposed to 天, which is muscular. The 土 tu3 radical to the left means “dirt” or “earth,” whereas the 也 ye3 radical on the right resembles the female genital. In the modern context, 也 usually means “also” or “as well.” Since many 字 share the same sound, such as the one for “ordinals” and the one for “younger brother,” 地 is referred to as 土也 di4 (地) in daily conversation when clarification is needed.	
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Put together, 天地人 are referred to as 三cai2, or “The Three Assets.” In dealing with business or international affairs, one should take into account opportunities available at the time (as ordained by Heaven), geographical/material situations of concern (as in Earthly surroundings), and the talents of and relationships among people (人) to figure out the best strategies.

The Book of Dao4 and De2 states that there are Four Greats (四大) in the universe, “dao4大天大地大人yi4 (also) 大.” The relationships among the four are stated as “人fa3地地fa3天天fa3dao4,” where fa3 means “to follow the rules or the model.” [Interestingly, 也字 (the character 也) can be used to replace yi4 since, in the modern context, 也 means “also” or “as well.”]

土地: land or territory, as in “土地huan4 (to exchange) he2ping2,” land for peace

大地: Mother Earth

天人he2(合) 一: Unity of heaven and man

星期天