

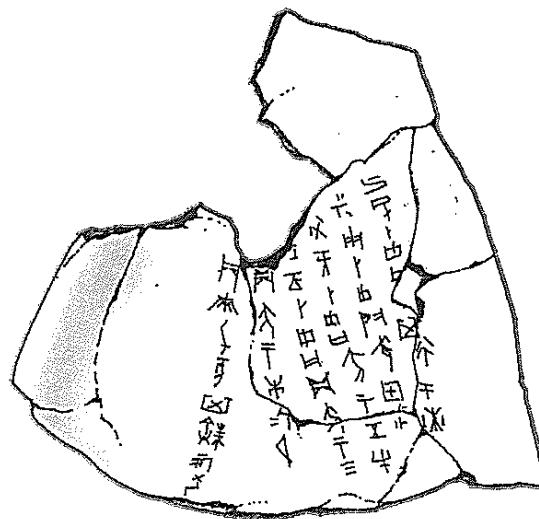
2 The language

There are variations in the language of China because of its great distances and the diversity of its people. Some minority peoples use their own language which differs from the traditional Chinese language. Those who use the traditional language (around 80% of the Chinese population) have developed regional differences in pronunciation, words and grammar. These variations are called *dialects*. People who speak one dialect sometimes find it difficult to understand the speech of someone who speaks another. Just as an Australian might have difficulty understanding a strong Scottish accent, so too people who only speak Cantonese [Guǎngdōnghuà 广东话] may have trouble talking with people who only speak the Min dialect [Fújiàn huà 福建话]. However, people who speak different dialects can always communicate with each other in the written language, which was unified by the First Emperor [Qín shǐhuáng 秦始皇] (221–210 BC).

























Although the written Chinese language was the same, there were still problems in communication caused by the many dialects. To solve these problems, in 1958, the Chinese Government proclaimed that a combination of the pronunciation used by the people of Beijing and other northern cities become the standard speech of China. This is called Pǔtōnghuà [普通话]—literally *common speech*—and is referred to as ‘Mandarin’ by Westerners. Pǔtōnghuà (also called Hànyǔ [汉语]—*the language of the Han people*) is now the language taught at school, used on TV and radio, and in all official documents.

3 The writing

Chinese is the oldest living language. It is believed that the history of Chinese writing spans over 5,000 or 6,000 years. The earliest writings discovered, dated between 1480 BC and 1122 BC, are inscribed on oracle bones and turtle shells, and are called jiǎgǔwén [甲骨文]. These writings are the records of kings in the Shang dynasty who asked the gods about their fortune for hunting, going to war or any important event.



Some Chinese writing was developed from simple pictures taken from nature, such as animals, birds, mountains and rivers. The style of writing was changed several times and gradually transformed into the characters used today.

	sun	moon	mountain	tree	water	fire	person	mouth
picture								
early writing								
seal form								
modern form	日	月	山	木	水	火	人	口
Pinyin	rì	yuè	shān	mù	shuǐ	huǒ	rén	kǒu

Each Chinese character is pronounced as a single syllable and has its own meanings. Many ideas, thoughts and feelings are expressed by combining two or more simple characters to form a new character with a new meaning.

日 sun + 月 moon = 明 bright (míng)
 木 tree + 木 tree = 林 forest (lín)
 火 fire + 火 fire = 炎 hot (yán)

Two or more characters can also be used together to form a further meaning, but they remain separate characters.

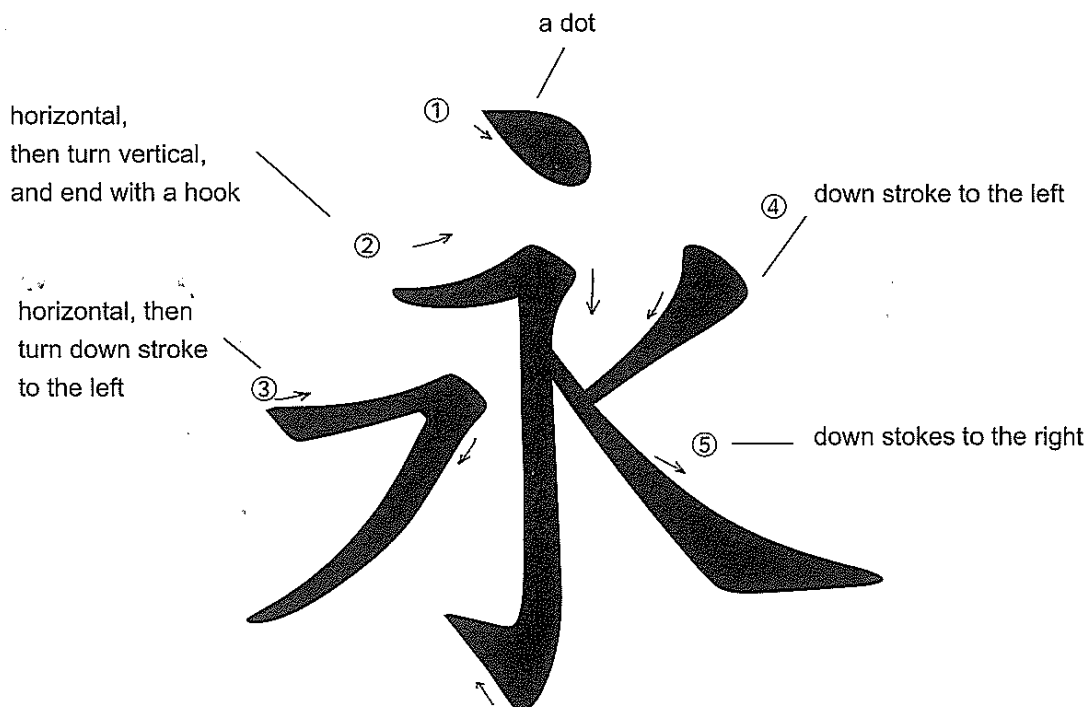
火 fire followed by 山 mountain forms 火山 volcano (huǒshān)
 山 mountain followed by 水 water forms 山水 scenery (shānshuǐ)
 口 mouth followed by 水 water forms 口水 saliva (kǒushuǐ)
 人 people followed by 口 mouth forms 人口 population (rénkǒu)

As Chinese writing is pictographic, some characters are complicated. In 1956, the Chinese Government began simplifying the structure of some characters to make them easier to write.

dragon	traditional	龍	>	simplified	龙	(lóng)
to study	traditional	學	>	simplified	学	(xué)
country	traditional	國	>	simplified	国	(guó)
happy	traditional	歡	>	simplified	欢	(huān)

These simplified characters have been widely and officially used in China ever since. Students learn the simplified form at school and all publications in China use the simplified form; it is also the style used in this book. However, most people in overseas Chinese communities and the people of Taiwan still use the traditional style.

The principles of writing a Chinese character are basically from left to right, top to bottom, a tick and a hook. The character yǒng [永] (forever) is a good example to show the writing structure as it has many of the typical strokes used in most Chinese characters. Writing the strokes in the correct way, and in the correct order, is the first step to writing Chinese successfully.



Chinese books are traditionally written from top to bottom, right to left, and bound with the spine on the right-hand side. In China today, publications, except calligraphy which still follows this tradition, are usually printed in the style used in the West. However, in Taiwan most newspapers, literary works and many other publications are still presented in the traditional style.

4 Pronunciation

As Chinese had no symbols to represent the sound of the words, in 1918 the Government of the Republic of China proclaimed thirty-nine symbols to represent the sounds. These phonetic symbols, i.e. ㄅ ㄆ ㄇ ㄏ... were named zhùyīn fúhào [注音符號] in 1930 and thirty-seven of them are still in use in Taiwan and many Chinese communities overseas. As these symbols are not easy to learn, Westerners have adopted various ways of using Roman letters, such as the Wade Giles system and the Yale system, to represent each Chinese sound. In 1958, the Government of the People's Republic of China introduced another Romanisation system, called *Pinyin* [pīnyīn 拼音]. Pinyin is now used in China and is an international system to express the sounds of the Chinese language as well as to spell Chinese names and places. The Pinyin system contains:

Initials		b	p	m	f		d	t	n	l
		g	k	h			j	q	x	
		zh	ch	sh	r		z	c	s	
		(y)	(w)							
Vowels	single	a	o	e	i	u	ü			
	double	ai	ei	ui	ao	ou	iu	ie	üe	er
	nasal	an	en	in	un	ün				
		ang	eng	ing	ong					
Special sounds		zhi	chi	shi	ri	zi	ci	si		
		yi	wu	yu						
		ye	yue	yin						
		yun	yuan	ying						