Writing Chinese with 50 easy characters

三 个 大 人 入 山

太 大 人 工 土 木

2013

Niels Mejlhede Jensen, Denmark

田 Tián (English: Qian Tian), Nanjing
Writing Chinese with 50 easy characters

人 叫 白
With this sentence of 3 short words we begin our presentation of 50 easy characters. These are at the end supplemented with a few more difficult but important characters. See more on page 22.

人 叫 白
rén jiào Bái
(a) person is called White, (or: the person is called White = Bái)

(Or: a person calls on Bái, or somebody is calling Bái).

We will now study the 3 Chinese characters. Below them the sentence is written in the official phonetic system pīnyīn Romanization in Mandarin national language. Pīnyīn: see e.g. a phrasebook.

人
rén
man (including woman), a person, the person, persons, the persons

This character is pictographic a man with two legs. It depends on the type of script how the character is formed in detail. Often there is a difference between the two legs, with the first leg (to the left) made together with the body in one stroke and the other leg placed afterwards. We propose that beginners draw (write) most simple in their own way just to learn to recognize the characters.

叫
jiào
is called / is calling

It can be remembered as the numeral 4 with a 4-sidet square in front, a square like a mouth that calls the name, see the character for mouth later on page 7. (In our elementary writing exercise here: just draw a simple square without "feet" as a normal square □).

白
bái
white

Bái (= white colour) is a common family name, (like the English name Brown).
The character looks like a hatch, a square door, in a white brick wall with a small crack above. The character has similarity with the character for sun (page 6), as white is light as the sun.

白 人
bái rén
white person, the white people

Next there is a page of simple examples of Chinese numbers. You may wait a while learning them and jump to the following page 4 with the characters that have similarities to the character 人 rén.
The introductory sentence can be expanded to:

一 个 人 叫 白
yī  gè  rén  jiào  Bái
one (number of) person is called White

三 十 二 个 白 人 叫 白
sān  shí  èr  gè  bái  rén  jiào  Bái
32  (numbers of) white persons are called White (or: 32 white people call on Bái)

一 二 三 四 十
yī  èr  sān  sì  shí
1  2  3  4  10

Some very easy numbers are the horizontal strokes for 1, 2, and 3, and a cross for 10. The number 4 is a 4-sided square decorated with curtains like a window. The number system is simple:

十一  十二  十三  十四
shí yī  shí èr  shí sān  shí sì
11   12   13   14

二十  二十一  二十二  三十
èr  shí  èr  shí yī  èr  shí èr  sān  shí
20    21    22    30

百  千
bǎi  qiān
100   1000

100 百 bǎi sounds somewhat like white 白  bái, so as character there is chosen one that looks similar, only with a wide horizontal hat added on top of the inclined dot. There is this type of similarity in sound and character (but only occasionally).

1000 千 qiān is like 10 十 shí with a flat hat on top. (See the character 干 gàn = to do on page 9). In a number of cases the numbers are written in the western way (arabic numerals).

个
gè
piece

When using numbers in a sentence like here it is most correct to include 个 rè, a measure word. It can be remembered as an arrow pointing upwards to higher numbers. There are different measure words for different nouns. 个 è is the most used.
The character 人 rén is in some form part of many characters.

The man 人 opens his arms to show: big 大

very / too much

Here the man also kicks his front leg.

Mrs. Bái  or: Mrs. White / or: 白太太 bái tàitai = a white wife.

big sky / big day

big has now grown all the way up and hits a flat sky 天 tiān.

white day, white sky / or: day, daytime

big man 夫 fū = man, husband.

big 大 is added a face cross line to become 夫 fū = man, husband.

大 夫 dà fū = doctor.

(Maybe: ☺): p 4 Reading exercise: 十 个 大 人 叫 大 夫 (see translation 2 for 叫 p 2).
白夫人
Bái fūren
White Mrs., i.e. Mrs. Bái, or Mrs. White, or Lady Bái
太太 tàitai and 夫人 fūren both mean: Mrs.

头
tóu
head

人 rén = man opens his arms and becomes: 大 dà = big.
Now also a nose and a mouth is put up in front to make 头 tóu = head.

买
mǎi
buy

You use your 头 tóu = head to be a good buyer by taking on a flat hat.

卖
mài
sell

We change the flat hat by adding a cross on top to sell. (Often shown as a more narrow cross).
Notice: 买 mǎi = buy and 卖 mài = sell sound almost alike, only with a difference in tones.

哭
kū
cry, weep

人 rén = man opens his arms and becomes: 大 dà = big. With big square eyes he sheds a tear with his left eye. (All the characters are shown big size on page 24, (the back of this notebook)).

笑
xiào
smile, laugh

人 rén = man, then 大 dà = big. With a wide mouth and 2 smiling eyes we get a laughing person.

From the simple character 人 rén = man we hereby stepwise with explanation hints have got more complex characters. But only a few of the many 1000 characters can be explained that easy.
Bái tàitai mǎi dà shān
Bái Mrs. buys big mountain, i.e. Mrs Bái buys a big mountain

山
shān
mountain, (a mountain, the mountain, mountains, the mountains)

山 shān = mountain is pictographic 3 steep mountain pinnacles. In China there are many mountains, also holy mountains. 2/3 of the country is mountainous. By the north west boundary there are the up to 7 km tall mountains:

天 山
Tiān Shān
sky mountain / Tiān Shān (literally also “celestial mountains”)

出
chū
leave / go out / exit

Leave the house and go out into the mountains with 2x3 pinnacles.

日
rì
sun

The oldest character for sun was a circle with a centre dot ⊙. But it is difficult to carve a circle and a dot on bone and wood, so it was changed to straight lines.

月
yuè
moon / month

The moon character is pictographic the moon crescent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>一月</th>
<th>二月</th>
<th>三月</th>
<th>四月</th>
<th>十月</th>
<th>十一月</th>
<th>十二月</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yī yuè</td>
<td>èr yuè</td>
<td>sān yuè</td>
<td>sì yuè</td>
<td>shí yuè</td>
<td>shí yī yuè</td>
<td>shí’èr yuè</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 month</td>
<td>2 month</td>
<td>3 month</td>
<td>4 month</td>
<td>10 month</td>
<td>11 month</td>
<td>12 month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>February</td>
<td>March</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>October</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>December</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers were shown above on page 3. Those are simple names for months.

p 6 Reading exercise: 四月 明日 笑 (see the next line:)
明
míng
bright

sun + moon = bright

A bright day will be tomorrow:

明天
mingtiān
tomorrow

明白
míng bái
clear / understood

明明
míng míng
obviously

口
kǒu
mouth

We look straight into the open mouth. A simple 4-sided square: there are more than 400 ways to draw these 4 lines, with all squares looking alike. In Chinese calligraphy there is only one correct (beautiful) way. But in our notebook here we only need to recognize and read our characters, and then postpone the calligraphy till a later long and interesting period of life. So until further: write the characters in your own way. Here just a simple square without “feet” will do ☐.

回
huí
return / answer a call

You return and show your mouth with thick lips. Or answer a phone call or a letter.

问
wèn
ask

With open outer contours of your lips you form a question, or you stand in the doorway asking:

门
mén
doors

We see the door hinged to the right as the left upper corner is open and the right bottom has a hook.

门口
ménkǒu
doorway

大门
dàmén
big door, main door, gate
小
xiǎo
small, little

A small boy, thin like a stick, waving his foot, and only showing his 2 hanging hands.

木
mù
tree / wood

A pictographic tree with horizontal and hanging branches.

林
lín
forest / surname

2 trees are a forest.

本
běn
root

A cross line at the lower part of the tree makes it a root

日本
Rìběn
Japan

The country where the sun rises, where it has its root.

土
tǔ
soil, earth / local

A cross stands upright from the earth.

士人
tún
native

士木
tǔmù
construction

p 8 Reading exercise: 十月 林 太太 卖 小木
A map of a field divided into 4, for 4 different crops (rotation of crops).

We see a type of map like of the country China, divided with a vertical line into a west part and east part and with 3 horizontal lines into a north and south central part (the two big river valleys) and further the far north and far south, and a dot down to the right indicating some islands.

If we remove the frame we get:

And if we remove the small dot we get:

And if we remove the centre cross line we get:

A pictographic steel beam like for the industry and construction work.

A drier rack to Do the clothes dry. The same character with different tones and meanings.
A simple building with open shed for e.g. some water mill industry.

A line hits through the centre of a box. The same character with different tones and meanings.
The number 7 skating on the winter ice.

winter

winter, winter weather

The number 4 for the 4 points of the compass, 4 decorated with an upper cross line and a low foot hook, and with two frost drops because the word has the same pronunciation as winter.

mountain east, the eastern peninsula-like mountainous province a little south of Beijing.

vehicle, car

The number 4 with two cross bars: reminding of 4 wheels + truck.

Notice the difference in the printed number 4 in: 叫 jiào = is called, 东 dōng = east, 车 chē = car.

A pole with a branch, standing upright from the ground.

below, lower, go down

A vertical pole with a hanging branch placed down below the ground.

winter

winter

winter weather

east

east

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A pole with a branch, standing upright from the ground.

below, lower, go down

A vertical pole with a hanging branch placed down below the ground.
上车
shàngchē
get into the car, get up into the vehicle

下车
xiàchē
get out of the car, get down from the vehicle

坐
zuò
sit

In the ground there is mounted a double bench with common back, with a person 人 rén sitting on each side.

坐车
zuòchē
drive the car / take a bus

入
rù
enter

人 rén = man has a front leg and a more loose hind leg. Here 人 rén turns around and places his loose leg in front and enters.

入口
rùkǒu
entrance

出口
chūkǒu
exit / export

出入
chūrù
come in and go out

入门
rùmén
cross the threshold / elementary course.
There are several ways to name the Chinese language. Here we have the character:

文
wén
language, script, literature

The character looks like a head with a flat scholar hat with a top tassel.

文明
wénmíng
civilized, civilization

手
shǒu
hand

A vertical stick with a foot hook and 3 cross lines on the upper part as 3 fingers in the hand holding the stick.

毛
máo
hair, feather, wool / well-known surname (notice the pronunciation)

A somewhat special bended feather. (Typography: there are 3 continues cross lines a little inclined, see the bigger character on page 24).

毛巾
máojīn
towel

The person Máo stands there with his towel at a towel dryer hanger.

休
xiū
rest, pause

A person 休 stands by a tree and rests. Like the character 人 rén, also 亻 as part of a character (a radical) indicates some connection to persons, see e.g. the personal pronouns page 20-21.

p 13 Reading exercise: 毛夫人 买 白毛巾
男
nán
men, male

Maybe remembered as the letter h like for the German word herren = men. The letter h with a screen face. The character is seen on signs for men’s toilet.

力
lì
strength

Strength like the male letter h above.

In the ancient time, male was the main farming labour outside the home, so we also can remember this character as: the male 男 worker contributes his strength 力 in the field 田 tián (p 9).

人 力 rénlì = manpower

女
nǚ
woman

A woman with a wide lower body walking with stretched arms.
The character is seen on signs for women’s toilet.

男 女
nánnǚ
men + women

女士
nǔshì
Lady, Ms, (polite speaking)

士
shì
scholar

From the ground there stands a holy cross as for scholars of the medieval period.
(Notice the small difference between the characters 士 shì = scholar and 土 tǔ = earth from page 8).

女 儿
nǔ’ér
daughter

儿女
ernǚ
sons and daughters, children

儿 ér = child, see page 17.
右
yòu
right

An old cross leans to the right, supporting on a box.

左
zuǒ
left

The old cross still leans to the right and has smashed the box and what is left is an I-beam.

右 手  左右 手
yòu shǒu  zuǒ yòu shǒu
right hand  left right hand, (both hands) English: right hand man, valuable assistant

在
zài
exist / in
Now the old leaning cross Exists only because of a vertical support at the bottom, and under the wing of the cross there is a small cross standing on the ground.

白 在 日 本 买 木
Bái zài Rìběn mǎi mù
Bái in Japan buys tree, i.e. Bái is in Japan buying a tree.

有
yǒu
have, has

Now the old leaning cross only Has the setting moon to lean against.

白 有 山
Bái yǒu shān
Bái has a mountain

有 yǒu is also used in the start of a sentence:

有 人 叫 白
yǒu rén jiào Bái
There is a person calling on Bái, somebody is calling Bái.

p 15 Reading exercise: 有 三千一百四十二个 太大 工 人 出 入 白 山
子
zǐ
son, child

A thin child with stiff flat hair dress stands with out-stretched arms and waves her foot.

子女
zǐnǚ
sons + daughters (children)

本子
běnzǐ
notebook

(子 zǐ = child is often used as a suffix to other nouns for modification).

字
zì
character

Child with stretched arms at school with a flat scholar hat with a top tassel, learning characters.

学
xué
study

Now the eager student has 3 top tassels on his flat scholar hat.

小学
xiǎo xué
elementary school

中学
zhōng xué
middle school

大学
dà xué
university, college

上学
shàng xué
attend school

放学
xià xué
get out of school

学问
xué wèn
knowledge

p 16: Reading exercise: 白天 小子 坐 学 中文字
(You may wait with the particles and suffixes on this page, wait with the 了 le grammar).

了
le
verb-suffix, verb ending particle, designates a completed action (past, presence, future)

Here the character 学 is without arms and scholar hat.

白 买 山
Bái mǎi shān
Bái is buying a mountain, or was buying, or will be buying. Maybe the buying will succeed.

白 买了 山
Bái mǎi le  shān
Bái has bought the mountain, buys (finish the trade), will (finish) buy it (e.g. next month).
A finished action, because of the 了 le suffix.
The Chinese grammar is to some extent different from the European.

Another important particle used to influence different words is:

的
de
Particle used to create genitive (e.g. the possessive pronouns), or used as suffix for e.g. verbs.
It is said to be the most used Chinese character.

白 的 山
Bái de shān
Bái’s mountain

Another particle is:

儿
er
child, son / particle

Important 2 legs to run around.

女儿 儿子
nǚ‘ér  érzi
daughter  son

As a particle 儿 ér is used as a suffix, a word ending, especially in North China.
We have previously obtained to write the first words from China’s rich geography, (see page 10, 10, 10, 11 and 6):

中国 Zhōngguó  China
广东 Guāngdōng  province in South China
广西 Guǎngxī  province in South China (autonomous region)
山东 Shāndōng  province in East China
天山 Tiān Shān  Tian Shān Mountains, in West China

China is also great rivers and huge cities (and we select those with simple characters):

长 江
Chángjiāng
Long River
Yangtze River

长 = long is a K with a horizontal line through the middle, like Yangtze is the KKey to the middle country.
江 = river is an I-steel beam across the river, stained with water on the front side.

江 山
jiāngshān
rivers and mountains, land

广 州
Guǎngzhōu
Broad District
Canton

广州 city is in the South China province 广东 (see page10), and this is the first place opened to European overseas trade (Portugal from 1516 Ming Dynasty (明 míng p.7)).
州 = district (e.g. administrative), the 3 dots and vertical lines could be 3 lakes and 3 rivers.

西 安
Xi‘ān
West Peaceful

Xi‘ān is the old western imperial capital in North China with the many 1000 terracotta warriors.
安 = peaceful / install is the woman character 女 nǚ showing peace by having a flat hat with top tassel.

p 18 Reading exercise: 工人 在 广州 有 广手
After the easy characters above with a type of memorizing hints we turn to some less simple but important characters.

是
shi
to be, (am, are, is, were, was, have been, will be)

(Above the ground there is a square like 日 rì = sun (page 6). Below the ground there are roots).

白 是 中 国 人
Bái shì zhōngguórén
Bái is Chinese

不
bù
not

(May look like a flat hand to turn down on the 3 lines below, downward left, vertical, right).

白 不 是 日 本 人
Bái bú shì Rìběnrén    (notice tone shift bù to bú)
Bái not is Japanese

白 是 不 是 中 国 人
Bái shì bú shì Zhōngguórén?
Bái is not is Chinese? i.e. is Bái Chinese?

也
yě
also, too

A square hook is as standing on a table, with also an opposite hook above, crossed by a vertical line.

王 也 是 中 国 人
Wáng yě shì Zhōngguórén
Wáng too is Chinese

也 is part of the character for he and she, see next page.

好
hǎo
hào
good
like

The character consists of 女 nǚ = woman + 子 zǐ = son (see page 14 and 16). See next page: hello.

好 学 hàoxué = likes to study, fond of learning (notice tone).
The character starts on the left side with a handwritten capital I (me) standing by a leaning dead tree.

The character consists of two T’s: a wry T + T with hands and foot, T as in French Tu and Russian Ty for you. The wry T in front is a radical for person, man, as explained on page 13 for 休 xiū = rest.

The character consists of the person radical 亻 + 也 yě = also, see page 13 and 19.

The character consists of 女 nǚ = woman + 也 yě = also, see page 14 and 19.

It looks like a scythe for harvesting hay and corn, hidden below a wide hat with a top-tassel.
men

character for making plural

The character consist of the person radical 亻 + 门 mén = door, see page 13 and 7.

我们

wǒmen

we, us

which is 我 wō = me + 们 plural character.

你们

nǐmen

you (plural)

which is 你 nǐ = you + 们 plural character.

他们

tām

they, them (persons)

which is 他 tā = he + 们 plural character.

它们

tāmen

they, them (things and non-persons)

which is 它 tā = it + 们 plural character.

50 easy Chinese characters

85 characters are presented here. The reader then can select 50 that are easy to understand and learn:

人 叫 白 一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八

木 林 本 木 田 国 玉 王 王 王

右 左 右 子 字 学 了 的 儿 长 江 州 安 是 不 也 好 我 你 您 他 她 它们

pīnyīn: ā á ă ò ò ù é è ē ī ī ě ě ě ú ú ù ù ù
Writing Chinese with 50 easy characters

Chinese is one of the world’s most spoken languages and with the expanding economic and technological influence of China there is an increasing interest in being introduced to the language. An elementary course should include the ability to recognize a few Chinese characters and give the joy of reading and readily write a few simple Chinese sentences.

Danish libraries have many editions of English textbooks of learning Chinese and a couple Danish. They naturally start by teaching simple words and sentences using Latin letters in Mandarin texts using the pīnyīn Romanization that was officially adopted in 1958. The textbooks that also include learning some or a few Chinese characters then often start with the important words like: I, you, he, she, we, are, hello. These words do though not have the very most easy and explainable characters. And if it is further emphasised that there is only one allowable way to write the many strokes and that all ”corner decorations” etc. need be included after a specific list, then it seems too difficult for a beginner. (And it is apparently still also difficult for up to 25% of the Chinese, according to Berlitz 2009 in Intermediate Mandarin Chinese, despite that equivalent to two years of elementary school time is used on learning characters).

Writing beautiful Chinese characters, calligraphy, is an impressive lifelong challenge of art. But it is here chosen to start with some simple characters and step by step expand them and include hints to better remember them. The reader is proposed to regard the character and notice the eye-catching strokes and features and then in the beginning write the character with the strokes in the sequence best remembered and with a simple typography of straight lines and square. After learning the 50 easy and explainable characters here there is a basis for continuing with these elements to the next many 100 characters.

For an elementary class in learning Chinese a possible proposal could be to learn ca. 5 characters for each lesson (besides the lessons in the pīnyīn textbook). For each lesson the student writes a line with a sentence of his own using characters learned so far. The paper is then passed on to the next student in the class, who for the following lesson adds his sentence, after having read the lines above etc.

Literature

Anne-Marie Westerby: Kinesisk parlør, 2002, (phrasebook)


Ji Yan: Kinesisk for alle, 2009. Text in only Chinese characters, and with translation to Danish.

There are several English textbooks in elementary Chinese in the Danish libraries. E.g.:

Text in both pīnyīn and Chinese characters. Become fluent in 100 short key sentences (out of 188 in all, with simple grammar). (p9: name Wáng 王).

Everyday Chinese, My Chinese tutor, small textbook + sound CD + CD-rom (from Sinolingua Beijing), 2006.
The CD-rom for the computer is excellent: 100 short key sentences and some short texts for daily situations in Chinese + pīnyīn + English. You can turn off the English, turn off the pīnyīn, to try out the Chinese characters, and you can turn off the nice Chinese music.

Much like Everyday Chinese, but with tourist orientated texts.
Likewise there is Business Chinese.

Interactive Chinese, Sinolingua, Beijing, 2006.
8 textbooks, 8 CD, 8 CD-ROM.
In Chinese + pīnyīn + English. You can turn off the English, turn off the pīnyīn, turn off the music. Pronunciation is shown with sketches of mouth and tong for each letter and sound. Includes classical Chinese small stories and poems.

One page for each character, shown big size with handmade soft strokes, showing the right sequence of strokes. Different styles and some earlier styles are shown. The characters are those from about 1960 simplified type, with the original complex form also shown if different. The book gives some memorizing hints. For each character there are examples of words. All is shown in a nice consistent order. Each page has a small exercise (with solution back in the book).

The Internet is developing fast:

Translation programs are improving rapidly, so that you talk Danish or English to your cell phone and your sentence is shown and said in Chinese a couple of seconds later. The Chinese characters you just photograph to be translated. But still it is an advantage if your brain knows a little Chinese.

See also the internet Youtube with excellent small video lessons in pronunciation and e.g. explanation of pīnyīn.

Front page:
3 Gorges Yangtze Dam, 2008, photo by professor in concrete Ole Mejlhede Jensen, DTU, Denmark, at his guest professorship in China. Today China produces 50% of the concrete in the world.
人  叫  白  一  二  三  四  五  六  七  八  九  十  百  千
rén  jiào  bái  yī  èr  sān  sì  shí  bǎi  qiān

个  大  太  天  夫  头  买  卖  哭  笑
gè  dà  tài  tiān  fū  tóu  mǎi  mài  kū  xiào

山  出  日  月  明  口  回  问  门  小
shān  chū  rì  yuè  míng  kǒu  huí  wèn  mén  xiǎo

木  林  本  土  田  国  玉  王  工  干
mù  lín  běn  tǔ  tián  guó  yù  wáng  gōng  gān/gàn

厂  广  西  中  冬  东  车  上  下  坐
chǎng  guǎng  xī  zhōng/zhòng  dōng  dōng  chē  shàng  xià  zuò

入  文  手  毛  巾  休  男  力  女  士
rù  wén  shǒu  máo  jīn  xiū  nán  lì  nǚ  shì

右  左  在  有  子  字  学  了  的  儿
yòu  zuǒ  zài  yǒu  zǐ  zì  xué  le  de  ér

长  江  州  安  是  不  也  好
cháng  jiāng  zhōu  ān  shì  bù  yě  hǎo/hào

我  你  您  他  她  它  们
wǒ  nǐ  nín  tā  tā  tā  men