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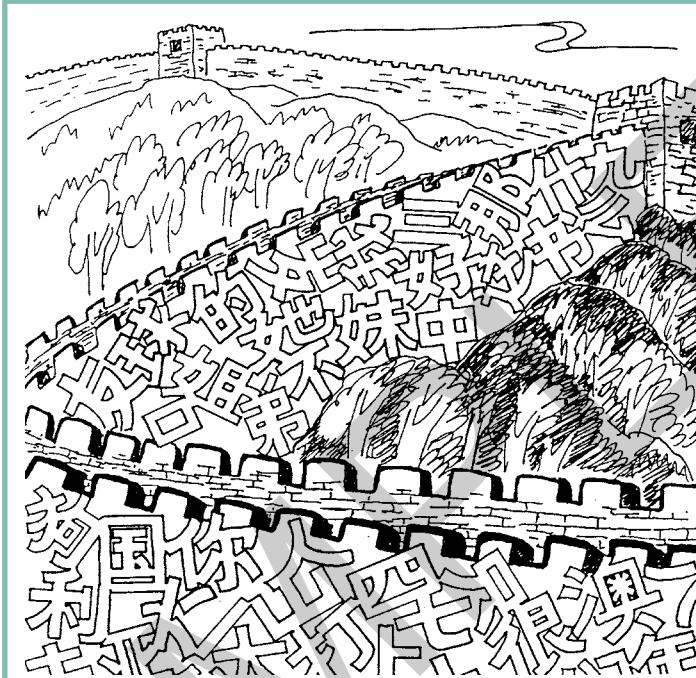
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dì yī kè Zhōngguó
第一课 中国



1 The country

China is situated in the eastern part of the Asian continent and is the third largest country in the world. It covers a total area of approximately 9.6 million square kilometres and is a land of contrasts with deserts in the north, mountains in the south and cultivated areas in the east.

This vast land supports almost a quarter of the world's population: over one billion people of different races, traditions and cultures. Although the majority (about 94% of the population) are the Han people, there are fifty-five minority peoples, the largest among them being the Mongolians [Ménggǔzú 蒙古族], the Tibetans [Zàngzú 藏族] and the Zhuang [Zhuàngzú 壮族].

Chinese culture was the cradle of Japanese, Korean and some South East Asian cultures. The ancient Chinese considered their country to be the centre of the world and called it *Zhōngguó* [中国], literally meaning 'the Central Kingdom'.

2 The language

The great distances in China and the diversity of its people have created variations in the Chinese language. Some minority peoples use their own language creating differences with 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 dialect. 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 [Fújiānghuà 福建话]. However, people who speak different dialects are always able to 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 Hán yǔ [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.



你 好 (1)

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								
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.

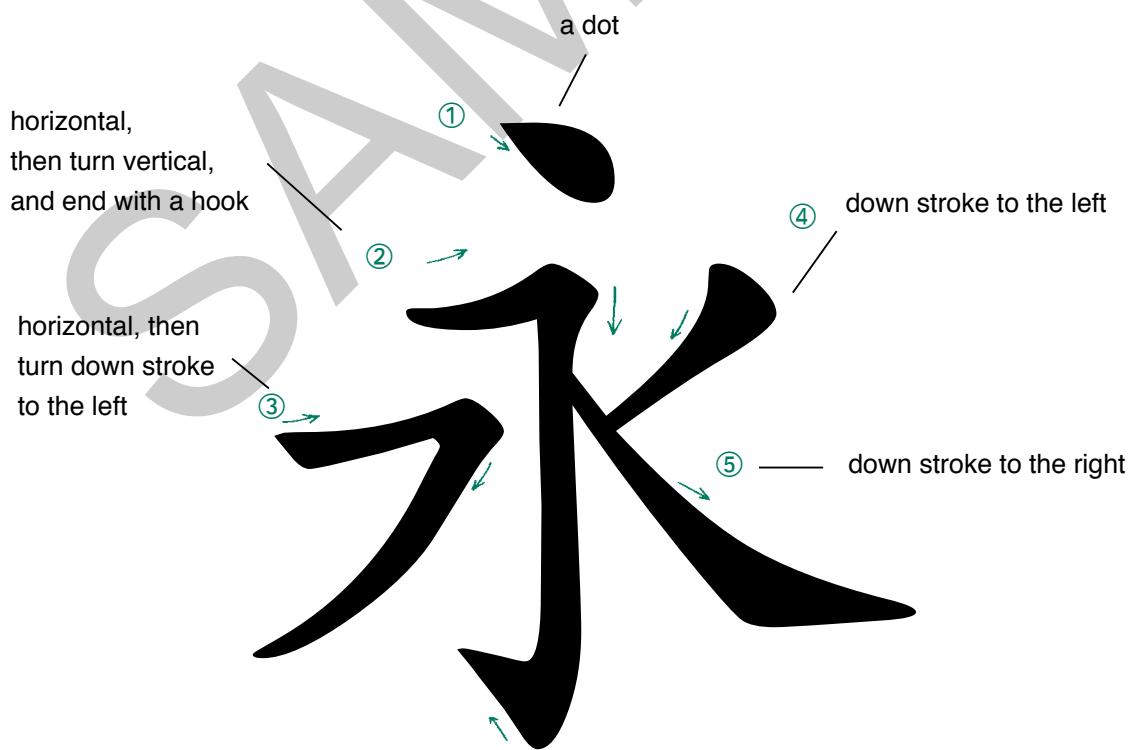
火 fire	followed by	山 mountain	forms	火山 volcano (huǒshān)
山 mountain	followed by	水 water	forms	山水 scenery (shānshuǐ)
口 mouth	followed by	水 water	forms	口水 saliva (kǒushuǐ)
人 people	followed by	口 mouth	forms	人口 population (rénkǒu)

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.ㄅㄆㄇ ... were named zhùyīn fúhào [注音符号] 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
	nasal	an	en	in	un	ün		üe
		ang	eng	ing	ong			er
Special sounds	zhi	chi	shi	ri	zi	ci	si	
	yi	wu	yu					
	ye	yue	yin					
	yun	yuan	ying					

LEARN TO WRITE by lesson

	Chinese	English		Chinese	English
1	人 rén 山 shān 口 kǒu	people, person mountain mouth	7	宠物 chǒng wù 只 zhī 狗 gǒu 马 mǎ 很 hěn 大 dà 小 xiǎo 没 méi	to spoil, to favour object, thing [measure word for some animals] dog horse very big, large small, little [negative word]
2	你好 nǐ 我好 hǎo 我是 wǒ 是 shì 他们 tā men	you good I, me is, am, are he, him (plural word)	8	中国 zhōng guó 英 yīng 也会 yě 说 huì 汉 shuō 语 yǔ	centre, middle country, nation elite, brave also, too can, be able to to speak, to say name of a Chinese dynasty language
3	一二三 sān 四 wǔ 五 liù 六 qī 七 bā 八 jiǔ 九 shí 十	one two three four five six seven eight nine ten	9	喜欢 xǐ 运动 huān 打 yùn 球 dòng 去 dǎ 吧 qiú què ba	to like; happy happy to transport; luck to move to hit, to play (tennis...etc.) ball to go [indicating suggestion]
4	谁 shéi 她 tā 老师 lǎo shī 几 jǐ 岁 suì 两 liǎng	who, whom she, her old teacher how many year of age two	10	朋友 péng yǒu 叫 jiào 上 shàng ¹ 年 nián 级 jí 和 hé 同 tóng 学 xué	friend friend to be called, to call to go to, to attend; up, above year grade, level and same; together to study, to learn
5	这 zhè 那 nà 什 shén 么 me 吗 ma 的 de 不 bù	this that what [word ending] [question word] [possessive particle] no, not	11	真 zhēn 饿 è 吃 chī 想 xiǎng 渴 kě 喝 hē 菜 cài 饭 fàn	really hungry to eat to feel like; to think thirsty to drink dish, vegetable cooked rice, meal
6	家 jiā 有 yǒu 个 gè 爸 bà 妈 mā 哥 gē 姐 jiě 弟 dì 妹 mèi	family, home to have, there is/are [measure word] father mother elder brother elder sister younger brother younger sister			