

Introduction to Chinese Characters

Introduction to Chinese Characters (???Hànzi)

Key concepts, history, structure, and learning tips

1. What Are Chinese Characters?

- **Logographic writing system** – each character represents a word or a meaningful unit (morpheme), not a sound.
 - Used in:
 - **Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghainese, etc.** (spoken varieties differ, written form is largely shared)
 - **Japanese** (kanji), **Korean** (historical hanja), **Vietnamese** (historical chữ Nôm)
 - Over **80,000** recorded characters; a literate adult typically knows **3,000–4,000**; the “????” (list of common characters) contains **3,500** in Mainland China and **2,136** in Taiwan.
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2. Historical Development

Period	Approx. Dates	Milestones
Oracle Bone Script	1200–1050?BC	First known Chinese writing; carved on turtle shells & bones; highly pictographic.
Bronze Script	1046–256?BC	Inscribed on bronze vessels; more regularized forms.
Seal Script (??)	221–207?BC (Qin unification)	Standardized script for the empire; still pictorial but more uniform.
Clerical Script (??)	206?BC–220?AD	Faster to write; strokes become flatter and more rectangular.
Regular Script (??)	4th?century?AD onward	The modern standard; balanced, clear, and most widely taught today.
Semi?cursive & Cursive (??, ??)	Tang dynasty onward	Faster, flowing styles used for calligraphy and informal writing.

3. Basic Structural Principles

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3.1. Components (?? bùshǔ and ?? pīnpáng)

- **Radicals** (214) act as semantic or indexing components.

Example: 氵 (three-dot water) signals a water-related meaning (海, 冰, 汗).

- **Phonetic components** give a clue to pronunciation.

Example: 清 = 氵 (water) + 青 (pronounced qīng).

3.2. Types of Characters

Type	Description	Example
Pictograms (??)	Direct drawings of objects	山 (mountain), 日 (sun)
Ideograms (??)	Abstract concepts expressed with symbols	上 (up), 下 (down)
Compound Ideograms (??)	Two or more elements combined to convey meaning	休 = 亻 (person) + 木 (tree) 休 “person rests under a tree”
Phono-semantic compounds (??)	One part indicates meaning, the other sound	河 = 氵 (water) + 可 (kě) 河 “river” pronounced hé
Borrowed characters (??)	Existing character used for a new meaning	来 originally meant “wheat”; later borrowed for “come”.
Derived characters (??)	Extension of meaning from an existing character	云 originally meant “cloud”; later used for “cloud” as a noun.

3.3. Stroke Order Rules

1. **Top → Bottom** (从上到下)
2. **Left → Right** (从左到右)