

## Character challenge

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By Ingrid Piller | December 12, 2012 | Language learning, gender & identity



So much hot air: the character for “meeting” consists of the one for “cloud” under a roof

Before my recent visit to [Wuhan](#) and [Hong Kong](#) I was planning to accept the Esperanto challenge that [a number of readers had recently thrown at us](#) and use the upcoming holidays to try and see whether it’s really possible to learn Esperanto in 100 hours. However, in China I got so fascinated by Chinese characters that I’ve now thrown myself into a Chinese character challenge instead.

I’d been intrigued by Chinese for a long time but up until about three weeks ago, I was of the opinion that life was too short to learn Chinese characters. They seemed like a huge set of haphazard lines and occasional efforts by my students to teach me this or that character just reinforced the idea that it was an unsystematic mystery that could only be mastered through years of rote learning at a young age.

Not so! Now I’ve discovered that learning Chinese characters makes the most intriguing pastime I’ve come across in a long time.

In Hong Kong, I picked up Alison Matthews and Laurence Matthews’ book [Learning Chinese Characters](#). The book draws on [James Heisig’s](#) technique of teaching kanji (and more recently hanzi) through visualisation and thus links each character to a memorable story. I don’t always like the stories and association chains in [Learning Chinese Characters](#) but it is a lot of fun to make up my own.

Once you have a visualisation, it’s easy to remember the character. For instance, I don’t think I’ll ever forget the character for *meeting* 会: it consists of the character for *cloud* 云 placed under a roof. Hot air under a roof – it’s the perfect image of many a meeting I’ve attended!

In other cases, it’s easier to remember association chains as in the old party game where players compete to remember the longest chain. The chain *one – earth – drop – mouth*, for instance, gives you the characters for *king*, *jade* and *country*.

一 *one* + 土 *earth* = 王 *king*

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王 *king* + 丿 *drop* = 玉 *jade*

玉 *jade* + 口 *mouth* = 国 *country*

So, connecting the meanings of basic characters to memorize the meanings of composite characters is a lot of fun once you get the hang of some basics.

[Learning Chinese Characters](#) is a great book to get you started on memorizing the meanings of characters but it doesn't do much to help you acquire a muscle memory of the stroke order. This is where an iPhone application called [Chinese Writer](#) published by [trainchinese.com](#) comes in handy.

Designed like a [tetris game](#), the player has to trace Chinese characters in the correct stroke order as they rain down on your screen and get them right before they disappear. As addictive as the original tetris game, it feels much more educational and the 47 characters in their first pack already feel automatic to me.

The free version of [Chinese Writer](#) comes with a total of 384 characters in four packs. For now, that's plenty for me but it's possible to upgrade to the full version with more than 2,000 characters.

Both [Learning Chinese Characters](#) and [Chinese Writer](#) claim to be starting with the most frequent characters but, unfortunately, there is not much overlap between the two resources in their first 100 characters. I wish the two resources were coordinated because together they offer an incredibly entertaining way to learn Chinese characters.

Language learning meets gaming! For me that's new territory and I'm blown away by the potential. I haven't had much time to do a literature search and haven't discovered much of a concerted research effort. I would love to hear from any of our readers who are into language learning games to find out what the state of the art is.

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