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Somkina N. On Some Approach to Teaching of Chinese Characters Introduction Course

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Abstract. The Chinese Character Introduction Course is one of the initial parts of Chinese language course taught at Saint-Petersburg state university. It was tested on the 1st year students for the past 8 years. The results of their final exams show significant improvement in comparison with their predecessors, whether in radical or characters learning, as well as in overall mastering of Chinese language. The article deals with basic information, tools, and exercises used within the course. Basic information includes history and evolution of the Chinese writing system, classification and evolution of the Chinese characters, visual structure of characters, the notions of “stroke”, “radicals”, “semantic dominant”, “phonetic element”, etc., traditional and simplified forms of the Chinese characters. Main exercises include looking for a given stroke, radical, or element within a given character, dissociate characters into component parts, working with a dictionary, calligraphy practice, etc. Control tasks include daily dictations and final test. By the end of the course students learn to recognize, read and write 214 radicals and basic strokes, get the basic understanding of inner logic of character composition, and receive basic knowledge of Chinese writing system in general.

Keywords: Chinese language, Chinese characters, calligraphy, teaching method, Chinese Character Introduction

1. Introduction

The main difficulty for Chinese language students is Chinese characters learning, moreover, education of professional Sinology scholars requires a solid foundation on which further knowledge will be built. This makes the Chinese Character Introduction Course (hereinafter CCIC) highly important, but at the same time rather laborious both for students and for instructor. The CCIC is an initial and an integral part of Chinese language course at St. Petersburg State University. The CCIC is aimed to develop basic writing skills, get the idea of internal logic of Chinese character composition, learn 214 radicals and basic strokes, learn to identify radicals and strokes within characters, learn to work with a dictionary.

2. Materials and methods

The amount of classroom hours allocated to the CCIC is not fixed, depending on the number of students in the group, their comprehensive skills and learning abilities, etc. Its volume is 36-48 hours (18-24 academic classes), while the general Chinese language course in the first semester is estimated as 208 hours. The theory of the CCIC is mainly based on the book “Introduction to Chinese Characters: Educational Reference Book” [1], while practical exercises were at first improvised during classroom session and later improved according to teaching and learning needs, taking into account mistakes made, questions asked, and sticking points encountered.

The CCIC requires the following set of tools:

1. One thick squared notebook (48-96 pages) for writing down radicals, rules, and other basic information, used as reference book.

2. Two small squared notebooks (12-18 pages) or Chinese worksheets for character handwriting, used as a worksheet for handwriting training.

3. Fountain pen

The need to use a fountain pen has two reasons. First, the cult of calligraphy is quite prominent in Chinese culture. Beautiful handwriting and the ability to write “like a Chinese” along with perfect pronunciation and grammatical accuracy, effectively shortens the distance between “us (Chinese)” and “them (non-Chinese)”. By the handwriting, the Chinese define so called 内意 (“inner mind”), i.e. worldview and mindset of a man. In this respect, fountain pen is the closest counterpart of writing brush. Secondly, writing with a fountain pen adds a creative element to the mandatory routine process of writing and memorization.

With the exception of the first lesson on introduction to Chinese writing system history and basics, the remaining classes are basically practical.

3. Results and discussion

At the first lesson, students are given basic knowledge of Chinese writing system in general:

1. Classification, specificity, history, and the development of Chinese writing system.

2. The evolution of basic characters (日, 山, 叒, 火, 馬, etc.), while students are invited to guess the meaning of ancient forms; the main script styles (jiaguwen (甲骨文, oracle bone script), jinwen (金文, bronze inscriptions), lishu (隸書, clerical script), kaishu (楷書, regular script), xingshu (行書, semi-cursive script), caoshu (草書, cursive script). This gives students the idea of general logic of the creation and current appearance of Chinese characters.

3. Demonstration of the scale of complicity of characters, for which the character “one” (一, 1 stroke) and “biang”, a type of local Shanxi noodles, (64 strokes, the character consisted of 辶 + 穴 + 月 + 幺言幺 + 長馬長 + 卩 + 心, that doesn’t have any font symbol due to its complicity) are used, and 龔 (36 strokes) of the more common ones.

4. Demonstration of the importance of location of the strokes in characters, for which the groups “人 (person), 入 (enter), 八 (eight)” and “工 (work), 土 (earth), 士 (ten)” are used.

5. The visual structure of characters: simple (口, 木), horizontal (呆), vertical (保), mixed (堡), encompassing (困) [2, p. 58;3, p.134].

6. Classification of characters: pictograms (日, 山, 水), simple ideograms (上, 下, 刃), compound ideograms (森, 歪), phonetic loan characters (四, 北), phono-semantic compound characters (吗, 妈, 骂, 码) [1, pp.18-19]

7. The concept of “radical”. It’s necessary to note the term “radical” is used in two senses. First, in a broad sense, to denote any component that looks like one of the 214 radicals [1, p. 95] and in a narrow sense, to refer to a semantic indicator or, less often, phonetic component of characters, by which they are grouped in a dictionary [2, p. 58], e.g. 河, 海, 洋 – with a common component- “water” 氵, etc.

It is also worth mention, that there are two ways of grouping characters in modern dictionaries. Traditional paper editions list dictionaries according to the strokes, while dicital dictionaries, as there is no need to use stroke-counting method, use the term radical (部首) as semantic dominant of a character. For example, 才 is listed under 一 in all paper editions of Xinhua Dictionary, while digital edition of the same dictionary lists it under 扌, which is the left-side form of 手. Also, it is sometimes possible to find a single character indexed under multiple radicals. For example, many dictionaries list 再 under either 工 or 冂, or both of them, while digital dictionaries place it only under 冂. Generally, characters are indexed under more than one radical only in order to make it easier to find them.

8. The concept of “phonetic component”; different from alphabetic-based languages, a Chinese character consists of sound (phonetics), shape (graphics), and meaning, and lacks an obvious sound-script correspondence [4]; the only clue for linking writing and pronunciation is so-called “phonetic component”, that gives a character certain reading, whether full syllable or a finale of a syllable. The students are shown the example of 校 xiào 胶 jiāo 较 jiào, with the phonetic component 交 jiāo that makes the finale -iao; 崔 cuī 锥 zhuī 椎 chuí 谁 shéi 權 cuī, with the phonetic component 佳 zhuī that makes the finale -ui, etc. There are loose regularities in the positioning of radicals within most characters, depending on their function: semantic dominants tend to appear on the top or on the left side of the character; similarly, phonetic components tend to appear on the right side of the character or at its bottom [5].

9. Traditional (繁体字) and simplified (简体字) forms of Chinese characters.

At the end of the introduction lesson, students are shown the writing of the character “一” both in six and eight pen (brush) moves, and the balanced location of a character in a “box” of four squares of a copybook. Then each student starts writing the character in a copybook, and the instructor goes through the ranks, controls the order of writing the character and makes adjustments if necessary.

The following CCIC classes are held in a lecture-practical mode. As part of the course, students must learn 214 radicals, including writing, pronunciation and meaning of each. The radicals are divided into 23 groups of 8-10 units based on the main stroke (for example, group 12 (刀 力 己 巾 弓 冫 羽 聿 隶) is formed based on the main stroke 冫 (horizon broken) and 冫 (horizon broken hook)). First, the instructor writes a radical on the blackboard, paying special attention to strokes order and the writing principles, demonstrates writing technique of a new stroke, if one appears, shows the location of the radical in a four-square box, and examples of its use within characters. Then the students write the radical under instructor’s control. Each radical and its variations (left / top / bottom / right / other) are written during the class, and then at home, four lines. Repetitive writing, in addition to the development of motor skills, makes it easier to memorize the radicals [6].

Upon completion of the study of each group, students write a dictation with three types of tasks:

Instructor	Student
meaning (verbally)	spelling, pronunciation
reading (verbally)	writing, meaning
spelling (on the blackboard)	pronunciation, meaning

Upon completion of the CCIC, students write a test paper. The task is to fill a table of 100 radicals with “character”, “pronunciation”, “meaning” columns and only one filled cell for each radical, thus students need to fill in the missing ones.

Example of the table (fragment):

Table 1

20.	龜			69.	西		
21.		mouth		70.		gate	
22.		horse		71.			dài
23.	厶			72.	山		

One filled cell’s value is 0.5 points, the whole table, therefore, is estimated at 100 points, the allowable limit of empty cells for a successful test is 12 (0-4 empty cells corresponds to “excellent”

grade, 5-8 empty cells correspond to “good” grade, 9–12 empty cells correspond to “satisfactory” grade).

On top of 214 radicals, during the CCIC course students receive additional knowledge as such:

1. Basic strokes - graphic elements that make up Chinese characters.

Table 2

一	Horizon	㇇	Horizon twice break throw away
丨	Vertical	㇇	Horizon thrice break with a hook
丿	Throw away	㇇	Horizon thrice break
㇇	Press down	㇇	Vertical with a rise
丶	Dot	㇇	Vertical break
㇇	Rise	㇇	Vertical bend
㇇	Vertical hook	㇇	Vertical bend with a hook
㇇	Horizon throw away	㇇	Vertical break throw away
㇇	Horizon hook	㇇	Vertical twice break
㇇	Horizon break with a hook	㇇	Vertical twice break with a hook
㇇	Horizon break with a rise	㇇	Throw away dot
㇇	Horizon break bend	㇇	Throw away break
㇇	Horizon twice break	㇇	Slant hook
㇇	Horizon косая with a hook	㇇	Bend with a hook
㇇	Horizon bend with a hook	㇇	Horizon break
㇇	Horizon throw away bend with a hook		

[7, c.28]

Bolded (1-8) are the basic strokes to which particular attention should be paid. Some sources indicate a different number of strokes (23 to 41), however, it is not crucial since further diversity is just modifications of basic strokes.

Strokes are introduced as they appear in the radicals. The basic strokes are given not only separately, but also as a part of the character 永, which consists of the entire basic set of these: dot, horizon, vertical, hook, rise, throw away, short throw away, press down; but it is not recommended to introduce 永 before the radical 水 (water). At the end of the CCIC course, at the last lesson, all the strokes learned are brought together and explained once more.

2. Basic calligraphy rules (rule for stroke orders, stroke crossing, etc.), explained as the complexity of the radicals grows

3. The history and development of Chinese writing system and Chinese language

4. Basic knowledge of Chinese culture and history

The last two points are not directly related to the topic of the course, but the format of the class “instructor writes on the blackboard - students write in their copybooks - instructor controls and corrects each student” assumes quite long pauses that can be used to give students basic information about realities of Chinese culture. Unlike a lecture, this kind of semi-practical lesson allows relatively free communication between instructor and students, so the latter, while writing, can simultaneously ask any questions and participate in discussions.

For better mastering theoretical knowledge, students are given a number of creative tasks for class- and homework. These tasks include:

1. Find the differences between strokes and characters, in which these strokes are used.

Example:

Find the difference between the strokes:

㇇ ㇈

Indicate which stroke is used in the following characters:

院耶廷阿阳那及那级诞

(Answer: ㇇: 院耶阿阳那; ㇈: 廷及级诞)

With all the simplicity, the task is extremely important, since students quite often confuse the strokes and, as a result, write and then learn some characters incorrectly. The most common mistakes are confusion of

- 丶 and ㇇, resulted in mistakes in writing 买, 贝 etc.
- ㇇ and ㇈, resulted in mistakes in writing 朵, 铅, 没 etc.
- ㇇, ㇈ and ㇉, resulted in mistakes in writing 院, 及, 仍 etc.

2. Find the differences between radicals and characters, in which these radicals are used.

Example:

Find the difference between the radicals

入, 八, 人

Point out which radical is used in the following characters:

共多关仄兼内盒豕从余令网六

(Answer: 人: 仄盒从令; 入: 多内网余; 八: 六关豕共兼)

The most common mistakes are confusion of:

- 贝 and 见, resulted in mistakes in writing of all derived characters (视, 贵, 员 etc.)
- 亻, 彳 and 讠, especially in 请, 清, 情
- 讠 and 讠
- 又 and 攴
- 夕 and 夕

A paper dictionary is also used to complete this task. As practice shows, in the first weeks of study students do not delve into meaning of a character and perceive it as mere a “picture”. However, fulfilling the task to search in the dictionary and to further analyse what they have found, helps students to understand inner logic of making up characters and is way more efficient as a teaching method.

Example:

Find the characters 河, 海, 湖, 洋 in a dictionary.

Look thoroughly if they share a common feature.

Compare their lexical meaning and their determiner.

What can you say about the radical 氵 ?

3. Write out the characters with the given graphic element:

Example:

鳳孔乱凤已氵乞

1) Write out the characters with the stroke

a. 氵:

Answer: 孔乱已

b. 乙

Answer: 乞 乞

2) Write out the characters with the radical 乙:

Answer: 孔 乱 乞

It is necessary to draw student's attention to the fact that 乚 is an alternative form of the radical 乙. In addition to the development of stroke recognition skills, the task also gives students understanding that a) stroke and radical are not always the same thing, and b) they should not be confused.

5. Write out the characters with a given radical:

Example:

Write out the characters with the radical 凵

岁 出 山 囟 囟 白 屯 缶 匠 齿

Answer: 出 囟

The task is aimed to teach students to differ similar radicals and to practice looking for them in a character; for example, 山 and 囟, though contain graphic element 凵, are radicals themselves, so cannot regard as the right answer for the task.

6. Select a group of characters containing a given radical.

Example:

Select a group where all characters contain the radical 豸

1. 猪 拘 狴 招 象

2. 貅 獬 豺 猛 犴

3. 狽 犷 猷 犴 犴

4. 狄 猿 獬 貂

5. 獠 豪 犹 狮

Answer: 3

7. Point out the radical and graphic element which the character consists of.

Example:

What parts do the following characters consist of?

癘 霾 慳

(Answer:

癘 = 疒 + 力 + 口 + 肉

霾 = 雨 + 彡 + 里

慳 = 忄 + 司 + 又 + 土)

8. Make up a character of proposed radicals / graphic elements, check the existence of such a character in a dictionary.

Example:

Make up characters of the following elements:

女 马 口 子

ОТВЕТ:

吗 妈 好

This task not only allows to comprehend inner logic of characters' composition, but also

develops the basic skills of working with a dictionary. The process is focused mainly on paper dictionary, students are taught various search methods (by radicals, by pinyin, by the lower right corner, by the four corner, etc.), but the development of searching skills in any dictionary, including electronic, is welcomed.

9. Write out the stroke order for a character

Stroke order is important for using digital dictionaries with the option of handwriting input, since most of the algorithms for character recognition is based exactly on it, therefore, if written in wrong order, it is likely that the system will not identify the character. In addition, stroke order is crucial to read and understand handwriting, because the vast majority of Chinese write in cursive that is difficult, if not impossible, to decipher without knowing stroke order.

It should be noted that the latest research shows that activating motor memory results in higher rate of memorizing characters [8, p.81], but it is not always possible for instructor to handwrite radicals on the blackboard. In this case it is recommended to have Power Point presentation to demonstrate radicals with animated stroke order form, as presenting characters dynamically may expose the student's attention to stroke compositions without explicit motor involvement [8, p.82]. However, it's still necessary to make students write in their copybooks as homework.

As additional reference sources, students are offered the sites:

1. ArchChinese <http://www.archchinese.com>, where one can find the list of radicals and an animated stroke order for each
2. 新华字典 <http://xh.5156edu.com/> The online version of the Xinhua Character Dictionary
3. 汉典 <http://www.zdic.net/> Online portal, which contains ancient, traditional and simplified characters dictionary, dictionary of idioms, etc.
4. <https://ctext.org/dictionary.pl> Page on Chinese Text Project site with the list of radicals with their traditional form, all the variations of writing, and more ancient forms, but fewer information in English.

Conclusion: Teaching Chinese Character Introduction course is more effective with the additional tasks, as well as work with a dictionary, in order to activate students' creativeness and cognitive abilities. Making use of the three elements of radical knowledge (graphics, semantics, and phonetics) as cues to encoding the characters helps further studying faster and easier. Moreover, calligraphy and repetitive writing plays an important role, aimed at the development of motor skills and mechanical, along with visual, memory.

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