
INTRODUCTION

Even though characters are one of the most fascinating aspects of the Chinese language, most of us who study Chinese aren't very good at writing them. Translators and scholars who know the language well sometimes have embarrassingly sloppy handwriting. It is a pity that the art of writing has been so little stressed in the teaching of the language. Not only is writing beautiful characters fun, but good handwriting is of much greater importance in learning Chinese than in learning a Western language. There are several reasons for this.

- The characters may seem chaotic to the novice, but their structure is not at all haphazard. Over the millennia they have developed from easily recognizable pictures of objects to highly stylized symbols of script. In the course of this development they have also been standardized to facilitate speed and comfort in writing. Not only must the strokes that make up each character be written in a certain rigidly specified order; they must also be written in a special way, which we will deal with in this book. The technique of writing is thus closely linked to the structure of the characters. By focusing on good handwriting, learners more quickly acquire a feeling for the logic of the Chinese characters, making them easier to remember. Schoolteachers in China pay great attention to the subject of writing.
- Most handwritten characters (in letters and on menus and shop

signs, for example) are written in cursive script, where the separate strokes are linked for quick writing. Such characters are much harder to read than the printed forms that beginners learn. Because they are shorthand versions derived from the same roots as the standard forms, the way they are written is closely linked to the way standard characters are written. In developing correct handwriting, you will gain a natural feel for the characters that makes them easier to decipher, even when they are in the cursive style. Actually, it is almost impossible for someone who lacks an adequate foundation in the art of writing to interpret cursive characters.

- For anyone who wants to learn how to write cursive script, reasonable proficiency in standard characters is absolutely essential.
- Calligraphy, the art of writing, is considered in China the noblest of the fine arts. At a very early stage in history it became an abstract and expressionist art form, where meaning is of secondary importance and aesthetic expression the prime concern. Many Chinese hold that calligraphy prolongs the writers' lives, sharpens their senses, and enhances their general well-being. By practicing calligraphy you can achieve a glimpse into Chinese aesthetics and philosophy and learn to appreciate an abstract art form.

There are two principal ways to learn calligraphy. You can begin in the traditional way, with a brush. This calls for long practice, infinite patience, and a good teacher. By practicing with a brush you emphasize the artistic rather than the practical, for few modern Chinese use the brush in everyday life. Good teachers of traditional calligraphy are a rare breed outside Chinese communities.

Your other option is to practice with a fountain pen. This has many advantages. The fountain pen is the writing tool used in present-day China, so you have a practical use for what you learn. The fountain pen is easier to use than the soft, pliable brush, so you can avoid spending time on technique and concentrate on writing neat characters. The principles for writing with a fountain pen hold equally well for pencil and ballpoint pen, though it is easier to form pleasing strokes with a fountain pen. Lastly, you can make do without a

teacher. Fountain pens are readily available, and ordinary paper can be used. For brush calligraphy, special Chinese writing paper is preferable.

Many teachers of Chinese hold the misconception that in learning calligraphy it is necessary to start practicing with a brush. As a result, many schools give makeshift courses in brush calligraphy or, more commonly, offer hardly any instruction in the subject at all. In fact, fountain pen calligraphy is becoming more and more popular in the whole Chinese-speaking world; there are many books offering model characters and aesthetic guidance, as well as regular exhibitions and competitions. Practicing with a pen is as good a way to learn the characters as practicing with a brush.

What I address in this book, then, is fountain pen calligraphy, or "calligraphy of the hard pen." To understand and appreciate characters requires some historical background and a simple analysis of the structure and aesthetics of the script. Much has been written on these subjects, and at the end of the book I list a few titles of further interest. On the other hand, there is, as far as I know, no introduction to writing characters with a pen that is designed for a non-Chinese-speaking audience. I hope this book will fill the gap. The material should be well suited for all learners of Chinese, from high school students and first-year undergraduates to old hands who would like to improve their writing technique. Because the book presupposes no previous knowledge of Chinese, it should also attract anyone with an interest in the language and culture of China.

I hope that by following the suggestions made in this book you will be able to learn Chinese characters more easily, deepen your appreciation of their beauty, and have as much fun practicing them as I have had.