
WRITING CHARACTERS

Having looked at the history and aesthetics of characters, it is high time to start writing. Let's begin by discussing how to practice and then talk about how to form characters that are pleasing to the eye.

The Tools of Writing

The Pen

Use a fountain pen with a round tip. The special pens for calligraphy that are available in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere usually have flat tips and are therefore not suitable for writing Chinese characters. The best pens are the ones whose shaft covers nearly the entire tip, giving it firm support (fig. 17). This is the kind of fountain pen most common in China, and you should be able to find one in a good stationery store in your neighborhood as well.

The Ink

Chinese carbon ink (*tànsù mòshuǐ*) is the ideal choice if you can find it. Shanghai brand is the best. The ink is a deeper black than most inks used

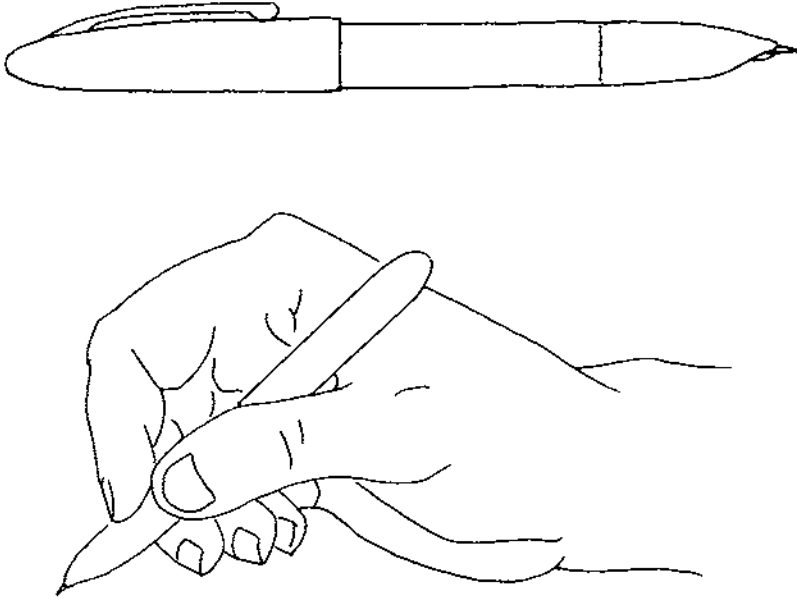


Fig. 17

outside China, in keeping with the Chinese calligraphic tradition of “black characters on white paper.” The high contrast makes it easy to spot errors. Also, it is almost waterproof after it dries. If you cannot find carbon ink, use any black ink.

The Paper

The paper should be crosshatched or marked off in squares, with each square big enough to contain a whole character. Squares makes it easier for the beginner to produce characters of uniform size. The paper should be glossy

enough that the ink dries with sharp edges and does not run. Never put the paper directly on a hard table when writing—satisfactory strokes are extremely difficult to produce. Instead, put fifteen to twenty layers of soft paper (ideally the tissuelike paper used for wiping camera lenses) under the sheet you are writing on.

How to Practice

The first thing to do with any new character is to carefully memorize the stroke order. Simple rules govern the order in which the strokes that make up a character must be written. We will wait a little before learning these rules, for they require that we know the basic strokes. Still, it is very important to write with the correct stroke order, so pay careful attention to the order in what follows.

The tried and true method for practicing writing is to copy the characters of an accomplished calligrapher. While you are unsure of your technique, you may want to put a thin, transparent sheet of paper over the characters you are copying and trace them with your pen. Once you understand the rudiments, you should copy by first examining the model and then writing your character in exactly the same way. You should *not* look at one stroke at a time, write it, consider the next stroke, write it, and so on. Instead, you should look at the *whole* character, analyze its structure, turn your head away, and not look at the model character again until you have written all the strokes. When you have completed your character, you should compare it with the model, find out what mistakes you made, and try again. This is the only way to fix the picture of the character firmly in your mind and make rapid progress.

The principle behind this method of practicing has its roots deep in the Chinese aesthetic tradition. Chinese artists are expected to see the whole painting with their inner eye before beginning to work; then they simply paint what they see. This approach is called *having a bamboo completed in your chest*. Chinese watercolors and calligraphic works are often executed in a very short time—the creative work is done before the artist touches the brush.

It is taboo to go back and alter a character while writing. If a stroke fails, begin the whole character over again.

Practice only three or four different characters a day, at least to begin with. Otherwise, you do not have time to learn them thoroughly enough, and you grow too tired to analyze what you are doing right and what you are doing wrong. You learn the characters in a sloppy way and do not really improve your writing.

Write each character at least a hundred times.

Save everything you write and date the papers. Just as with all learning, there will be times when you do not feel as though you are making any progress. It can be heartening to look at the characters that you wrote a month or two earlier. You will be surprised at the difference.

Sit correctly at a desk or table that is not too high. You should be able to rest your arms comfortably on the tabletop. Put the paper straight in front of you and do not slant it too much. Many learners slant the paper and bend over when writing. Don't do either when you write in Chinese. Hold the pen between thumb and forefinger, letting it rest gently on your curved middle finger (fig. 17). The tip of the pen should point forward on the paper and should form a forty-five-degree angle with it. Sit back in the chair so the chairback supports your lower back as much as possible. Be as upright as possible without tensing your back and shoulders. (You should sit this way when writing in English as well.)

Try to practice on a daily basis. It is much better to practice for fifteen minutes every day than not to practice for a while and then suddenly sit for hours on end at the writing table.

At the end of this book there are models for a hundred or so of the most common characters. Later you may choose models that you think look good. Copying characters written with a brush is fine, but you must catch the spirit of the characters rather than copying them directly, for a fountain pen can never reproduce the thick strokes of a writing brush.

The Basic Strokes

The standard characters are made up of individual strokes arranged in a certain way. The form of each stroke is very important for the form of the whole character. It is therefore necessary to learn proper basic strokes to write acceptable characters. Once you have spent some time practicing the basic strokes, you will have done half the job of acquiring a good Chinese hand. Those little twists and turns may seem insignificant, but they have not been put there on a whim. Rest assured that over the past few millennia, Chinese calligraphers have developed a method of writing that is practical, quick, and elegant.

Traditionally, calligraphers have recognized eight basic strokes for the characters. These are the strokes appearing in the character *yǒng*:



yǒng, eternal

The eight basic strokes are the following (in traditional order):



Below I present the eight basic strokes and give examples of ways they can be executed. The order in which they appear is not the traditional one—I have chosen to present them in a way that I hope will make them easier for the foreigner to learn. In addition, there are practice characters illustrating each stroke. I suggest that you practice one or two strokes at a time and write a few hundred a day. Do not start a new stroke until you feel comfortable with the one you are working on. If you practice half an hour a day, you should feel reasonably satisfied with your basic strokes in two to three weeks.

Héng 橫

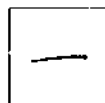
The first stroke is called *héng*, or *horizontal*, and looks like this:



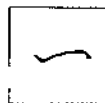
If you look at it carefully, you will notice that it is not a simple straight line. It is not quite horizontal but slants slightly upward, and it is bent without looking crooked, like a flexible twig or a bone.

To write the stroke, set your pen down at the left with a certain force. Then move it slightly downward and to the right. This gives you the little ingress at the left—the well-defined start, separate from the rest of the stroke, like the tensing of muscles before a jump. Execute the stroke itself more quickly, and finish by again pressing more firmly and moving the pen slightly down and to the right. It will feel very awkward to write so carefully, but your speed will soon increase.

Avoid the following mistakes:



Matchstick. The beginning and end are missing, and the result is stiff and wooden.



Bent stick. The beginning and end have taken over too much of the stroke, so it does not look straight anymore.

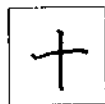
Here are some exercises. Note the stroke order!



yī, *one*



èr, *two*



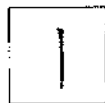
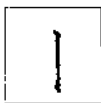
shí, *ten*



Héng is rather hard to write. If you feel frustrated, try the next stroke for a while and then return to héng.

Shù 竖

The second stroke is called shù, meaning *vertical*, and comes in two variants, *dropping dew* and *suspended needle*:



When writing, you begin these two variants in the same way. Put the pen down with a certain force, move it slightly downward and to the right, and then write the stroke itself with a somewhat quicker movement, exerting only moderate pressure on the pen. Whereas the héng stroke slants gently upward rather than being perfectly horizontal, shù should be absolutely vertical. You finish *dropping dew* by moving the pen with a constant pressure to the end of the stroke and calmly lifting it from the paper. At the very end, you may even move the pen backward for half a millimeter or so. This gives the feeling that the stroke has been executed with careful control and not just tossed down.

To finish the *suspended needle*, start slowly decreasing the pressure about two-thirds of the way down the stroke, and continue decreasing it until the pen leaves the paper.

Avoid the following mistakes:



Nail's head. The beginning is overdone.



Rat's tail. This is crooked and lacking in power. You have not given the stroke itself enough energy.



Hemp thread. This stroke begins narrowing too soon and looks as though it is about to break in two. Keep applying pressure all the way down to the tip, and do not let the stroke taper off until you are a millimeter or two from the end.

Dropping dew is used when the shù stroke meets another stroke at the top or bottom, and the *suspended needle* is used when shù passes through the whole character like a skewer. This is evident in the following exercises:



xià, *down, below* 一 丅 下



qiān, *a thousand* 一 二 千



zhōng, *the middle; China* 丨 冂 口 中



bàn, *half* 丶 丩 丩 半

Piě 撇

The third basic stroke is called piě and functions as a “left leg” in many characters. It should look like the tusk of an elephant:



Piě is comparatively easy to write well. The ingress is about the same as for shù, but you must avoid the mistake of curving the stroke too much:

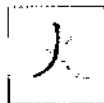


Archer's bow. This stroke is too bent, and there is no difference between beginning and end.

Here are some exercises in writing piě:



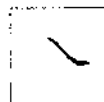
rén, *man, person* 丿 人



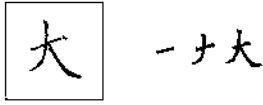
huǒ, *fire* 丿 丶 丶 火

Nà 捺

The fourth basic stroke is called nà. It is rather hard to write. If piě is the left leg, then nà is the right leg:



Here is how *nà* looks in the character *dà*, *big*:



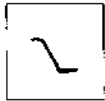
Note how *nà* conveys the impression of a leg with a foot at the end and how this leg stabilizes the character.

To write *nà*, you should feel in the beginning as if you are striving upward and to the right, even though the stroke slopes downward the whole time. At the start of the “foot,” press a little harder with the pen and at the same time change direction to achieve a clear but gentle “joint” in the stroke.

Avoid the following mistakes:



Hockey stick. The end is crooked and sticks up.



The foot is too marked, so the stroke looks broken.

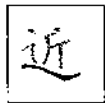


Sagging rope. The stroke does not strive upward at the beginning; it looks feeble.

Here are some exercises:



mù, tree; wood 一 十 才 木



jìn, close, nearby 一 丨 夕 斤 辵 辵 近



shì, to be

一 日 日 日 旦 早 早 昇 是

Tiǎo 挑

Tiǎo must be carefully differentiated from piě, which has a similar shape but is written in the opposite direction. Tiǎo is a variant of héng, so it is written from left to right:

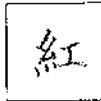


Here are some exercises:



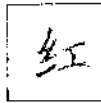
dǎ, to beat, to hit

一 寸 才 打 打



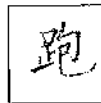
hóng, red (full form)

一 乙 乙 乙 乙 乙 乙 乙 紅 紅 紅



hóng, red (simplified form)

一 乙 乙 乙 乙 紅 紅 紅

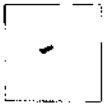


pǎo, to run, to move fast

一 口 甲 甲 甲 甲 甲 甲 跑 跑 跑 跑

Diǎn 点

The sixth basic stroke is diǎn, the *dot*. Although making a dot may sound easy, this stroke is one of the hardest to master. It is crucial to the harmony of the whole character. The dot can be written in a number of ways, but three basic types can be distinguished. The first looks like a short tiǎo:



The second resembles a piě:



The last is a real dot and should look like an elongated apple seed:

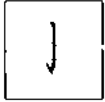


Sometimes the dot can be very long:



Dots often occur in groups, and each dot in the group should be unique, so that the whole does not look dull and repetitive. A few exercises follow.

and to the left, after which you lift it from the paper while moving it diagonally upward to the left. The stroke thus acquires a little “heel” to stand on:



The second, called the *reclining hook*, should be softly and evenly bent. You finish it by moving the pen backward, toward the center of the character:



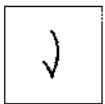
The third hook is a more upright form of the reclining hook:



Finally, there is a very common hook that begins as a *héng* and is ended by moving the pen downward to the right and then backward and to the left:



Avoid the following mistakes:



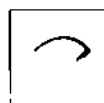
Fish hook. The *shù*, or *vertical*, part is bent and has fused with the heel.



Triangle. The heel is missing.



The tip slants outward; the character will lose its energy and coherence.

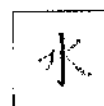


This stroke is too curved.

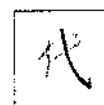


The turn is too pronounced and looks as though it is composed of several short segments rather than a single stroke.

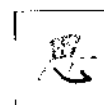
Exercises:



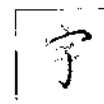
shuǐ, *water* 丿 勹 ㇇ 水



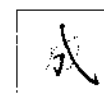
dài, *generation* 丿 亻 亻 代 代



sī, *to think* 丿 口 囗 田 田 思 思 思



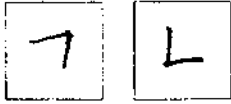
zì, (*written*) *character* 丶 宀 宀 字 字



chéng, *to become* 一 厂 万 成 成 成

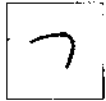
Zhé 折

The last stroke to learn is the *bend*, zhé. It occurs in two variants, both of which are often used to frame characters:



Note that each corner is made with a single stroke.

Avoid the following mistakes:



The bend is too round and indistinct.



The bend seems to have several distinct segments; it looks broken and lacks strength.

Exercises:



guó, *country* (full form) | 冂



guó, *country* (simplified form) | 冂



qū, *area* (full form)

一 丁 百 百 區 區 區



qū, *area* (simplified form)

一 丁 又 区

Some Composite Strokes

You may have noticed that some strokes that appear to have two separate parts count as a single stroke. These *composite strokes* can be seen as combinations of the eight basic strokes, and it is not really necessary to practice them separately. I include them here as an orientation.

Héngzhé wāngōu 横折弯钩

One of the most common composite strokes is the *héngzhé wāngōu*:



It is easy to see why this stroke is also called the *floating goose hook*. It is used, for example, in the character *jiǔ*, *nine*:



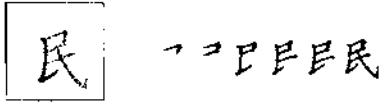
丨 九

Shùtiǎo 竖挑

As the name indicates, this stroke comprises a shù and a tiǎo,



It appears, for example, in the character mín, *people*:

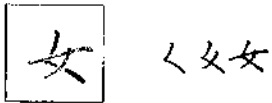


Piězhé 撇折

Another very common composite stroke is piězhé:



It is the first stroke in the character nǚ, *woman*:



Héngzhé wānpiě 横折弯撇

This stroke



is used, for example, in the character jí, *to reach, to attain*:



、乃及

Héngzhé shùtiǎo 横折竖挑

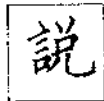
This stroke



is the larger part of the simplified form of the very common radical meaning *word*, here in the character shuō, *to say, to speak*:



(simplified form) 丶 讠 讠 讠 讠 讠 讠 讠

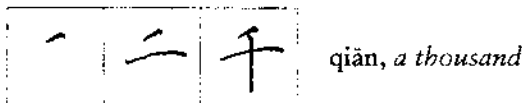
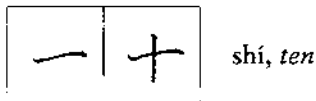


(full form) 丶 讠 讠 讠 讠 讠 讠 讠 讠 讠 讠

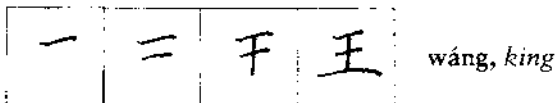
Stroke Order

There is only one more thing to consider before we can write freely: stroke order. Sample characters are given to illustrate the eight rules to follow. If you practice the characters, you will soon learn the rules intuitively and not have to think about them as you write. Below, only simplified characters are used as examples of the rules.

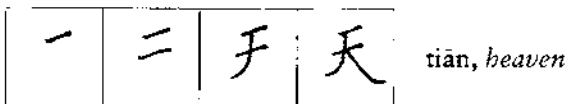
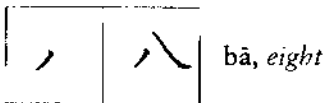
Rule 1. Héng comes before shù; that is, horizontal strokes come before vertical ones:



When a héng forms the bottom of a character, it is written last:



Rule 2. Piě comes before nà; that is, a left leg comes before a right one:



Rule 3. Characters are written from top to bottom:

一	二	三	sān, <i>three</i>
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丶	亠	宀	方	立	lì, <i>to stand</i>
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Rule 4. Characters are written from left to right:

一	十	土	却	地	地	dì, <i>the ground; place</i>
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丿	女	女	如	好	好	hǎo, <i>good</i>
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Rule 5. If the character is framed from above, the frame is written first:

丿	勹	勹	句	句	jù, <i>sentence</i>
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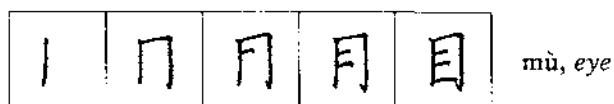
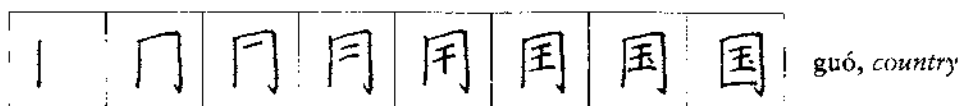
丨	冂	冂	同	同	同	tóng, <i>same</i>
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Rule 6. If the character is framed from below, the frame is written last:

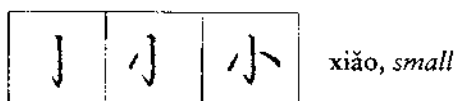
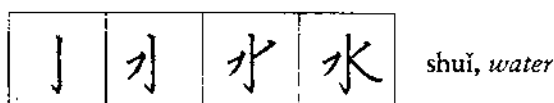
丿	了	了	牙	牙	彖	函	函
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

hán, *letter, epistle*

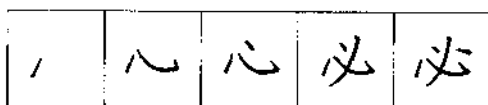
Rule 7. Frames are closed last:



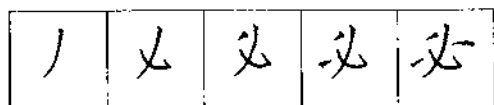
Rule 8. In symmetrical characters the middle is written first, then the sides:



These rules do not unequivocally cover all situations. When no rule seems applicable, you must simply learn the stroke order by heart. If you are conscientious about this from the start, you will quickly develop a feeling for what is correct. Sometimes the official stroke order is changed by calligraphers to make the character easier to write. Such changes in stroke order are not made lightly. They are indeed very rare and are most often based on stroke orders from other styles than *kāishū*. One example is the character *bì*, *must*, which should, by the above rules, be written from left to right:



This is the official stroke order, but if you write it this way, the components are very hard to balance well. If you write it with the *cǎoshū* stroke order, however, the composition becomes much more harmonious:



Another example is *fāng*, *place, location*, which can be written in the following two ways. The first way is the official way, but the second way makes it easier to produce a well-balanced character.

