TO THE STUDENT

Learning to read and write Chinese characters will be one of the most demanding parts of your study of Chinese. The difficulty is not conceptual or deeply intellectual. It is a problem of getting yourself to do steady, hard work over an extended period of time. This is because Chinese characters are numerous and considerably more complex than the letters of Western alphabets. It takes much more memory work to master them. With this workbook you will be asked to learn more than 500 Chinese characters. It is designed in several ways to make your learning of characters more efficient.

First, and most important, is the method of learning 5 characters every day, not counting weekends. Experience has clearly shown that steady study of a few characters a day is much more effective than trying to learn all the characters of a lesson at once. Most students forget characters at a much faster rate when they try to take occasional big bites rather than frequent little bites.

WARNING: This method will not work without your pledge of cooperation. You must solemnly promise yourself to take your little daily bite no matter what. Do not go to bed until you have learned your day’s characters. Also use the odd bits of time you have during the day—ten minutes waiting in a line, five minutes waiting for a class to begin, etc.—reviewing earlier characters. This will be much better than leaving your character-learning for the night before a test.

Second, the workbook begins with the more common and useful characters, and proceeds toward the less common ones. As early as page 2 in the workbook, after learning only 10 characters, you will already be able to read and write a number of simple sentences. For the first part of your course, your ability to read and write characters will lag behind your speaking and listening. But as you near the end of the course, your character-learning will gradually catch up. This is because the vocabulary you will be learning later on will increasingly consist of compounds that use characters you already know.

Third, it is very inefficient to study characters in isolation, as if they were abstract codes that might later be “translated” back into regular language. You can internalize characters much faster if you always treat them as living parts of the language. The best way to do this is constantly to associate the sounds and meanings of characters with their written forms. This workbook includes exercises that are designed to help you do this. Each page in the workbook includes sample sentences or a short dialogue using characters you have learned. There are also simple translation exercises and a “self-dictation”. The self-dictation exercises appear in hanyu pinyin; you are to read the sentences aloud, and think of their meanings, at the same time that you write the characters. All of the reading exercises have accompanying oral recordings, which you can also use to reinforce the association of sounds and meanings with the characters.
TRADITIONAL AND SIMPLIFIED CHARACTERS

As noted in the Introduction to the Lessons book (the Blue Book), the Western student is best advised to learn to read both traditional and simplified characters (although which version one chooses to write can be a matter of preference). Both kinds of characters are so much part of the Chinese world, past and present, that to learn to read only one kind is very short-sighted. Accordingly this workbook introduces both, and the exercises are structured to encourage the student to read both.

FORMAT OF THE WORKBOOK

NOTE: This book is bound along its right-hand edge, in traditional Chinese style, and thus opens from what Western custom regards as the “back” of the book. (In the traditional Chinese view, Western books bound on the left were equally “backwards.”) Many contemporary Chinese books are now bound in the Western format.

The right-most column on each page lists five characters written in traditional form with a traditional Chinese brush. Every mark with a brush is called a “stroke.” The tiny numbers that appear near each stroke tell you two important things: 1) the order in which the strokes are written; and 2) which end of the stroke to start from. It is crucial that you follow both kinds of rules. If you do not, then later, when your handwriting speeds up, the natural slurring of your handwriting will not match the natural slurring that Chinese people use, and your handwriting will become illegible. Mastering stroke order will become naturally easier as you proceed, because there are general principles of moving left to right and top to bottom that you will begin to find natural. But there are exceptions. So you always have to check the tiny numbers.

The second column from the right lists the same characters in their simplified forms. The tiny numbers again indicate stroke order. You will note that the simplified and traditional forms are the same for many characters. In this workbook we give the simplified characters in print style and the traditional characters in brush-writing style, so you will notice that even characters that are “the same” appear slightly differently. The simplified characters are in slightly smaller size so that there is room in the box for the following other important information:

1. In the upper left-hand corner, the pronunciation of the character in hàn yǔ pīnyīn and a gloss of its meaning. When a gloss refers to the original meaning of the character (which may be somewhat different from the particular meaning that appears in the blue book dialogues), we put that gloss in parentheses. WARNING: A “gloss” does not mean a reliable equivalent that is used the same in English and Chinese. We give you English glosses only as ID tags for the characters you are studying. You will ruin your Chinese if you take the glosses as guides to the use of Chinese words. To learn proper uses of Chinese words, study the Blue and Red books.

2. In the upper right-hand corner, a character-part followed by two numbers that are separated by a slash. The character-part is the character’s radical. Every character has a radical, which is often related to the character’s meaning. After you have learned about fifty characters you might want to begin studying them in groups that share radicals; some students find character-learning
easier this way. (See Appendix III on pp. 133-139 to help you do this. See also pp. 118 to 120 in the Appendix to the Blue Book.) Radicals are also important in looking up words in dictionaries. For this purpose, every radical has a number. These numbers are different for traditional and simplified dictionaries. Before the slash we list the traditional number; after the slash, the number used in simplified-character dictionaries. The left-hand side of each page gives you reading exercises using the characters that you have learned so far. In order to encourage you to read both traditional and simplified characters, we alternate between traditional- and simplified-character readings from one page to the next. Moreover, on the pages that use traditional characters, we present them in the traditional way. We start at the top right-hand corner of a page and proceed downward in a column, with successive columns arranged right-to-left across the page. (We have used the handwriting of different people for these exercises in the hope that the slight variations will help accustom you to different handwriting styles.) For the pages that use simplified characters, we follow the format that is standard for simplified-character books. This format is the same as Western books. One begins in the upper left-hand corner and proceeds across pages in rows, top to bottom.

In the lower left-hand corner of each page are two kinds of exercises. The first, listed under a roman numeral I, is called a “self-dictation exercise.” In it you are to look at the hanyù pinyin and write the corresponding characters. The best way to do this exercise is to think the meaning of the sentence, pronounce its sounds, and write its characters all at the same time. This will help you to internalize Chinese characters, and they will come to life for you. The second exercise, listed under a roman numeral II, is simple translation. Again you will do best to think the meanings and say the sounds as you write the characters in these exercises. You can do these exercises using either simplified or traditional characters.

The last six pages in this workbook (pp. 124-129) list characters that are either especially complex (such as yìng ‘win’) or not especially common (such as lóngxìa ‘lobster’). Normally it is better to concentrate on simpler and commoner characters in your introductory course and to leave the difficult and rare characters for more advanced study. We list these characters for your reference, but have omitted the accompanying exercises.

There are five appendices beginning on p. 131. Appendix I is a list of characters that are commonly used in interjections. Appendix II lists characters that have more than one pronunciation, with different pronunciations corresponding to different meanings.

Appendix III is especially important. Many students have found it useful in learning characters. It lists all of the characters in this workbook according to their traditional radicals. The first column, on the left, lists the radicals in the order in which they appear in traditional dictionaries. The second column gives you the traditional “radical numbers.” (You will notice that some numbers, such as 3 and 4, are skipped. That is because these are such rare radicals that no character in our whole workbook uses them.) The third column lists all of the characters in our workbook that are classified under the given radical. These characters are, moreover, listed in order as they appear in the workbook. This makes it easy for you to use this appendix at any time and reliably keep using it all the way through your study. You will be especially well advised to note certain common radicals and their meanings. Radical number 9, for example, is the “human being” radical and has the common forms 人 and 亻. (Some radicals take two forms, some only one.) Radical 18 is the “knife” radical, radical 30 the
“mouth” radical, and so on. The common radicals that you are well served to notice are numbers 9, 18, 30, 32, 38, 40, 61, 64, 72, 75, 85, 86, 96, 109, 118, 120, 140, 149, 157, 162, 167, 169, 184, and 187. For these radicals we have added meaning glosses (“knife,” “mouth,” etc.) directly below the radical. Appendix IV lists some of the ways in which standard components of characters appear in simplified characters. This appendix will be especially useful when you are trying to master simplified characters. The column on the left lists some common character-components in their simplified forms, and the space to the right lists, in the order in which they appear in this workbook, the characters that use those simplified components. Appendix V is a vocabulary list to accompany the lyrics to the song “Bygone Times” that appears on p. 91 of the Blue Book.

The index at the “back” of the book (pp. 143-151) is arranged Western style, beginning at the Western “front” as if it were in a Western book. Experience has shown that students find this arrangement of the index easier to use.

TO THE TEACHER

It is best to introduce this workbook shortly after you have begun Unit I, Lesson 1. Do not introduce characters during the Foundation Work. The Foundation Work is demanding and extremely crucial, and requires the student’s fullest possible attention.

Although this workbook is, to a large extent, “self-programmed,” your role as teacher is very important in assuring its successful use. There are several things you can do.

First, do whatever you can to reinforce your students’ commitment to daily work on characters. Even the best-intentioned students, when they confront other pressures on their time, may be tempted to “leave characters for the weekend”—or even longer. You should constantly remind your students that they will spend much less time, in the long run, if they spend a little bit of time every day.

Second, you can add some external discipline to your students’ self-discipline by asking them to write each character 10 times and to hand the copies in every day. This exercise also serves the purpose of allowing you to check to be sure your students correctly understand the structure of the characters. It is a good idea to supply your students with photocopied grid paper for this purpose. Remember that they are beginners and therefore the boxes should be big—about 1” square.

Third, it is a good idea to give quizzes on characters frequently—about twice a week. You needn’t test many characters or spend much class time on these quizzes. Three to five minutes is enough. The purpose is to encourage your students in the habit of making steady, bit-by-bit progress.