第一步 Dì yī bù: Beginners' Chinese

Chinese characters

Interviewer: Mandarin script is also a bit of a challenge, isn't it? to say the least, with about 50,000 characters to contend with. How can a beginner manage Qian?

Qian: I know, this is a very challenging aspect of learning Mandarin. But you must remember although they're 50,000 characters, one only really needs about 2,000 characters to be able to write and read and be competent with the language. And normally I would say 1,000 characters are sufficient to communicate in writing and speaking. Now, our beginners' course only teaches the basic 400 characters. And you will be very surprised to know that with those 400 characters you can mix and match different combinations to make a lot more phrases and expressions, and to be able to cope with daily conversations. Let me give you some examples. Now, suppose I have taught you four characters only, OK? And these four characters are: 明 *míng* meaning '*bright'*, 天 *tiān* means '*sky/day'*, 白 *bāi* means '*white/clear'* and 气 *qì* means '*air'*. Now we can use those four characters or we can say they are four words because some Chinese words consist of one character, other words consist of two characters, other words may consist of three characters. So we've got those four characters, therefore words OK? Now, let's try to combine them. Now if we put 明 *míng* (bright) and 天 *tiān* (sky) together it means 'tomorrow'. Now, if we put the 'bright' and 'white' together we can form the verb 'to understand' and the Chinese word is 明白 *míng bai*. OK? Now, if we put the word 'white' and the word 'day' together, we get the word 'day time' and it sounds like this: 白天 *bāi tiān* and finally if we put the word for 'sky' and the 'air' together we get the word 'weather', and it sounds like this: 天气 *tiānqì*. So you see, with the four words, four characters to start with, you end up having eight words.

Interviewer: and when you think about the extra dimension you get where each of the characters or words you've just told us about has different tones, which each have a different meaning, with that initial subset you can very rapidly, sort of, expand the possible meanings you can convey.

Qian: That's true, that's very true, yes.

Interviewer: So that's just the speaking part of it. What about writing it, actually getting to grips with each individual characters, which are like little pictograms in themselves. Tell us a little bit about that.

Qian: OK, for writing what we do in our course is we first we teach the students to download the Chinese font onto their computers and then they will be able to type using roman letters. They do not need a special keyboard, they can use the normal keyboard and to type in this roman alphabet is called 'pinyin', and then they can choose the right characters. So when they first start learning how to type Chinese characters it helps them to recognize the characters, because writing takes a lot of time. There are a lot of different strokes and it can be discouraging but if they feel they could actually word-process to type characters it's quite rewarding to start with.

Interviewer: OK, that's great Qian. But let's go back to the characters, tell us how you can actually help a beginner to decode these rather complex characters in Mandarin?

Qian: Right, there is a large proportion of Chinese characters which are consisted of (sort of) two components: left and the right or top and bottom. So we teach students the meanings of some key character components, and those key components they are known as head components or radicals in some dictionaries. So that students can associate the meaning with those characters. OK? For example: the characters for 'mother' 'sister', 'grandmother', they all have the head component 'female', or 'woman'. So when students learn all those key (sort of) head components, the meanings of them, so when students come up with a new character, and they will recognize those radicals or head components, and then they will have a pretty good sort of guess of the meaning. And also some of the characters give out the phonetic hint. Obviously you need to recognize those characters first, remember how they're pronounced, then when they appear again in other characters, then you think 'oh, I know how that component is pronounced so, in this new character that might be the pronunciation'. OK? So those other things we teach students. Now, another thing we tell students in one of our study tips is to make up a story for a character, so for example, the character we mentioned earlier, the word for 'bright' consists of the component for 'sun' and the component for the 'moon', so they would say: 'When the sun and the moon are combined it is bright' so, they actually make up stories for themselves. We tell them: 'Whatever works for you, you make up your own stories'. They actually share their stories on the course forum.

Interviewer: Now, that's interesting. So it's actually like, you know, it's 'every picture tells a story', and in fact, if you think of Chinese characters, there's little pictures, little pictograms, and you allow those stories to help you remember what they mean. I mean, that's fantastic and a lovely tool.

Qian: Yes, but some characters, I must admit, it's very difficult to make up any stories for them and you just have to memorise them.

Interviewer: So actually, sort of, moving on from that idea of a very vivid pictorial language, it seems that Chinese words are very descriptive, tell us a li... tell us more about that.

Qian: Yes, that's very true actually, especially nouns. For example, the word for 'film' as in 'movie' literally the Chinese word means 'electric shadow' and it sounds like this: 电影 *diànyǐng*. What about if I gave you the literal translation of a few Chinese words, perhaps you could have a go at what they might mean in English?

Interviewer: Oh, you've put me on the spot now, but I'll give it a go.

Qian: OK, now, here's a Chinese word 电脑 *diànnǎo*, literally it means 'electric brain'. So what do you think is the English equivalent?

Interviewer: ehm... electric brain, computer?

Qian: Correct! Yes! It is a computer! Right, now next one, 地毯 *dìtǎn*, literally it means 'floor blanket', so what does that mean in English

Interviewer: ehm... sounds like it would either be a rug or a carpet of some sort?

Qian: Yes, that's correct! Yes, spot on! Here comes a perhaps a slightly difficult one, the word is: 银行 *yínháng*, literally it means 'silver business', 'silver' as in 'silver or gold'. 'Silver business'; so what do you think it means in English?

Interviewer: I don't know, may be... is it something to do with metals? Metalurgy or something?

Qian: No, it's a bank. A bank you go to put your money in or withdraw your money, so...

Interviewer: Oh I see! So...

Qian: ...in the old days silver was a, you know? used as a currency.

Interviewer: Allright, so it's like, sort of, more like... finance.

Qian: Yes.

Interviewer: OK

Qian: But you did pretty well. OK, so like in any language, there are many stories or, you know, histories behind some expressions. For example, the term 'iron rice bowl', (the Chinese term is 铁饭碗 *tiě fàn wǎn*) refers to secure jobs during the Mao Zedong era, you know, in the fifties, sixties, when everybody had a job. So, we used to say 'oh, you've got an iron rice bowl' OK? But then, during the economic reform in the eighties, when people sort of gave up their secure jobs to try to sort of setting up their own business, then the expression 下海 *xià hǎi* (literally means 'going to the sea') came into the language because I think the the sea is perceived as dangerous and insecure. So you see, that sort of combining different characters to make up new meanings, to be creative with the language, can be hugely fun for students. And in the course materials, there are many word-formation activities to help the learners to learn the new vocabulary.