

Unit 1

Get acquainted with the characters of this unit by reading over this list several times. You should be fluent before beginning writing practice. To test yourself, cover the English and see if you can understand the Chinese, and then cover the Chinese and translate the English into Chinese.

你好!		Hello!
好吗?	好嗎?	How are you?
好不好?		Are you well?
请你……	請你……	Would you please ...?
是我。		It's me.
你好吗?	你好嗎?	How have you been?
不是我。		It's not me.
再见!	再見!	Goodbye!
对不起!	對不起!	Pardon me! Sorry!
谢谢!	謝謝!	Thanks!
不谢。	不謝!	You're welcome!
姓谢。	姓謝。	My last name is Xie.
不姓谢。	不姓謝。	My last name is not Xie.
他们好吗?	他們好嗎?	Are they well?
你叫什么?	你叫甚麼?	What's your name?
他名字是……		His name is
我叫 John。		My name is John.

Some Basic Terms

Simplified vs. Traditional Characters

Recall that simplified characters are those characters among the thousands of characters ‘traditionally’ used in Chinese that were selected by a language committee shortly after the birth of the People’s Republic to be simplified—that is, made easier to write by a reduction in their strokes. Most underwent modest changes, while a few others changed considerably. Here are two examples drawn from characters you have learned or will soon learn:

Traditional form

見 (jiàn)

幾 (jǐ)

After simplification

见 (jiàn)

几 (jǐ)

Pictographs (or Simplex) vs. Compound Characters

We use the term ‘pictograph’ to refer to characters that resemble what they mean, or at least used to. You’ve seen six already:

火, 口, 木, 人, 山, 水, and also

一, 二, 三 and

上 (shàng), 下 (xià)

Different in structure from the characters above are what we term ‘compound’ characters—that is, characters that share common constituents or combining forms. These common combining forms were historically selected on the basis of meaning (now usually called *radicals* or meaning clues) and *phonetics* (sound clues) and combined together. A few hundred individual constituents joined in countless ways account for perhaps three-quarters of all characters.

Some examples: When you combine

‘female’ (radical) and ‘horse’ (phonetic): you get 妈/媽 (mā, ‘mom’);

‘insect’ (radical) and ‘horse’ (phonetic): you get 蚂/螞 (mǎ, ‘ant’);

‘two mouths’ and ‘horse’: you get 骂/罵 (mà, ‘to curse’); and so on.

The vast majority of Chinese characters are compounds of meaning and sound.




Learn as many constituents as you can. These sheets will help you. Caution: the meaning and sound clues are usually generic in nature and not always reliable, especially the phonetic ones. The examples above present a reliable phonetic (mǎ) and a clearly identifiable radical. Not all characters will have such reliable clues. Nonetheless, there are clues, and they make what is a very difficult task less difficult. We urge your constant attention to such building blocks of characters during your study of Chinese, now and later.

Loan Words / Graphs

Some meanings are resistant to either ‘picturing’ (as in ‘pictographs’) or ‘compounding’ (combinations of two or more). For example, how does one picture the word ‘no’? In many such cases, the language resorted to finding an already existing word (that is, existing char-

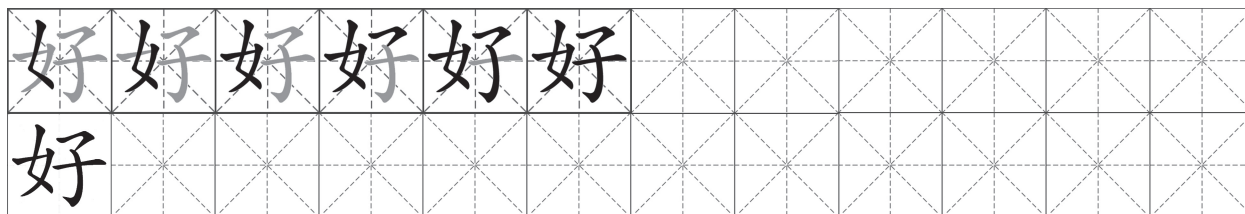
acter) pronounced just like the needed word, and borrowed that character to represent the written form of the hard-to-picture word. Example: 不 (bú/bù) means 'no.' Some scholars claim it originally represented a 'bird soaring into the sky.' Since 'a soaring bird' was pronounced in the spoken language nearly or exactly the same as 'no, not,' why not use 不 (bú/bù) to mean 'no, not'? Context usually helped determine which meaning was intended—thus the term 'loan character' or 'loan graph.' Such characters have little or no meaning or sound clues for learners. Learning them might take a bit more effort.

好 (hǎo)




hǎo	Ancient Form	Later Form	Modern Form
good, well, fine			
Nǐ hǎo!			你好!

好 (hǎo, 'good') is formed with two components, a woman 女 (nǚ), the radical, on the left, with a child 子 (zǐ) on the right. In ancient China, indeed in all societies, a child born of a woman leads to all sorts of good things. Thus the meaning, and perhaps a useful memory aid and some cultural insight, given the importance of family continuance in China. By the way, if our 'etymologies' aren't helpful, we encourage you to make up your own to assist your recall. It's an important learning tactic and perhaps the more fanciful, the more 'yours,' the better.

你好! 我叫Lynn。 Chén Fēng, 你好吗? 您 (nín) 好, Zhōu lǎoshī! 他好吗?	你好! 我叫 Lynn。 Chén Fēng, 你好嗎? 您 (nín) 好, Zhōu lǎoshī! 他好嗎?
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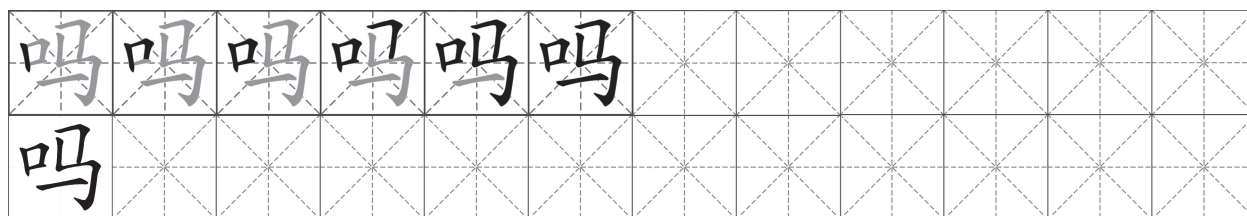


吗/嗎 (ma)

ma	Ancient Form	Modern Traditional Form	Modern Simplified Form
(question particle)			
Nǐ hǎo ma?		你好嗎?	你好吗?

吗/嗎 (ma) is a compound character in both its traditional and simplified forms. The left-side radical or semantic-meaning component is a 口 (kǒu, 'mouth'), indicating something spoken (a spoken question?), while on the right is the reliable phonetic/sound component 马/馬 (mǎ, 'horse'). Can you make out a 'horse,' with its front legs kicking up dust, and maybe a rider on top? Notice how the simplified form derives nicely from the traditional. 吗/嗎 is a final particle used in yes/no or rhetorical questions.

校长(xiàozhǎng, 'principal'), 您忙 (máng, 'busy') 吗?	校长(xiàozhǎng, 'principal'), 您忙 (máng, 'busy') 嗎?
你是美国人 (Měiguórén, 'American') 吗?	你是美國人 (Měiguórén, 'American') 嗎?
他姓 (xìng, 'be surnamed') Smith 吗?	他姓 (xìng, 'be surnamed') Smith 嗎?
你不懂 (dǒng, 'understand') 吗?	你不懂 (dǒng, 'understand') 嗎?



请/請 (qǐng)

qǐng	Ancient Form	Modern Traditional Form	Modern Simplified Form
'will you please ...,' request, ask; invite	請	請	请
Nín qǐng!		您請!	您请!

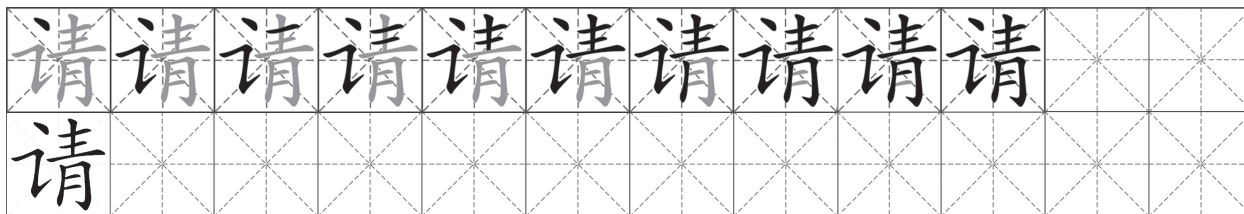
请/請 (qǐng, 'please') is another typical component character. Keep in mind that the majority of Chinese characters are of this type. On the left of this character is the radical/semantic component 言 (yán, 'speech'), since when one requests, asks, or invites, it is often done through speech. Notice that its two-stroke simplified equivalent (讠) is simplified from seven strokes (言) to two and is derived from a common, handwritten form. On the right is the phonetic component 青 (qīng, 'blue' or 'green'), quite a reliable sound clue for this character, and for several other characters. 青 is very useful as a phonetic. Learn 青 and be more able (in the future, not now!) to recall the pronunciation of the following:

清	晴	情	鯖	蜻	氰
qīng	qíng	qíng	qīng	qīng	qíng
clear (as liquid)	clear (as weather)	sentiment	mackerel	dragonfly	cyanic acid

您请! ('Please go ahead of me!') 老师, 请问 (qǐngwèn), 您叫什么名字 (míngè zi, 'name')? ('Teacher, may I ask, what is your name?')	您請! ('Please go ahead of me!') 老師, 請問 (qǐngwèn), 您叫甚麼名字 (míngè zi, 'name')? ('Teacher, may I ask, what is your name?')
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请/請 also appears in the following words:

我请你!/我請你! 'My treat!/It's on me!'	请问/請問 please + ask = 'May I please ask...?'
您请!/您請! (ask someone to go ahead of you; often repeated: 您请, 请)	请客/請客 invite + guest = 'stand treat; give a party'



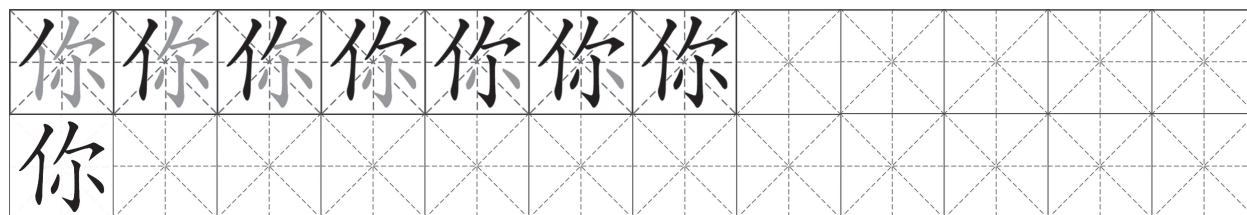
你 (nǐ)

nǐ	Ancient Form	Modern Form
you (<i>singular</i>)	你	你
Nǐ hǎo!		你好!

你 (nǐ, 'you') is a typical compound character (two side-by-side components) where one side, the radical (on the left side in most characters), indicates broad meaning, while the other side is a clue (not always reliable but often a clue nonetheless) to pronunciation. On the left of 你 is the radical, 亻 ('person,' standing or in profile [full form: 人]). On the right is the phonetic component 尔 (ěr). It is not at all a fully reliable sound hint, but maybe it

offers something for our attention. mǐ > mǐ > mǐ > nǐ! By the way, when 尔 functions as an independent character (not a phonetic component) it is pronounced ěr.

你好!	你好!
你们好。	你們好。
你叫什么?	你叫甚麼?
你们都 (dōu) 是美国人吗?	你們都 (dōu) 是美國人嗎?

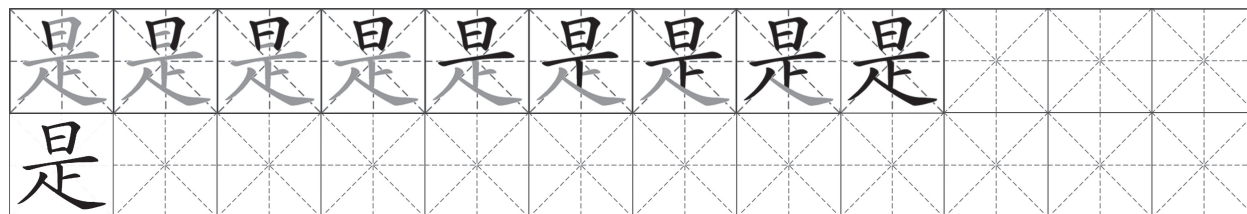


是 (shì)




shì	Ancient Form	Later Form	Modern Form
be; be so; yes			
Shì bu shì?			是不是?

是 (shì, 'to be') is an equative verb formed with a 日 (rì, 'sun' [slightly flattened]) on top and 正 (zhèng, 'correct' [altered]) on bottom. When the sun brings something to light, it results in truth, something correct, something that's so. Maybe that can serve as a memory aid.

你是中国人吗? ——是。我是中国人。 Lynn, 这位是杨老师。 ('Lynn, this is Prof. Yang.')	你是中國人嗎? ——是。我是中國人。 Lynn, 這位是楊老師。 ('Lynn, this is Prof. Yang.')
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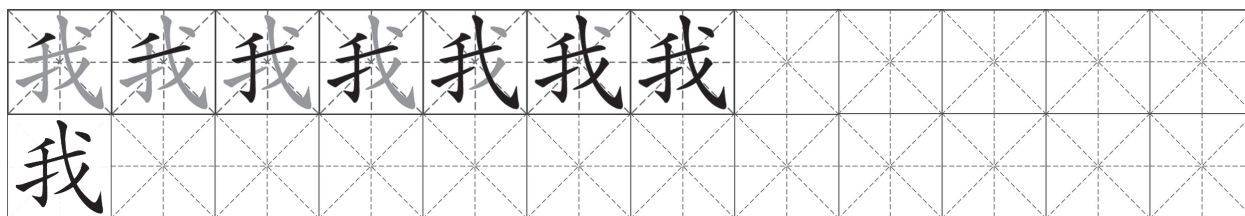


我 (wǒ)




wǒ	Ancient Form	Later Form	Modern Form
I; me			
Wǒ hěn hǎo.			我很好。

我 (wǒ, 'I; me'), which appears as if it didn't have two parts, actually does. It is a picture of a hand, 手 (shǒu) (on the left), 'personally' holding one's own ancient weapon, a halberd or lance (戈). You'll realize the two parts when you practice writing 我. Don't forget the dot, the final stroke of the 'lance.' The form was later used exclusively to mean 'I; me.'

我姓陈(Chén)。 请问，您贵姓？(Qǐngwèn, nín guìxìng?) 我叫Máo Zhìpéng, 我是北京人 (Běijīng-rén)。	我姓陳(Chén)。 請問，您貴姓？(Qǐngwèn, nín guìxìng?) 我叫Máo Zhìpéng, 我是北京人 (Běijīng-rén)。
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再 (zài)

zài	Ancient Form	Later Form	Modern Form
again			
zài jiàn			再见 / 再見

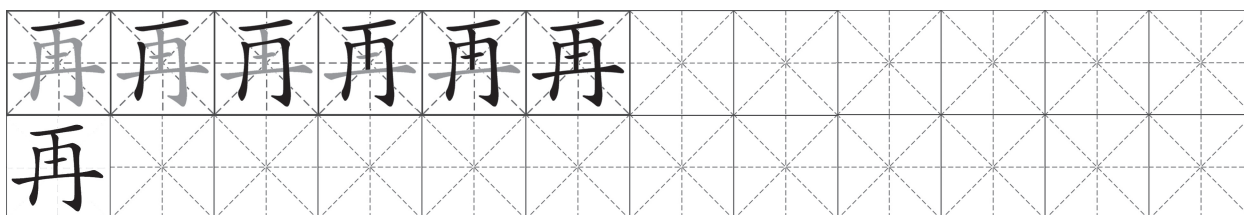
再 (zài) means 'again, for a second time.' The ancient form is a fish in the middle with two horizontal lines on the ends indicating two fish on a line. Two fish on a line > 'again; twice; once more.' What then of the modern form? Any clues there? Some see a 'structure' with

layer upon layer, ‘again’ and ‘again’ (those three horizontal lines, perhaps?). You can take your choice or provide another to remember the meaning of ‘again’ of 再.

王 (Wáng, surname) 老师, 再见! 王老师, 请您再说一遍 (yí biàn)。	王 (Wáng, surname) 老師, 再見! 王老師, 請您再說一遍 (yí biàn)。
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再 also appears in the following words:

再见 / 再見 again + see = ‘good-bye; see you again’	再三 again + three = ‘over and over again’
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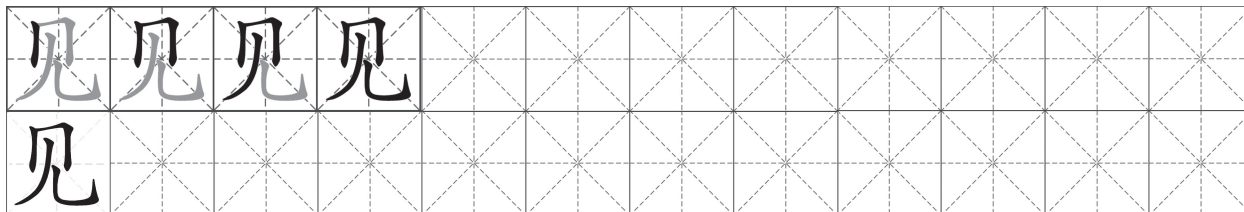


见/見 (jiàn)

jiàn	Ancient Form	Later Form	Modern Traditional Form	Modern Simplified Form
see; meet up with				
Zàijiàn!			再見!	再见!

见/見 (jiàn) combines a large 目 (mù, ‘eye’) on top of an altered 人 (rén, ‘person’) and easily renders the meaning ‘to see,’ or the extended meaning ‘to go to see; to meet up with.’ Like many simplified characters, the modern simplified form derives from the common handwritten form. Many commonly used handwritten forms, popular for many years among the people, became official simplified characters, so the transition to simplified characters was a relatively easy task for native speakers of Chinese. Our task as second language learners is not so easy.

再见, Lynn! 明天 (míngtiān, 'tomorrow') 见。 一会儿 (yíhuìr, 'a little while') 见。 李老师再见!	再見, Lynn! 明天 (míngtiān, 'tomorrow') 見。 一會兒 (yíhuìr, 'a little while') 見。 李老師再見!
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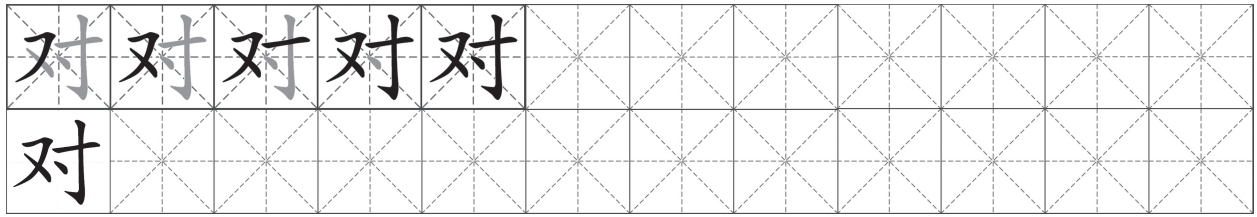


对/對 (duì)

duì	Ancient Form	Later Form	Modern Traditional Form	Modern Simplified Form
face toward; toward; correct				
Duìbuqǐ!			對不起!	对不起!

The ancient form of 對/对 (duì) is a hand on the right holding a stand upon which candles burn. Look closely at the earlier forms, and the modern traditional forms for the candles and the hand (the candles disappeared in the simplified form). Perhaps this is the origin for the meaning 'face toward' (the burning candles, that is). 对不起/對不起 (duìbuqǐ) literally means 'one cannot (不) rise (起) to face (对/對) the other person,' so one is unworthy and needs to excuse oneself. From the original meaning of 'toward,' the meaning of 'correct,' and, in certain contexts 'yes,' was also derived, all from the character 对/對.

对不起, 我不懂。 ——没关系, 我再说一遍。(Méi guānxì, wǒ zài shuō yí biàn.) 对不对? 对。'Right or wrong? Right.'	對不起, 我不懂。 ——沒關係, 我再说一遍。(Méi guānxì, wǒ zài shuō yí biàn.) 對不對? 對。'Right or wrong? Right.'
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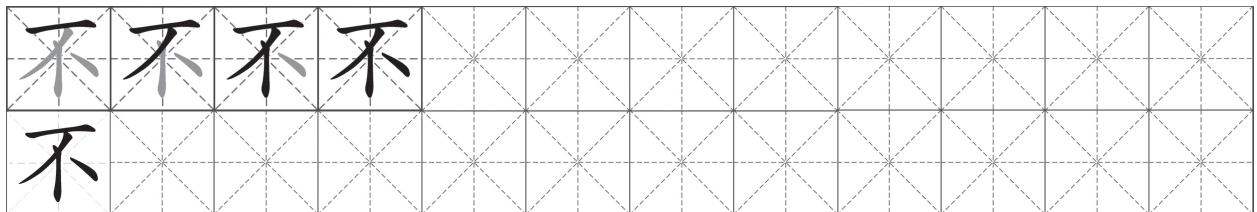


不 (bù)



bù	Ancient Form	Later Form	Modern Form
not; no			

In ancient times 不 (bù, 'not, no') was like a drawing of a bird rising to heaven, no longer in sight. Other sources claim it originally represented a 'radish.' The Chinese language, needing a word to represent the negative, borrowed the character meaning 'radish' and used it to mean 'no, not,' in the process known as 'phonetic loan.' My real dislike for radishes led me to forming a memory aid for 'bù.' NO radishes for me! Reminder: 不 (just like 一, yī, 'one') changes its tone in certain environments. Do you remember the rule?

不好 — 不对 — 是不是? 不谢 — 对不起! 我不姓王。 他不是老师, 他是学生 (xuésheng, 'student').	不好 — 不對 — 是不是? 不謝 — 對不起! 我不姓王。 他不是老師, 他是學生 (xuésheng, 'student').
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起 (qǐ)

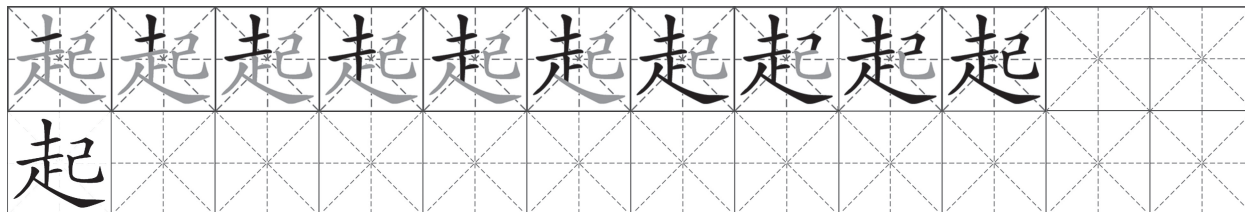
qǐ	Ancient Form	Modern Form
get up; rise; start		
Duìbuqǐ!		对不起! / 對不起!

起 (qǐ) is composed of two components, a semantic indicating broad meaning and a phonetic, roughly indicating sound. On the left is the common character 走 (zǒu), meaning 'to walk, to go,' a common radical. On the right of 起 is the phonetic component 己 (jǐ). jǐ > jǐ > jǐ > qǐ!




(After bumping into someone) 对不起, 对不起! ——没关系, 没关系! (Méi guānxì!) 'No problem! / That's quite all right!'	(After bumping into someone) 對不起, 對不起! ——沒關係, 沒關係! (Méi guānxì!) 'No problem! / That's quite all right!'
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起 also appears in the following words:

一起 one + rise = 'together' 起床 rise + bed = 'get out of bed; get up in the morning'	对不起 / 對不起 face (a person) + (can)not + rise to = 'sorry'
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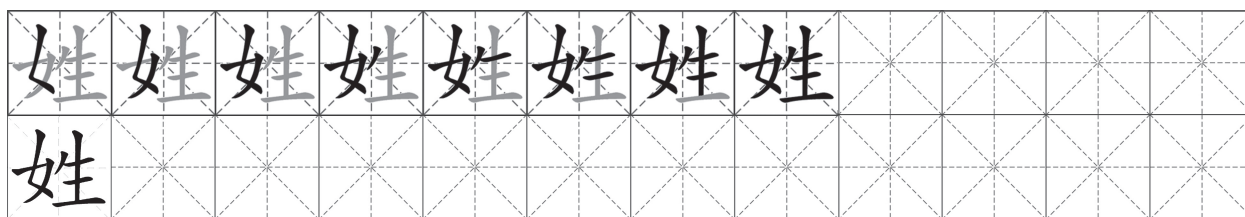


姓 (xìng)

xìng	Ancient Form	Later Form	Modern Form
surname(d); family name			
Tā xìng shénme?			他姓什么 / 甚麼?

姓 (xìng, 'surname[d]') is formed with 女 (nǚ, 'woman') on the left, the radical (somewhat elongated when a radical), and 生 (shēng, 'to give birth'), on the right, suggesting a child is born (生) of a woman (女) and thus acquires a surname. In ancient times, it was the mother from whom one derived one's family name. In present-day China, a woman retains her family name after marriage rather than adopting the man's name, as is common in many other cultures.

他姓什么? ——他姓谢。 请问, 您贵姓?	他姓甚麼? ——他姓謝。 請問, 您貴姓?
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谢/謝 (xiè)



xiè	Ancient Form	Modern Traditional Form	Modern Simplified Form
thank; (a surname)		謝	谢
xièxie!		謝謝!	谢谢!

谢/謝 (xiè, 'to thank') 谢谢/謝謝 (xièxie, 'thank you'), on the left is the speech radical, (言/讠), and on the right is the phonetic component 射 (shè, 'shoot'), a long way from xiè to be sure. 谢/謝 may provide an early example of a character for which it is difficult to find a memory aid. 'Speech' plus 'shoot'? Perhaps you can suggest one. If you can, let me say 谢谢/謝謝 to you! Here's a fun expression using 谢/謝: 谢天谢地/謝天謝地 (xiètiān-xièdì) ('thank heaven and thank earth') = Thank goodness!/ Thank God!

谢谢您! 谢谢你! 谢谢老师! 不谢, 不谢。	謝謝您! 謝謝你! 謝謝老師! 不謝, 不謝。
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谢谢谢谢谢谢谢谢谢谢谢谢谢谢
谢谢

他 (tā)

tā	Ancient Form	Modern Form
he; him		
Tā hěn hǎo.		他很好。

他 (tā, 'he; him') combines the very common radical for 人 (rén, 'man; person') (the 'standing-man' variety, 亻) with a very old phonetic, pronounced nowadays nothing like 'tā.' The right side is actually a common character you have either learned already or will soon learn. It's 也 (yě, 'also'). You will need to distinguish:

also

he; him

she; her (with 女, nǚ, 'female' radical)


他好吗？ ——他很好，你呢？ 我也很好。	他好嗎？ ——他很好，你呢？ 我也很好。
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他 also appears in the following words:

他的 he + 的 (de) = 'his'	他很好。
他们 he + (plural suffix) = 'they; them' (including men and women)	

[illegible]

们/們 (men)

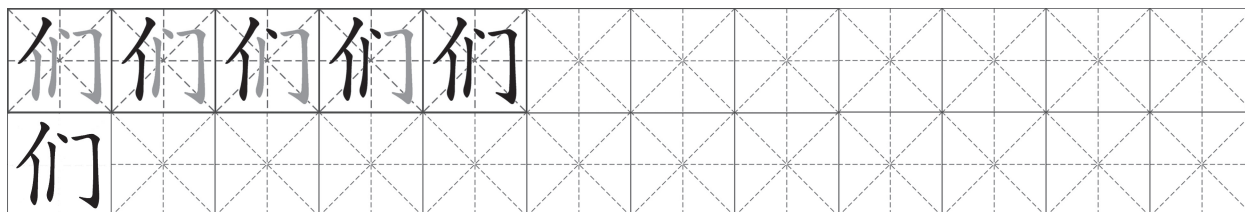
men	Ancient Form	Modern Traditional Form	Modern Simplified Form
(plural suffix for nouns and pronouns)		們	们
wǒmen, nǐmen, tāmen		我們, 你們, 他們	我们, 你们, 他们

们/們 (men) (note: no tone) is a compound character built, like the majority of Chinese characters, of two components: on the left is the radical, 亻 (rén), meaning 'man,' a 'person' (this 'combining form' is often referred to as 'a standing man' [full shape: 人]); on the right is the very reliable sound indicator or phonetic 门/門 (mén, 'door'). Looks like a door with two (multiple or plural) leaves, right? 们/們 is added to a pronoun or noun, usually related to persons, indicating plurality.



我们都好, 你们呢? 他们都懂, 你也懂吗?	我們都好, 你們呢? 他們都懂, 你也懂嗎?
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们/們 also appears in the following words:

我 (I) + 们/們 = 我们/我們 'we/us'	你 (you) + 们/們 = 你们/你們 'you' [plural]
他 (he) + 们/們 = 他们/他們 'they/them'	孩子 (child) + 们/們 = 孩子们/孩子們 'children'

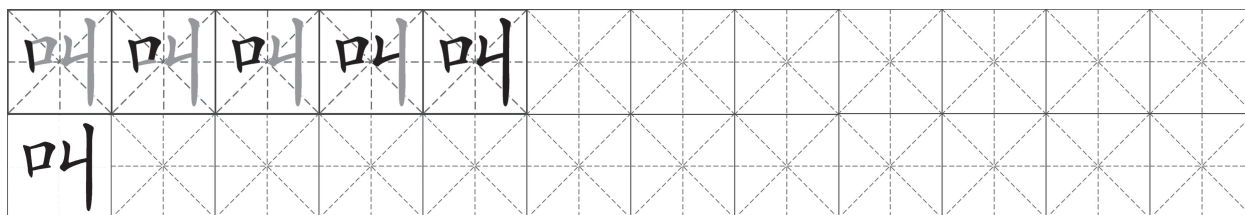


叫 (jiào)




jiào	Ancient Form	Modern Form
be called (by a name)		
Nǐ jiào shénme?		你叫什么 / 甚麼?

叫 (jiào, 'to be called') combines the very common radical 口 (kǒu, 'mouth') on the left—which implies some sort of activity involved with speech—with 丿 (jiū) on the right, which provides a clue to its sound. The right side looks like the number 'four,' right? Memory aid: "I called you four times and you still haven't answered!" 口 is an important radical, well worth remembering. You will see it again and again (e.g., in 叫, 吗/嗎).

請問，你叫什么名字？ ——我姓李 (Lǐ), 叫李文 (Lǐ Wén)。 我叫 John, 你叫什么？	請問，你叫甚麼名字？ ——我姓李 (Lǐ), 叫李文 (Lǐ Wén)。 我叫 John, 你叫甚麼？
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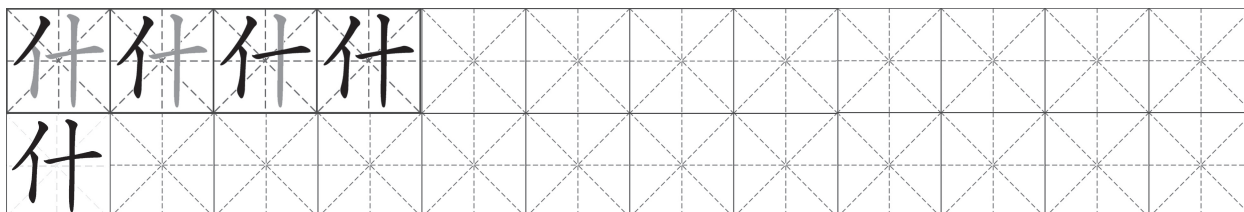


什/甚 (shén)

shén	Ancient Form	Modern Traditional Form	Modern Simplified Form
(combining form with 'me' [么/麼]); what			
shénme		甚麼	什么

什/甚 (shén), in its simplified form, combines 'person' (rén, the 'standing man' [full form 人]) on the left with 十 (shí, 'ten') on the right, with the original meaning of 'ten people.' Note how the modern simplified form actually resembles the ancient form. Later 什/甚 came to be used with 么/麼 (me) to mean 'what,' 什么 / 甚麼 (shénme).

他叫什么名字? 他的名字叫谢立山 (Xiè Lìshān)。 他姓什么, 叫什么? 你的电话号码 (diànhuà hàomǎ) 是什么? What's your telephone number?	他叫甚麼名字? 他的名字叫謝立山 (Xiè Lìshān)。 他姓甚麼, 叫甚麼? 你的電話號碼 (diànhuà hàomǎ) 是甚麼? What's your telephone number?
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么/麼 (me)

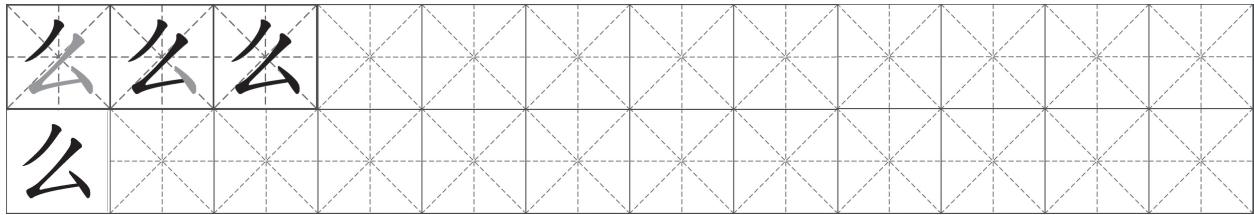
me	Ancient Form	Modern Traditional Form	Modern Simplified Form
(suffix to the question word and adverb 'what, how')	麼	麼	么
shénme		甚麼	什么

么/麼 (me) as a suffix is a phonetic loan; that is, a character with near identical pronunciation but a different meaning was 'borrowed' to serve as a needed character. Note how the simplified form is simply a reduction to the bottom part of the traditional character. On the bottom of both characters, traditional and simplified, there's something that looks like a 'nose'—someone sniffing to find out 'what' something is, what's going on.




你叫什么名字? 你说 (shuō, 'say') 什么?	你叫甚麼名字? 你說 (shuō, 'say') 甚麼?
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么/麼 also appears in the following words:

什么 / 甚麼 — 'what?'	多么 / 多麼 — 'how, what' (to express exclamation)
怎么 / 怎麼 — 'how?'	这么 / 這麼 — 'such, so'



名 (míng)

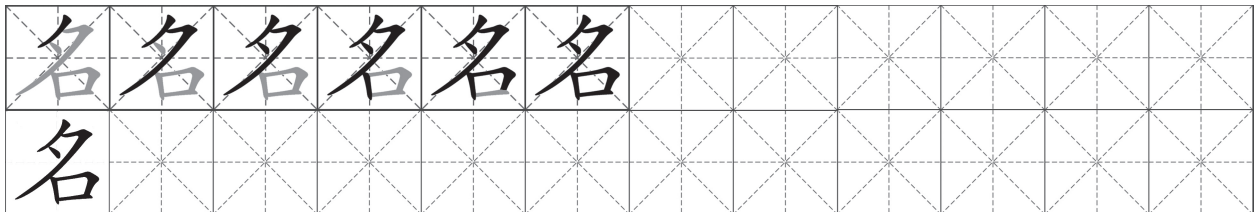
míng	Ancient Form	Later Form	Modern Form
name			
míngzi			名字

名 (míng, 'name') is composed of 口 (kǒu, 'mouth' radical) on the bottom and 'evening' on top. Perhaps the reasoning is: In the dark of the evening a person can only be identified by shouting his/her name. By the way, the element for 'evening' (the top part) is worth noticing. It appears in another very useful character: 多 (duō) [evening on top of evening] > 'many; numerous.' You will learn it in the next unit.




他叫什么名字? ——他姓 Mèng, 叫 Mèng Dérú。	他叫甚麼名字? ——他姓 Mèng, 叫 Mèng Dérú。
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名 also appears in the following words:

名人 name + person = 'a famous person; celebrity'	名字 name + character = 'name; given name'
有名 have + name = 'famous'	姓名 surname + given name = 'one's full name'



字 (zì)

zì	Ancient Form	Later Form	Modern Form
written character; word			
míngzi			名字

字 (zì, 'written character; word') is composed of 宀 ('roof') on top and 子 (zǐ, 'child') underneath. 子 also supplies a reliable clue to pronunciation (but not for the tone; accurate tonal 'carryover' is rarely the case with the phonetic component). The original meaning of 字 was 'to give birth.' You may see that clearly in the ancient form. Well, after the birth of a child, what's one of the first thing parents do? Give the child a name, of course. In this unit we see 字 as part of the word 名字 (míngzi, 'name; given name'). Please note that in the word 名字, 字 is pronounced in a neutral tone. Still later, 字 was borrowed to mean a 'written character' or 'word,' which is now its most common meaning as a single character, but not, however, part of this unit's vocabulary, although a very useful item. Memory aid for 字: 'a child practicing writing characters at home.'

字 also appears in the following words:

请问, 你叫什么名字? / 請問, 你叫甚麼名字? 'May I ask your name?'	生字 give birth to + character = 'new character, new word' (to be learned)
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