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### Characters First: The deep benefits of a different approach to learning the written language

Why is Chinese not only a different language, but a different kind of language?

Why will learning only to speak Chinese never enable you really to understand Chinese?

What is the genius of the Chinese language?

I should say from the outset that I have no qualifications or expertise in Mandarin which entitles me to stand here today and talk to you. I am merely a learner of Mandarin a former Headteacher who has attempted to wrestle with some of the problems presented by the standard methods of teaching Mandarin. With that slender authority, I feel entitled to say to you, that the standard approaches to teaching Mandarin tend to fail for all but the most able language learners. We constantly hear that Mandarin is so much difficult to learn than other languages. We are constantly told that characters are the problem. My belief is that the pedagogy is the problem. Mandarin is *not* more difficult to learn than any other language. In many respects, it is quite a lot easier. Characters are *not* the problem, they are the answer.

This is nobody's fault. Teaching Mandarin as a foreign language on any kind of scale is a very new discipline. It was perfectly reasonable to start by trying to do it with methods tried and tested for teaching European languages to speakers of another European language, or indeed the reading and writing of Chinese to Chinese children. But you know, the wise man, when he has discovered that a hammer is not an effective tool for loosening a bolt, looks for another, more effective tool. He doesn't keep hammering away. What I am suggesting to you today is that we should explore the toolbox, put away the hammer, and find a spanner.

I started learning Mandarin, some five years ago, when, still living in London and Head of a London Grammar School, I was appointed as Head of Dulwich College Shanghai. No one told me how I should learn it. And I didn't ask. Like most teachers, I'm pretty good at learning stuff, and I didn't see why learning Mandarin should be any different. Five minutes research on the internet told me what I needed to know in order to make a start. I discovered that I would need to learn about 3,000 characters in order to be able to read reasonably fluently. I found out, further, that these characters were pronounced differently in different languages, that each character, rather than having a single, defined meaning, had a range of meanings and associations, sometimes large, sometimes small, which, when combined with other characters produced the more defined clarity of words. And that was it. *I was hooked*. *I really wanted* to know how this language worked. I have always thought that being able to read is more important than being able to speak but in any case, and it was Mandarin as a **written language** that hooked me, not as a spoken language. And it still is.

So I set myself a target. I had 10 weeks before I was next due in Shanghai, 70 days. I resolved in those 70 days to learn 1500 characters, that's just 21 characters a day. And I did that. It wasn't hard work. As a result, I have never bought the idea that character learning is difficult.

Now you'll probably think that that was an impressive feat - and I'd like you to think that it was. But it wasn't really. If ask you what learning a character means I suspect you think this:

Recognise and  
distinguish

Learn  
meaning

Radical

Components

老

Pronunciation

Pinyin  
spelling

Tone

Stroke  
order

But this is what I mean by 'learning a character'

老 - old

That is what I did for 1500 characters in 10 weeks. I found, when I returned to China for my second visit, that I could make some kind of sense of every Chinese text that I saw. I wouldn't go so far as to say it was reading, exactly, but I was certainly accessing the text. It would take some puzzling out, but with a bit of thought, the text would always give up its meaning to a significant degree.

Yes, of course, like it was like trying to discern a landscape through misted glass. But with each character combination subsequently learned as a word, the mist clears and the picture becomes sharper. I have become convinced that this process is actually an essential one in learning how to read Chinese.

I also learned an essential truth, and one which, in my experience, native speakers of the language are loathe to admit, that is that you don't need to be able to speak a word of Mandarin in order to read or in fact write Mandarin. **Reading is the extraction of meaning from script.** I was extracting meaning, therefore, I was reading.

This initial experience in encountering written Chinese for the first time was very influential for me, when in my new role as Headmaster of Dulwich College Shanghai, I had to engage with the teaching of Mandarin. I would listen repeatedly to parents complaining that their son, who had been learning Mandarin with us for three years, could still not order a meal in a restaurant. I would listen to intelligent, diligent children telling me how much they disliked Mandarin because lessons were so boring, dominated by rote learning of characters and vocabulary. And that led me to look very closely at the standard methods for teaching Chinese and to conclude very quickly that there had to be a better way.

I have spent the last three years, with my collaborators, Annabel Parker and Tim Nash and with recognised experts in the field of Mandarin education, such as Katharine Carruthers, Joel Bellasen, George Zhang, working out what that might be, and crucially resourcing it. The principles of what we have come to call the Wo Hui method are these:

- Character learning ceases to be a problem if it is dealt with, in the early stages of learning, separately from the spoken language, and with its own scope and sequence of learning.
- An appreciation of the genius of the language and the creative capacity of children in manipulating, playing with and writing the language is unlocked by treating the individual characters as the fundamental units of meaning.
- The simple principle of efficiency should determine the order in which characters are learned. The most frequently used characters should be learned early so that a large percentage of the written language is unlocked rapidly.
- The pedagogical method employed in teaching the written language should involve all the normal strategies of good teaching – good scaffolding and systematic consolidation – “snowballing”.
- Learning is the task of the student; everything that can be learned independently by the student **should** be learned independently.
- The student, not the teacher, should be the master of his/her learning. This means that the student needs to have full access to all the resources they require to enable the learning to take place, not just in a lesson with a teacher, but outside the lesson, at a time and place of the student's choosing.

- What the student can do with what s/he knows, rather than simply what s/he knows should be the focus of all teaching. The structure of teaching should be determined by enabling, through a carefully scaffolded approach, the functional mastery of the language, in both its written and spoken forms.
- The use of pinyin should be minimised and should never be assessed as if it is a legitimate written form of the language. Students should never be required to write in pinyin or to read extended text in pinyin.

The capacity of technology to enable the realisation of all the above principles and thus transform students' experience is enormous. What we have created for our schools is a web-based platform that provides a fully blended approach to support students' learning of Mandarin. Its effect, especially in the hands of a practised and able teacher is genuinely transformative. It is tremendously gratifying to see Mandarin take poll position in student popularity stakes when it comes to choosing modern languages, even more wondrous that Mandarin departments are now seen in our schools as taking the pedagogical lead, rather than being the black sheep of the MFL family.

If you'd like to know more about that method, Freya Zhang and Annabel Parker are doing a workshop on it in the workshop sessions tomorrow. We call the method, "Wo Hui" in stark contrast to its predecessor, which might be named, "Wo bu hui".

The method is built upon the premise that Mandarin is not one language, but two. A spoken language and a written language and that these are not dependent upon each other, as in European languages. The question, therefore, is not **can** they be taught separately, using different content, - the answer to that question is self-evidently yes - but should they be. Is it **desirable** to do so?

My answer to this is also, emphatically, yes, not because it is a more effective way of teaching communicative skills in Mandarin, although it definitely is, but because it is the only way to teach Mandarin in way that gives insight into the fact that Chinese is not only a different language, but a different kind of language which expresses a different way of thinking, a language which has its own very special genius. We teach languages not only to communicate with each other better, but much to understand each other better.

Let me try, haltingly, to explain what I mean by this, starting first with an observation. When I first started engaging with this question I noticed something that caught my attention. In the standard methods, 老师 is taught as a word, a two-character combination, meaning teacher, whereas for me, the natural way to teach it would be as a combination of two characters, 老 meaning 'old' and 师 meaning 'master'. So when you ask a child who has been taught in the standard methods, what the meaning of 老 is, they will say it is the 老 from 老师; when you ask a child who has been taught in the 'Wo Hui' method, they will tell you that it means 'old'. And, therefore, when they encounter the character in an unfamiliar context like 老兵, - an old soldier, or veteran, they are going to have a much better chance of inferring what this character combination mean. Now this has a practical benefit: students become more fluent readers -they no longer have to stop to look up each character combination that they haven't learned- they are never entirely stuck, but it has a more profound benefit too. They understand that a word in Chinese is not like a word in English. What do I mean by this?

Here are two activities that you might observe in the Wo Hui method classroom:

女，子，好，人，大，天，从，日，月，明，早，口，马，妈，吗

What combination of two characters would you choose to express the following ideas?

Pegasus (a flying horse of Greek mythology)

Emperor

Tomorrow morning

This activity demonstrates that, in Chinese, words emerge from the combination of ideas. This combination of ideas represented by characters to create new ideas is not only at the heart of Chinese as a written language, it is its genius. It takes English somewhere between 30 and 50,000 words to express everything that it needs to say, it takes Chinese between 3 and 5 thousand characters to do the same, through this simple strategy of combination of concepts. Through this kind of activity, students become aware that Chinese is not just another language, it is actually a different kind of language, and even in fact that a word in Chinese is not the same as a word in English. In English a word is a sound with an associated meaning– in Chinese it is an association of ideas, brought about by the juxtaposition of written characters, which in turn suggests meaning.

Here's another activity, appropriate for more able students:

It is possible to translate the character 老 in a number of different ways including:

venerable;

experienced;

of long standing;

always;

all the time;

of the past,

very;

outdated;

tough (of meat)

over-cooked (of meat)

What do you think is the key idea that ties these meanings together?

The second activity goes to the heart of what a character is. For English, it is the **sound** of the word that is at the heart of the language. The word **is** its sound – the written word is but a phonetic expression of the spoken word. For Chinese it is the character – this wonderful invention that coalesces a range of concepts and associations around an image that is neither a picture nor a

symbol- that is at the heart of the language. **If poetry is the beating heart of English, calligraphy is the soul of Chinese.**

Every learner of Chinese will resonate with an experience we all have had, and I for one, still regularly have, when reading Chinese; that is of recognising every character and every word, but still not being entirely clear about what the meaning is. Reading Chinese is always a little like reading poetry. Allowing the characters and words to flow and letting the meaning emerge, as you do with poetry, is something you have to learn and which standard methods of teaching never really cater for, since the spoken and written languages are taught in tandem.

We have all noted that Classical Chinese is to be introduced into the specifications. I have no idea at all how the standard methods of teaching Chinese are going to prepare students to access texts like this.

浮世三千，吴爱有三，

日，月与卿，

日为朝，月为暮，卿为朝朝暮暮

I think students trained using our methods might, on the other hand, might genuinely enjoy the experience.

We have talked for a long time about whether we should teach writing separately from speaking. It has been difficult to decide because until now there has been no fully resourced curriculum that follows this approach. We have taken the plunge and produced the resources to support that approach to GCSE. Experience will now tell us the answer. It's too early for us to be sure about the answer, but the evidence we have to date is that this method enriches students and liberates teachers. But to all of you, I now say, let the great experiment begin!