

## Reading and Writing Chinese

By David McKoski, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer

Similar to many other cultures, the Chinese also have created legends to explain how their language and culture developed. Tradition holds that Cang Jie, a minister of the Emperor, invented Chinese writing while looking at the movement of stars and planets and observing the prints made by birds and animals on the ground. He noticed how each was distinct and recognisable. Inspired by this he drew objects, simplifying them by reducing the number of lines. These were the first pictographs created in the Chinese language. Other legends describe a giant dragon climbing out from the Yellow River carrying the Chinese writing system on its back.

The Chinese written language however can be traced back to writings found recorded on the bones of animals and shells. Since the beginning of the written language whether it appeared on animal bones or on the back of a dragon, the Chinese written language has gone through changes and developed into a language that has unified the Chinese people.

As the years passed, the written language developed as writing surfaces and writing instruments changed. Writing surfaces changed from tortoise shells and animal bones to bronze surfaces and bamboo strips and finally to paper. As the writing surface changed so did the writing instruments. Metallic blades were used to carve words into the shells and bones while brushes were invented to hold the ink that would be used to write on paper. As the writing technology changed the style of writing and the shape of the words began to change.

"How do you read and write Chinese?"

There is no alphabet in Chinese similar to English, Spanish, or French. Therefore to write Chinese you must learn a new system of writing. Each Chinese word is composed of lines or strokes, not letters. There are nine different strokes used to create words. A combination of these strokes create a symbol or picture that represents a word. We call these symbols or pictures characters. Some characters represent a single word or idea while other characters must be combined with another character to form a word or idea.

Some characters are called pictographs and look similar to the character they represent while other characters are ideographs and represent the action or concept of the character. As civilization developed so did the

need for new characters. A new type of character was invented in order to express new ideas. These characters have a combination of qualities. One part of the character describes what the word relates to and the other part provides a phonetic description, a clue that will help you pronounce the word. This type of character allows Chinese to develop numerous words.

The smallest character is composed of one stroke and this is the word for the number 'one'. The character that contained the most strokes was used during the 5th century and contained 64 strokes, however this character is no longer in use. Today the character with the most strokes is the word that means 'to have a stuffed up nose' and this character is composed of 36 lines. The average number of lines to create a character is 9.8 therefore many of the characters are not as complicated to write.

However to help the Chinese people learn to read and write their language, the government has made changes to simplify the writing system. Similar to changes in technology, political changes have also changed the development of the written language. During the 1950's the government of the People's Republic of China decided to simplify some of the more complex characters. To simplify meant to reduce the number of strokes that were required to write a character. Having a written language that everyone in the country is able to read and write is important in China because Chinese people do not all speak the same common Chinese language. For example, people living in the southern part of China do not speak the same Chinese language that people in the north speak. However, they can all read and understand the same written language. For example, when Chinese people read a newspaper it does not matter what Chinese dialect they speak because they can all understand the same written language.

Changes have also been made in the manner that Chinese is read. In the People's Republic of China and Singapore words are now read horizontally from left to right similar to reading English or Spanish. However, in Hong Kong and in Chinese communities living outside China and Singapore writing continues to be read vertically from right to left.

"How many words are there in Chinese?"

A student in primary school in China spends many hours learning to read and write Chinese. By the age of nine they must master 2,500 words and by the age of twelve the number of words must increase to 3,000. Learning the words alone occupies almost half of the time during the first years

of primary education. Is learning 3000 words enough? One recent dictionary has listed 56,000 words although it is more likely that there are around 20,000 different words. Mastering 3,000 words will enable you to read books, newspapers, and other modern reading materials. 80% of all the words in books, newspapers, and magazines are represented individually or in combination by 560 characters, the next most common 950 characters represent 96% and a final 700 characters will allow you to read 98% of modern reading materials.

In the future will 3,000 characters be enough characters for the average student to master in order to read books, newspapers, and other modern reading materials. The 20th century saw the simplification of characters and an increase in new words as a result of new technology and greater contact with non Chinese cultures. Not since 200 A.D has the Chinese written language experienced such changes. What do you think the future will hold for the development of Chinese writing?