

A new approach for foreigners learning to read Chinese script, where their native tongue is phonetic or quasi-phonetic



Harvey Stern¹

¹School of Earth Sciences, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia, e-mail: hstern@unimelb.edu.au

A new approach for foreigners learning to read Chinese script, where their native tongue is phonetic or quasi-phonetic, is presented. The beauty of this approach lies in its simplicity. It reflects just how native born Chinese people learn the script.

Many publications have documented the basic meanings of the elements that form the frequently used Chinese characters. Native born Chinese children learn to interpret these characters directly from spoken tongue to character.

This is not the approach currently employed for the teaching of Chinese to foreigners. What usually takes place for foreign students is a conversion of the Chinese characters into roman (phonetic) script (Pinyin), rather than an initial teaching of the direct conversion of characters to understanding. This is because it is considered that the manner a child learns his or her (native) phonetic or quasi-phonetic language may be extended to the teaching of a non-phonetic language.

What is being proposed here is that the intermediate conversion to phonetics provides a significant barrier to comprehension.

Parallels may be drawn between how a native born Chinese child learns to read the script and how people generally receive weather forecasts, that is, via pictorial weather icons. After a mere glance at the definitions of the weather icons, their meaning is entrenched in the mind of the reader. In subsequent contact with the icons, the reader immediately understands them, without further reference to the definitions.

天日期	早晨的天气	下午的天气	最低温度	最高温度	数量的雨	可能有雨	早晨的风 下午的风 最大转速
星期四 2-11-2017	毛毛雨	多云	11.8	17.4	0.5	65	SW 15 SSW 15 最大 40
星期五 3-11-2017	毛毛雨	部分多云	9.9	17.1	1.3	59	SW 15 SSW 15 最大 40
星期六 4-11-2017	多云	阳光	8.8	17.4	0	21	SSW 8 S 15 最大 30
星期天 5-11-2017	部分多云	多云	9.4	19	0	27	SW 10 S 15 最大 35
星期一 6-11-2017	部分多云	多云	9.1	19.7	0	24	SW 15 SSW 20 最大 45
星期二 7-11-2017	阵雨	阵雨	10.7	18.5	0.2	50	WSW 25 SSW 25 最大 60
星期三 8-11-2017	多云	阳光	10.6	19.5	0	28	SSW 15 S 20 最大 40



Source: <http://www.weather-climate.com/14DayForecasts/Chinese.html>

It is this process of recognising the shapes of Chinese characters by which native born Chinese learn to read.

For a country with a relatively low per capita GDP and a variety of spoken dialects, literacy levels are high. These high literacy levels arise in an environment where sounds and tones of the various languages (dialects) are different from each other. A Mandarin speaker and a Cantonese speaker may both be able to read the same newspaper without understanding the spoken language of each other.

One researcher notes:

"Not only were the Chinese able ... to keep in contact with each other in spite of all the various dialects ... they were also capable of communicating with the Chinese of past ages in a way that we can hardly realise ... whether the poem that he was reading was written at the time of Christ, a thousand years later, or yesterday, it was just as comprehensible or enjoyable".

Why should learning Chinese be important to Australia? Aside from China being Australia's largest trading partner, our relationship is deepening in a host of other areas. A meaningful relationship requires effective communication. Unfortunately, although the number of Australian school students studying Chinese has doubled over the past decade, the number completing Year 12 studies of the language has fallen.