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Why Chinese Is So Damn Hard

by
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The first question any thoughtful person might ask when reading the title of this essay is, "Hard compared to what?" A reasonable question. After all, Chinese people seem to learn it just fine. When little Chinese kids go through the "terrible twos", it's Chinese they use to drive their parents crazy, and in a few years the same kids are actually using those impossibly complicated Chinese characters to scribble love notes and shopping lists. It doesn't seem so hard for them. So what do I mean by "hard"? Hard for whom? Since I know at the outset that the whole tone of this document is going to involve a lot of whining and complaining, I may as well come right out and say exactly what I mean. I mean hard for *me*, a native English speaker trying to learn Chinese as an adult, going through the whole process with the textbooks, the tapes, the conversation partners, etc., — the whole torturous rigamarole. I mean hard for me — and, of course, for the increasing number of other Westerners who have spent years of their lives bashing their heads against the Great Wall of Chinese.

If this were as far as I went, my statement would be a pretty empty one. Of *course* Chinese is hard for me. After all, *any* foreign language is hard for a non-native, right? Well, sort of. Not all foreign languages are equally difficult for any learner. It depends on which language you're coming from. A French person can usually learn Italian faster than an American, and an average American could probably master German a lot faster than an average Japanese, and so on. So part of what I'm contending is that Chinese is hard compared to... well, compared to almost any other language you might care to tackle. What I mean is that Chinese is not only hard for *us* (English speakers), but it's also hard in absolute terms. Which means (and here's where I'm going to get a lot of flak) that Chinese is also hard for *them*, for Chinese people.¹

If you don't believe this, just ask a Chinese person. Most Chinese people will cheerfully acknowledge that their language is hard, maybe the hardest on earth. (Many are even proud of this, in the same way some New Yorkers are actually proud of living in the most unlivable city in America.) Maybe all Chinese people deserve a medal just for being born Chinese. At

any rate, they generally become aware at some point of the Everest-like status of their native language, as they, from their privileged vantage point on the summit, observe foolhardy foreigners huffing and puffing up the steep slopes.

Everyone's heard the supposed fact that if you take the English idiom "It's Greek to me" and search for equivalent idioms in all the world's languages to arrive at a consensus as to which language is the hardest, the results of such a linguistic survey is that Chinese easily wins as the canonical incomprehensible language. (For example, the French have the expression "*C'est du chinois*", "It's Chinese", i.e., "It's incomprehensible". And so on.) So then the question arises: What do the Chinese *themselves* consider to be an impossibly hard language? You then look for the corresponding phrase in Chinese, and you find "*Gēn tiānshū yíyàng*", meaning "It's like heavenly script."

There is truth in this linguistic yarn; Chinese does deserve its reputation for heartbreaking difficulty. Those who undertake to study the language for any other reason than the sheer joy of it will always be frustrated by the fact that no matter how much work one puts into the endeavor, it remains, at the very least, unreasonably difficult and, at the most, impossible. Those who are actually attracted to the language precisely because of its daunting complexity and difficulty will never be disappointed. Whatever the reason they started, every single person who has undertaken to study Chinese sooner or later asks themselves "Why in the world am I doing this?" Those who can still remember their original goals will wisely abandon the attempt then and there, since nothing could be worth all that tedious struggle. Those who merely say "I've come this far — I can't stop now" will have some chance of succeeding, since they have the kind of mindless doggedness and lack of sensible overall perspective that it takes.

Okay, having explained a bit of what I mean by the word, I return to my original question: Why is Chinese so damn hard?

1. Because the writing system is ridiculous.

Beautiful, complex, mysterious — but ridiculous. I, like many students of Chinese, was first attracted to Chinese because of the writing system, which is surely one of the most fascinating scripts in the world. The more you learn about Chinese characters the more intriguing and addicting they become. The study of Chinese characters can become a lifelong obsession, and you soon find yourself engaged in the daily task of accumulating them, drop by drop from the vast sea of characters, in a vain attempt to hoard them in the leaky bucket of long-term memory.

The beauty of Chinese characters is indisputable, but as the Chinese people began to realize the importance of universal literacy, the characters must have begun to appear to them like a tiny pair of ornately-shod bound feet — exquisitely beautiful, but not too practical for daily use.

For one thing, it is simply too hard to learn enough characters to become literate. Again, someone may ask “Hard in comparison to what?” And the answer is easy: Hard in comparison to Spanish, Russian, Hindi, or any other sane, “normal” language that requires at most a few dozen symbols to write anything in the language. John DeFrancis, in his book *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy*, reports that his Chinese colleagues estimate it takes seven to eight years for a Mandarin speaker to learn to read and write three thousand characters, whereas his French and Spanish colleagues estimate that students in their respective countries achieve comparable levels in half that time. Naturally, this estimate is rather crude and impressionistic (it’s unclear what “comparable levels” means here), but the overall implications are obvious: the Chinese writing system is harder to learn, in absolute terms, than an alphabetic writing system. Even Chinese kids, whose minds are at their peak absorptive power, have more trouble with Chinese than their little counterparts in other countries have with their respective languages. Just imagine the difficulties experienced by relatively sluggish post-pubescent foreign learners such as myself.

Chinese is supposed to be hard because there are so many characters one has to learn. This is absolutely true. There are a lot of books and articles that downplay this difficulty, saying things like “You only need 2,000 or so characters to read a newspaper”. Poppycock. I couldn’t comfortably read a newspaper when I had 2,000 characters under my belt. I just couldn’t. I had to look up several characters per line, and even after that I had trouble pulling the meaning out of the article. (I take it as a given that what is meant by “read” in this context is “read and comprehend the text without looking up dozens of characters”; otherwise the claim is rather empty.)

I think this fairy tale is promulgated because of the fact that, when you look at the character frequencies, well over 90% of the characters in any newspaper are easily among the first 2,000 you learn. But what they don’t tell you is that there will still be plenty of unfamiliar words made up of those familiar characters. (To illustrate this problem, note that in English, knowing the words “up” and “tight” doesn’t mean you know the word “uptight”.) Plus, as anyone who has studied any language knows, you can often be familiar with every single word in a text and still not be able to grasp the meaning. Reading comprehension is not simply a matter of knowing a lot of words; one has to get a feeling for how those words are

used in a multitude of different contexts. In addition, there is the obvious fact that even though you may know 95% of the characters in a given text, the remaining 5% are often the very characters that are crucial for understanding the main point of the text. A non-native speaker of English reading an article with the headline "JACUZZIS FOUND EFFECTIVE IN TREATING PHLEBITIS" is not going to get very far if they don't know the words "jacuzzi" or "phlebitis".

Incidentally, I'm aware that much of what I've said above applies to Japanese as well, but I feel that the burden placed on a learner of Japanese is much lighter because (a) the number of Chinese characters used in Japanese is "only" about 2,000 — fewer by a factor of two compared to the number needed by the average literate Chinese reader; and (b) the Japanese have phonetic syllabaries (the *hiragana* and *katakana* characters), which for most purposes is as good as an alphabet.

Another ridiculous aspect of the Chinese writing system is that there are two (mercifully overlapping) sets of characters: the traditional characters still used in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the simplified characters adopted by the People's Republic of China in the late 1950's and early 60's. Any foreign student of Chinese is more or less forced to become familiar with both sets, since we are routinely exposed to textbooks and materials from both Chinas. This linguistic camel's-back-breaking straw puts an absurd burden on an already absurdly burdened student of Chinese, who at this point would gladly trade places with Sisyphus. But since Chinese people themselves are *never* equally proficient in both simplified and complex characters, there is absolutely no shame whatsoever in eventually concentrating on one set to the partial exclusion the other. In fact, there is absolutely no shame in giving up Chinese altogether, when you come right down to it.

It's heartening for those of us struggling to learn the language to see the reaction Chinese people themselves often have to their own writing system. I once attended a talk by a Chinese researcher with the evocative name of Ovid Tzeng,² a specialist in the psycholinguistic aspects of different writing systems. At one point in the talk, he put up a slide with some Chinese characters written in *cǎoshū*, or "grass style". "Look at this," he said to the audience, "What a mess! How could anyone possibly read this?" The Chinese nodded matter-of-factly, and the non-Chinese smiled indescribable little smiles of vindication.

2. Because the language doesn't have the common sense to use an alphabet.

To further explain why the Chinese writing system is so hard in this

respect, it might be a good idea to spell out (no pun intended) why that of English is so easy. Imagine the kind of task faced by the average Chinese adult who decides to study English. What skills are needed to master the writing system? That's easy: 26 letters. (In upper and lower case, of course, plus script. And throw in some quote marks, apostrophes, dashes, parentheses, etc. — all things the Chinese use in their own writing system.) And how are these letters written? From left to right, horizontally, across the page, with spaces to indicate word boundaries. Forgetting for a moment the problem of spelling and actually making words out of these letters, how long does it take this Chinese learner of English to master the various components of the English writing system? Maybe a day or two.

Now consider the American undergraduate who decides to study Chinese. What does it take for this person to master the Chinese writing system? There is nothing that corresponds to an alphabet, though there are recurring components that make up the characters. How many such components are there? Don't ask. As with all such questions about Chinese, the answer is very messy and unsatisfying. It depends on how you define "component" (strokes? radicals?), plus a lot of other tedious details. Suffice it to say, the number is quite large, vastly more than the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet. And how are these components combined to form characters? Well, you name it — components to the left of other components, to the right of other components, on top of other components, surrounding other components, inside of other components — almost anything is possible. And in the process of making these spatial accommodations, these components get flattened, stretched, squashed, shortened, and distorted in order to fit in the uniform square space that all characters are supposed to fit into. In other words, the components of Chinese characters are arrayed in *two* dimensions, rather than in the neat one-dimensional rows of alphabetic writing.

Okay, so ignoring for the moment the question of elegance, how long does it take a Westerner to learn the Chinese writing system so that when confronted with any new character they at least know how to move the pen around in order to produce a reasonable facsimile of that character? Again, hard to say, but I would estimate that it takes the average learner several months of hard work to get the basics down. Maybe a year or more if they're a klutz who was never very good in art class. Meanwhile, their Chinese counterpart learning English has zoomed ahead to learn cursive script and god knows what else.

This is not exactly big news, I know; the alphabet really is a breeze to learn. Most Chinese people I know who have studied English at all can usually write with a handwriting style that is almost indistinguishable from

that of the average American. Very few Americans, on the other hand, *ever* learn to produce a natural calligraphic hand in Chinese that resembles anything but that of an awkward Chinese third-grader. If there were nothing else hard about Chinese, the task of learning to write characters alone would put it in the rogues' gallery of hard-to-learn languages.

3. Because the writing system just ain't very phonetic.

So much for the physical process of writing the characters themselves. What about the sheer task of memorizing so many characters? Again, a comparison of English and Chinese is instructive. Suppose a Chinese person has just the previous day learned the English word "president", and now wants to write it from memory. How to start? Even if the person has absolutely no visual memory of the word, they still have at their disposal a host of clues and spelling rules-of-thumb to make use of. What sort of process do they go through?

"Let's see, 'president' — it must start with a 'p', then an 'r'... then some vowel... Let's see, 'pres' — sounds like a short 'e', so it's 'p-r-e'..." So far, so good. Now a snag: "Okay, 'p-r-e', then what? 'President'... Sounds like a 'z' there" — here a visual clue comes into play — "No, wait, 'z' is a pretty uncommon letter, and I don't remember a 'z' there. Must be an 's', since that often has a 'z' sound. Okay, 'p-r-e-s', now another vowel..." And so on. Not all Chinese have developed such explicit phonetic knowledge of English, of course, but the sound-to-spelling correspondence is there for anyone to see (as imperfect as it is), and native English speakers as well as Chinese people learning English can and do make use (consciously and unconsciously) of this feature all the time. If you don't believe this, just ask anyone who knows any English at all to spell a nonsense word like "flugbogs". Aside from some wisecracks who will provide you with answers like "phluggblawgs", most responses won't differ much from "flugbogs".

Now imagine that you, a learner of Chinese, have just the previous day encountered the Chinese word for "president" ("zǒngtǒng") and want to write it. What processes do you go through in retrieving the word?

Very often you just totally forget, with a forgetting that is both absolute and perfect in a way few things in this life are. You can repeat the word as often as you like; the sound won't give you a clue as to how the character is to be written. After you learn a few more characters and get hip to a few more phonetic components, you can do a bit better: "Let's see, 'zǒng'... I remember it had some component that was a kind of weak phonetic found in some other character... What was it? 'Song'? 'Zeng'? Oh yeah, 'cōng', as in 'cōngmíng', meaning 'smart'. Now how do you write *that*? Let me think... I think this is it," (*starts to write the character*) "But there

was something underneath this component. What was it? Something with several strokes...a 'heart' radical maybe?..." And so on. Of course, the phonetic aspect of some characters is more obvious than that of others, but many characters, including some of the most high-frequency ones, give no clue at all as to their pronunciation.

All of this is to say that Chinese is just not very phonetic when compared to English. (English, in turn, is less phonetic than a language like German or Spanish, but Chinese isn't even in the same ballpark.) It is not true, as some people tend to think, that Chinese is not phonetic at all; it is. Chinese is phonetic in the way that sex is aerobic: technically so, but in practical use not the most salient thing about it. And this phonetic aspect of the language doesn't really become very useful until you've learned a few hundred characters, and even when you've learned two thousand, the feeble phoneticity of Chinese will never provide you with the constant memory prod that the phonetic quality of English does.

Which means that often you just completely forget how to write a character. Period. If there is no obvious semantic clue in the radical, and no helpful phonetic component somewhere in the character, you're just sunk. And you're sunk whether your native language is Chinese or not — contrary to popular myth, Chinese people are not born with the ability to memorize arbitrary squiggles. In fact, one of the most gratifying experiences a foreign student of Chinese can have is to see a native speaker come up a complete blank when called upon to write some relatively common character. You feel suddenly vindicated and relieved to see a native speaker experience the exact same difficulty you experience every day.

This is *such* a gratifying experience, in fact, that I have actually kept a list of characters that I have observed Chinese people forget how to write. (A sick, obsessive activity, I know.) A word in Chinese can be composed of one or more characters, and I have seen highly literate Chinese people forget how to write certain characters in common words like "tin can", "knee", "screwdriver", "to snap one's fingers", "elbow", "ginger", "cushion", "firecracker", and so on. And when I say "forget", I mean that they often cannot even put the first stroke down on the paper. Can you imagine a well-educated native English speaker *totally* forgetting how to write a word like "knee" or "tin can"? Or even a rarely-seen word like "scabbard" or "ragamuffin"? No matter how low-frequency the word is, or how unorthodox the spelling, the English speaker can always come up with *something*, simply because there has to be *some* correspondence between sound and spelling. One might forget whether "abracadabra" is hyphenated or not, or get the last few letters wrong on "rhinoceros", but even the

poorest of spellers can make a reasonable stab at almost anything. By contrast, often even the most well-educated Chinese have no recourse but to throw up their hands and ask someone else in the room how to write some particularly elusive character.

I must point out that one of the reasons I am so acutely aware of the difficulties of Chinese is that the first foreign language I tackled was French, which is one of the easiest languages for a speaker of English to learn. If not for this experience learning French, I might never have realized how absurdly hard Chinese is, when viewed as a member of the category "foreign language". Therefore, in much of what follows I will be using French as a convenient example of a more typical foreign language one might study.

As one mundane example of the advantages of a phonetic writing system, here is one kind of linguistic situation I encountered constantly while in France. I wake up one morning in Paris and turn on the radio. An ad comes on, and I hear the word "*amortisseur*" several times. "What's an amortisseur?" I think to myself, but as I am in a hurry to make an appointment, I forget to look the word up in my haste to leave the apartment. A few hours later I'm walking down the street, and I read, on a sign, the word "*AMORTISSEUR*" — the word I heard earlier this morning. Beneath the word on the sign is a picture of a shock absorber. Aha! So "amortisseur" means "shock absorber". And *voilà!* I've learned a new word, quickly and painlessly, all because the sound I construct when reading the word is the same as the sound in my head from the radio this morning — one reinforces the other. Throughout the next week I see the word again several times, and each time I can reconstruct the sound by simply reading the word phonetically — "*a-mor-tis-seur*". Before long I can retrieve the word easily, use it in conversation, or write it in a letter to a friend. "So *this* is what it's like to learn a foreign language," I think to myself, and suddenly the whole process doesn't seem so daunting.

When I first went to Taiwan for a few months, the situation was quite different. I was awash in a sea of characters that were all visually interesting but phonetically mute. I carried around a little dictionary to look up unfamiliar characters in, but it's almost impossible to look up a character in a Chinese dictionary while walking along a crowded street (more on dictionary look-up later), and so I didn't get nearly as much phonetic reinforcement as I got in France. In Taiwan I could pass a shop with a sign advertising, say, wedding attire, and never know how to pronounce the characters for "wedding" and "attire" unless I first look them up. And even then, the next time I pass the shop I might have to look the characters up again. And again, and again. The reinforcement does not

come naturally and easily.

One of the primary ways one learns a foreign language is to read a lot. With most foreign languages, reading, though challenging, is fun, and reading helps to reinforce your speaking; that is, as you read the text you hear the words in your mind's ear, and maybe even pronounce them silently with your mind's voice. But with Chinese, forget it. For the first couple of years, reading anything but your rinky-dink textbooks or spoon-fed pablum handouts is almost impossible, and will do little to help your spoken Chinese. There are just too many unfamiliar characters, and even if you remember what they mean, you are always getting the tones wrong, so reading them provides only a mild reinforcement of the sound, unless you want to look up every single character whose tone you're not sure of. At that rate you might make it through a 150-page *kungfu* novel in about one semester, if you had nothing else to do.

4. Because you can't cheat by using cognates.

I remember when I had been studying Chinese very hard for about three years, an interesting incident happened. I happened to find a Spanish-language newspaper sitting on a seat next to me. I picked it up out of curiosity. "Hmm," I thought to myself. "I've never studied Spanish in my life. I wonder how much of this I can understand." At random I picked a short article about an airplane crash and started to read. I found I could basically glean, with some guesswork, most of the information from the article. The crash took place near Los Angeles. 186 people were killed. There were no survivors. The plane crashed just one minute after take-off. There was nothing on the flight recorder to indicate an critical situation, and the tower was unaware of any emergency. The plane had just been serviced three days before and no mechanical problems had been found. And so on. After finishing the article I had a sudden discouraging realization: *Having never studied a day of Spanish, I could read a Spanish newspaper more easily than I could a Chinese newspaper after more than three years of studying Chinese.*

What was going on here? Why was this "foreign" language so transparent to me? The reason was obvious: cognates — those helpful words that are just English words with a little foreign make-up. I could read the article because most of the operative words were basically English: "*aeropuerto*", "*problema mecánico*", "*un minuto*", "*situación crítica*", "*emergencia*", etc. Recognizing these words as just English words in disguise is about as difficult as noticing that Superman is really Clark Kent without his glasses. That these quasi-English words are easier to learn than Chinese characters (which might as well be quasi-Martian) goes without saying.

Imagine you are a diabetic, and you find yourself in Spain about to go into insulin shock. You can rush into a doctor's office, and, with a minimum of Spanish and a couple of pieces of guesswork ("diabetes" is just "*diabetes*" and "insulin" is "*insulina*", it turns out), you're saved. In China you'd be a goner for sure, unless you happen to have a dictionary with you, and even then you would probably pass out while frantically looking for the first character in the word for insulin.

The most commonly studied European languages — German, French, Spanish, Italian, etc. — all have thousands of those blessed cognates, and they make learning those languages a relative breeze. People who have never studied any foreign language at all may think I'm exaggerating, but I'm not. Here, I've just gone to my bookshelf and picked out a French book I happen to have called *L' homme et le cosmos*. I've opened it to a random page and now I'll type the first paragraph I see:

Cette théorie est assez ancienne. On a commencé à se rendre compte dès 1915 qu'une théorie de l'Univers était possible, lorsque Einstein a, pour la première fois, exposé sa théorie de la relativité générale. C'était là une nouvelle théorie de la gravitation, la seule nouvelle théorie de la gravitation depuis celle de Newton qui datait du XVII^e siècle.

Even if the only French you know is "*oui*", "*bon voyage*" and "*Isabelle Adjani*", you can still figure out what this passage is about. If you remember a smattering of French grammar from high school you can probably piece the whole thing together, with a little memory prodding. If you're actually trying to study French, you will have learned effortlessly and once and for all how to say "theory", "gravitation", "Einstein", "Newton", and "general relativity". Not bad for one paragraph. (Incidentally, readers unfamiliar with Chinese may be surprised that I include "Einstein" and "Newton" in this list. But it is not until one studies a language like Chinese that one realizes what a blessing it is that in European languages, place names and the names of famous people are usually written exactly same as the English words or else merely undergo a minor linguistic facelift. In Chinese the name of every country and every famous person must be learned from scratch; it's impossible to guess that "Shakespeare" becomes the four-character word "*Shāshìbǐyà*".)

I studied French sporadically for about two years, and haven't even touched the language since I started studying Chinese almost six years ago. Yet I can say honestly that I could not as easily or fluidly read the passage above if it were translated into Chinese, even though I've studied Chinese almost three times as long as I have French. I once knew how to say "general relativity" in Chinese, but I seem to have forgotten it at the

moment. I can't even remember the last character in the word for "Einstein". If I were called on to read both passages, the one in French and the one in Chinese, out loud, I'm sure I could still read the French with more assurance and fluency (though that isn't saying much). This state of affairs can be very frustrating and discouraging.

The first year I was learning French, I read a lot. I went through the usual kinds of novels — *La nausée* by Sartre, Voltaire's *Candide*, *L'étranger* by Camus — plus dozens of film magazines, comic books, newspapers, French—English bilingual editions of various books, etc. — even a French translation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which I zipped through in about a week. It was a lot of work but fairly painless; all I really needed was a good dictionary and a battered French grammar book I got at a garage sale.

At the end of *three* years of learning Chinese, I hadn't yet read a single complete novel. I found it just too hard, impossibly slow, and unrewarding. Newspapers, too, were still too daunting. I couldn't read them without looking up about every 10th character, and it was not uncommon for me to scan the front page of the *People's Daily* and not be able to completely decipher a single headline. Someone at that time suggested I read *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and gave me a nice three-volume edition. I just have to laugh. It still sits on my shelf like a fat, smug Buddha, only the first 20 or so pages filled with scribbled definitions and question marks, the rest crisp and virgin. After five going on six years of hard work, I still can't read it to save my life. (By "read it", I mean, of course, "read it for pleasure". I suppose if someone put a gun to my head and a dictionary in my hand, I could get through it.) Of course, much of the difficulty in reading such a novel is not purely linguistic, but rather a matter of the vast cultural differences between China and the West. More on this later.

I realize that I keep comparing French (one of the easiest languages for an American to learn) with Chinese (one of the hardest), and this runs the risk of presenting a distorted view of the relative difficulty of Chinese, but I wish to stress the idea that the accomplishment of "learning a foreign language" varies greatly depending upon the language in question. An average American could probably become reasonably fluent in *two* Romance languages in the time it would take them to become fluent in Chinese. (This is partly because, as a friend once said, "Learn one Romance language, get one free.") At any rate, I'm well aware that there is a continuum of difficulty among languages, and everyone can provide their own litany of the many difficulties of whatever languages they've tackled. Again, I merely use French as a convenient example of an "easy" language, and to highlight this gamut from easy to difficult.

One could perhaps view learning languages as being similar to learning musical instruments. Despite the esoteric glories of the harmonica literature, it's probably safe to say that the piano is a lot harder and more time-consuming to learn. If someone tells me "I'm learning to play a musical instrument", I'm a lot more impressed if it's the violin than if it's the kazoo. To extend the analogy, there is also the fact that we are *all* virtuosos on at least one "instrument" (namely, our native language), and learning instruments from the same family is easier than embarking on a completely different instrument. A Spanish person learning Portuguese is comparable to a clarinetist taking up the saxophone, whereas an American learning Chinese is more like a rock guitarist trying to learn to play an elaborate 30-stop three-manual pipe organ.

5. Because even looking up a word in the dictionary is hard.

One of the most unreasonably difficult things about learning Chinese is that merely learning how to look up a word in the dictionary is about the equivalent of an entire semester of secretarial school. When I was in Taiwan, I heard that they sometimes held dictionary look-up contests in the junior high schools. Imagine a language where simply looking a word up in the dictionary is considered a skill like debate or volleyball! Chinese is not exactly what you would call a user-friendly language, but a Chinese dictionary is positively *user-hostile*. What were those ancient Chinese thinking when they started scratching complicated tic-tac-toe games on turtle shells? Why couldn't they have anticipated the advent of printing, of dictionaries, libraries, computers? After all, the Phoenicians did.

Figuring out all the radicals and their variants, plus dealing with the ambiguous characters with no obvious radical at all is a stupid, time-consuming chore that slows the learning process down by a factor of ten as compared to other languages with a sensible alphabet or the equivalent. I'd say it took me a good year before I could reliably find in the dictionary any character I might encounter. And to this day, I will very occasionally stumble onto a character that I simply can't find at *all*, even after ten minutes of searching. At such times I raise my hands to the sky, Job-like, and consider going into telemarketing. Maybe I'm just not cut out for such things. Someone who actually *likes* such linguistic detective work — such as Sir William Jones, who first noticed the clues that the languages we now classify as Indo-European are all related, or Jean François Champollion, who discovered the key to Egyptian hieroglyphics while deciphering the Rosetta Stone — would be better suited to such activities. But these people wisely stayed away from Chinese.

Chinese must also be one of the most dictionary-intensive languages

on earth. I currently have more than 20 Chinese dictionaries of various kinds on my desk, and they all have a specific and distinct use. There are dictionaries with simplified characters used on the mainland, dictionaries with the traditional characters used in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and these come in both directions, English—Chinese and Chinese—English. There are dictionaries that use the Wade—Giles romanization, dictionaries that use *pinyin*, and dictionaries that use other even more surrealistic romanization methods. There are dictionaries of classical Chinese particles, dictionaries of Beijing dialect, dictionaries of *chéngyǔ* (four-character idioms), dictionaries of *xiēhòuyǔ* (special allegorical two-part sayings similar to British rhyming slang), dictionaries of *yànyǔ* (proverbs), dictionaries of Chinese communist terms, dictionaries of Buddhist terms... on and on. An exhaustive hunt for some elusive or problematic lexical item can leave one's desk "strewn with dictionaries as numerous as dead soldiers on a battlefield."³

Many of these dictionaries are incompetently edited, sloppily compiled, only marginally useful. Some dictionaries have the characters arranged by radical rather than alphabetically by *pinyin*. Those tend to collect dust, because they are almost useless. The reason is that 90% of dictionary look-up in Chinese involves either looking up a character just to check the tone (for the hundredth time), or looking up a familiar character that is part of a several-character compound. A dictionary in which the characters are arranged by radical is nearly useless in this case, since this method is slow compared to alphabetic look-up, and you don't want to waste two minutes searching for a character you already know.

For looking up unfamiliar characters there is another method called the four-corner system. This method is very fast, rumored to be maybe even as fast as alphabetic look-up (gee, imagine that!), but unfortunately, learning this method takes about as much time and practice as learning the Dewey decimal system. Plus you are then at the mercy of the few dictionaries that are arranged according to the numbering scheme of the four-corner system. Those who have mastered this system usually swear by it. The rest of us just swear.

Another problem with looking up words in the dictionary has to do with the nature of written Chinese. In most languages it's pretty obvious where the word boundaries lie — there are spaces between the words. If you don't know the word in question, it's usually fairly clear what you should look up. (What actually constitutes a word is a very subtle issue, but for my purposes here, what I'm saying is basically correct.) In Chinese there are spaces between *characters*, but it takes quite a lot of knowledge of the language and often some genuine sleuth work to tell where *word*

boundaries lie; thus it's often trial and error to look up a word. It would be as if English were written thus:

FEAR LESS LY OUT SPOKE N BUT SOME WHAT HUMOR LESS NEW
ENG LAND BORN LEAD ACT OR GEORGE MICHAEL SON EX PRESS
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DIS GRACE."

Imagine how this difference would compound the dictionary look-up difficulties of a non-native speaker of English. The passage is pretty trivial for *us* to understand, but then we already know English. For them it would often be hard to tell where the word boundaries were supposed to be. So it is, too, with someone trying to learn Chinese.

6. Because east is east and west is west and the twain have only recently met.

An American undergraduate can major in French and after four years be casually reading *Le Monde* while hanging around Les Halles in Paris smoking Galoises and getting successfully picked up by members of the opposite sex. I mean, if they're talented and really throw themselves into the culture, the best of them are soon swimming in the language like sharks — cool, relaxed, swearing, using slang, talking in a blasé and world-weary manner about anything from apartheid to the latest Gerard Depardieu movie.

But not if you're one of the poor shmucks who chose to study Chinese. After four years of study you probably can just barely carry on a halting conversation about how many people are in your family and what kind of music you like. After four years you will probably *not* be able to hold your own in an argument about the Great Leap Forward, nor express all the subtle nuances of Daoist cosmology, nor make facile observations about the similarity of the communist propaganda system and American advertising. After four years you will probably still be stammering hopelessly when confronted with most grown-up topics, unable to use any

colorful idioms, unable to find even the basic words you need, butchering the tones of those you do retrieve, and in general not swimming but floundering, still a *wàiguórén*, still an outsider, still a pathetic dork.

This is the sad voice of experience. And things are not that much better after even six years of “eating bitterness”. Why such a difference in difficulty? Part of the reason is, of course, the deep family resemblance of French and English. I mean, reading a sentence in French like: “*Le président Reagan a annoncé que le gouvernement américaine va continuer à defendre blah-blah-blah*” is about as hard as deciphering pig Latin, and this is mainly due to the above-mentioned cognates, which enable you to boldly sail into uncharted semantic seas equipped with only the simple rules-of-thumb that turn English words into French ones. But the other reason — and these two are not unrelated, of course — is that the two cultures themselves are also about as different as Peter Pan and Skippy peanut butter.

When you get together with a French person, what kinds of things can you talk about? What kinds of cultural references can you bring up and still be understood? Well, you can easily talk about, say, the latest Woody Allen movie. Or *any* movie. The French are notorious film nuts, after all (where do you think the term “film noir” came from?), and very often a big Hollywood movie is released in France before it’s released in the U.S. They love jazz, too; you can mention Louis Armstrong, rave about Duke Ellington or John Coltrane, even refer to Charlie Parker as “Bird”, and they’ll know what you’re talking about. Similarly, names like “Rameau”, “Manet”, “Debussy”, “Duchamp”, “Truffaut”, “Sartre”, “Bardot”, and “Julia Child” are all household words in America. And so on and so forth. We share the same art history, the same music history, the same *history* history — which means that in the head of a French person there is basically the same set of archetypes and the same cultural cast of characters that’s in your head. We say Rambo and they say Rimbaud — six of one, *une demi-douzaine* of the other.⁴

Talking with a Chinese person is a different matter. Most Chinese young people have never heard of Woodstock, nor could they name any of the Beatles. They’ve probably never heard of Tarzan, Marilyn Monroe, Houdini, or Jack the Ripper. I have a Chinese friend who at one time had read the first translations of Kafka into Chinese, yet didn’t know who Santa Claus was. (Can you *really* understand Kafka without the cultural underpinning that includes Santa Claus?) And forget about mentioning anything as current as Madonna or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles; you will get a very, very blank stare. Chinese people will recognize the same major landmarks of European and Western history that we do, of course, though

they will often have grown up with a very different ideological slant on them. Most Chinese, for example, will tell you with a straight face that Nixon was one of the best presidents in American history. After all, wasn't he the one who opened up China to the West?

Similarly, how many Americans other than sinophiles have actually read Mozi? How many westerners have a rough idea of the chronology of China's dynasties? How many among even Chinese majors can recount any portion the plot of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*? Has the average history major here ever heard of Qinshi Huangdi and his contribution to Chinese culture? How many American music majors have ever heard a note of Peking Opera, or would recognize a *pípá* if they tripped over one? How many otherwise literate Americans have heard of Lu Xun? Lao She? Qian Zhongshu? Liu Binyan? Hou Baolin?

What this means is that when Americans and Chinese get together, there is often not just a language barrier, but an immense cultural barrier as well. While a large part of studying most Western languages involves merely learning the corresponding words for concepts, ideas, people, and events that are already familiar, learning Chinese involves learning a very different *culture*, one whose details are not taught in American schools or generally known even among the most highly educated. Of course, this is one of the reasons the study of Chinese is so interesting. It is also one of the reasons it is so damn hard.

7. Then there's classical Chinese (*wenyanwen*).

Forget it. Way too difficult. If you think that after three or four years of study you'll be breezing through Confucius and Mencius in the way third-year French students at a comparable level are reading Diderot and Voltaire, you're sadly mistaken. There are some westerners who can comfortably read classical Chinese, but most of them have gray hair or at least tenure.

Unfortunately, classical Chinese pops up everywhere, especially in Chinese paintings and character scrolls, and most people will assume anyone literate in Chinese can read it. It's truly embarrassing to be out at a Chinese restaurant, and someone asks you to translate some characters on a wall hanging.

"Hey, *you* speak Chinese. What does this scroll say?" You look up and see that the characters are written in *wenyan*, and in incomprehensible "grass-style" calligraphy to boot. It might as well be an EKG readout of a dying heart patient.

"Uh, I can make out one or two of the characters, but I couldn't tell you what it says," you stammer. "I think it's about a phoenix or

something.”

“Oh, I thought you knew Chinese,” says your friend, returning to their menu. Never mind that an honest-to-goodness Chinese person would also just scratch their head and shrug; the face that is lost is yours.

Except for a few famous passages, I can almost *never* really understand any classical Chinese at all without an English translation on hand to consult. This state of affairs is disheartening only to those who mistakenly believe that classical Chinese attempts to clearly communicate thoughts and ideas, as other languages do. It's common knowledge that a passage in classical Chinese can be understood only if you *already know what the passage says in the first place*. This is because classical Chinese really consists of several centuries of esoteric anecdotes and in-jokes written in a kind of terse, miserly code for dissemination among a small, elite group of intellectually-inbred bookworms who already knew the whole literature backwards and forwards, anyway. An uninitiated westerner can no more be expected to understand such writing than an average Chinese person could understand the entries in the “personal” section of the classified ads that say things like: “Hndsm. SWGM, 24, 160, sks BGM or WGM for gentle S&M, mod. bndg., some lthr., twosm or threesm ok, have own equip., wheels, 988-8752 lv. mssg. on ans. mach., no weirdos please.”

In fairness, it should be said that classical Chinese gets easier the more you attempt it. But then so does hitting a hole in one or swimming the English channel in a straitjacket.

8. Because the majority of Chinese people you are most likely to meet want to practice their English on you.

The Chinese mania for English is well known. For the Chinese, as for the citizens of many countries, a good command of spoken English is a ticket out of their current situation and into the Shangri-la of the West, and this means the number of people avidly studying English is quite large. (I've heard it said that there are more learners of English in China alone than there are native English speakers in America.) Young people in Taiwan wishing to do business or study abroad read English texts with the same urgent intensity as overweight Americans read diet books. English phrase books and learning methods occupy the shelves of Chinese-language bookstores like bodice-busters fill the bookracks of American drugstores. English-language instructional TV shows on the mainland like *Follow Me* inspire the same religious devotion with which American soap-opera addicts watch *General Hospital*. Every Sunday, even in rain or freezing snow, dozens and sometimes hundreds of Chinese young people congregate

in what is known as the “English Corner” of Beijing’s Purple Bamboo Park just for a chance to practice speaking English for an hour or two. Any English-speaking foreigner foolhardy enough to venture into the park on this day is immediately surrounded and devoured like a wounded tunafish at a shark feeding-frenzy. The students overwhelm the hapless native English-speaker with a flurry of questions, earnest non-sequiturs on any topic from Hegel to country music, all asked with a tireless enthusiasm that comes more from a desire to simply speak and hear the language than a true interest in the subject matter.

If you are sincerely trying to improve your Chinese, it is best to avoid such English fanatics, though this may prove difficult. A huge percentage of the Chinese you meet in the States will either be hot off the boat and anxious to try out their English, or they will have lived here so many years that half of every sentence they speak is English. (“*Wǒ běnlái xiǎng Wednesday qù shopping, suǒyǐ wǒ jiù dǎ diànhuà* make sure *yíxià tā hái shì yào* give me a ride, you know.” Etc. This is not at all an exaggeration.) Neither of these two types will do you much good. It make take some hunting, but you can always find Chinese who are perfectly happy, even relieved, to be able to speak Chinese with you, and they are bound to be very patient and tolerant of your linguistic ineptitude. If you are in China or Taiwan, the English maniacs can be very persistent and ridiculously helpful, and this will make it far too easy to never speak or hear a word of Chinese. (They’ve usually been studying English a lot longer than you’ve been studying Chinese.) In such cases you must be polite, but decline offers of aid, invitations to movies, suggestions to have a “free talk”, etc. Each of these situations will turn into an English lesson for that person. It may seem selfish not to help them, but such people will easily find plenty of English-speaking, totally unsinified westerners to practice on. And your best bet to improve is just to close your eyes and dive in.

9. Because there are too many romanization methods and they all suck.

Well, perhaps that’s too harsh. But it is true that there are too many of them, and most of them were designed either by committee or, worse, by linguists. It is, of course, a very tricky task to devise a romanization method; some are better than others, but all involve plenty of counterintuitive spellings. And if you’re serious about a career in Chinese, you’ll have to grapple with at least four or five of them, believe it or not. *Pinyin* is now *de rigueur* for mainland materials, and despite some obvious flaws, it is, for better or worse, the method of choice. (*Pinyin* certainly makes Chinese *look* very alien and imposing, with all its initial “x”s, “zh”s,

and “q”s.) You need the Wade—Giles method to use any university Chinese library or to read most pre-1970 stuff about China. Even if you never visit Taiwan, it’s hard to completely avoid the non-alphabetic *bopomofu* method used there. Many people swear by it as the only method that doesn’t confuse you with the misleading connotations of western spelling conventions. But of course this also makes it hard to learn, easy to forget (if those are different things), and totally useless for computers and typewriters. There is the Yale romanization, which luckily I’m not at all familiar with. For those who wish to delve into the works of the famous linguist Zhao Yuanren, there is his own logical but cumbersome romanization. And there are probably a dozen more out there, mercifully obscure and rightfully ignored. A distinguished professor I know once observed that for an aging Chinese scholar, one of the first signs of senility is to make up a new romanization method.

10. Because tonal languages are weird.

Okay, that’s very Anglo-centric, I know it. But I have to mention this problem because it’s one of the most common complaints about learning Chinese, and it’s one of the aspects of the language that Westerners are notoriously bad at. Every person who tackles Chinese at first has a little trouble believing this aspect of the language. How is it possible that *shùxué* means “mathematics” while *shūxuè* means “blood transfusion”, or that *guòjiǎng* means “you flatter me” while *guǒjiàng* means “fruit paste”?

By itself, this property of Chinese would be hard enough; it means that there’s this extra, seemingly irrelevant aspect of the sound of a word that you must memorize along with the vowels and consonants. But where the real difficulty comes in is when you start to really *use* Chinese to express yourself. You naturally want to use the kind of intonation and stress that comes naturally to you, but you suddenly find yourself straitjacketed — when you say the sentence with the intonation that feels natural, the tones come out all wrong. For example, if you wish to stop someone who’s about to take a drink out of your water glass, in English you might say something like “Hey, that’s *my* water glass!”, with a distinct falling tone on the word “my”. If you follow your intonational instincts and do the same thing when you say the phrase in Chinese — that is, put a falling tone on the first character of the word for “my” — you will have said a different word entirely, and might not be understood. To pick an even more salient example, English speakers are used to adding a rising tone to interrogative sentences — a habit that, when exported to Chinese, can result in gibberish.

Intonation and stress habits are incredibly ingrained and

second-nature. With non-tonal languages you can basically import, *mutatis mutandis*, your habitual ways of emphasizing, negating, stressing, and questioning. The results may be somewhat non-native but usually understandable. Not so with Chinese, where your intonational contours must always obey the constraints of the specific words you've chosen. Chinese speakers, of course, can express all of the intonational subtleties available in non-tonal languages — it's just that they do it in a way that is somewhat alien to us. When you first begin using your Chinese to talk about subjects that actually *matter* to you, you find that it feels somewhat like trying to have a passionate argument with your hands tied behind your back — you are suddenly robbed of some vital expressive tools you hadn't even been aware of having.

There are other dialects of Chinese with more tones than Mandarin, of course. Cantonese, for instance, has nine tones, more or less. I suppose this makes Cantonese harder than Mandarin, in the same way that jumping across the Pacific Ocean is probably harder than jumping the Caspian Sea.

So just how much harder *is* Chinese?

I guess I still have to answer the question "Harder than what?" (After all, I don't want to be guilty of the Madison Avenue ploy of the "dangling comparative" — phrases like "Goodyear tires are 30% stronger", "Cheez-Lumps contain 50% less sodium", etc. Stronger than what? Less than what?) My answer is perhaps based on an idiosyncratic standard, but nonetheless, here it is: For an average American, Chinese is significantly harder to learn than *any* of the other 25 or 30 major world languages that are usually studied formally at the university level. Not too interesting for linguists, maybe, but something to consider if you've decided to better yourself by learning a foreign language, and you're thinking "Gee, Chinese looks kinda neat."

There are no doubt many languages that are harder for a variety of extra-linguistic reasons — no one's ever studied the language before, so there are no existing textbooks for foreigners; or the speakers of the language live in inaccessible places, or they are dying out; or they kill anyone who tries to learn their language, etc. — but these are usually not among the major languages offered at an American university. In other words, I'm mainly comparing Chinese with the usual Romance languages, the Germanic languages, many of the other major Indo-European languages, plus other often-studied languages like Arabic, Hebrew, Finnish, some African languages, etc. And yes, Japanese, which is probably close to Chinese in difficulty.

If your particular sect of Chinese linguistics classifies Cantonese and

other dialects of Chinese as separate languages, then just take what I've said in the article above and fill in whichever dialect you want. But if you accept the umbrella term "Chinese" as mainly denoting Mandarin but implicitly including Cantonese and the other dialects, then I think Chinese fully lives up to its reputation as a killer-diller.

It's pretty hard to quantify a process as complex and multi-faceted as language-learning, but one simple metric is to simply estimate the time it takes to master the requisite language-learning skills. For example, take just the total time expended looking up words in the dictionary. Chinese is horrendously time-consuming in this respect, and thus loses hands down to almost every living language except maybe Japanese (this being because the Japanese are silly enough to continue borrowing Chinese characters wholesale for use alongside their more sensible syllabaries). Having to learn two or three romanization methods along with the characters themselves also slows one down. General writing skills are slowed down tremendously due to the complexity of the Chinese writing system, and the hassle of having to deal with both simplified and traditional characters is another hindrance. Put all these things together, and it adds up to an awful lot of down time while one is "learning to learn" Chinese.

How much harder is Chinese? Again, I guess I'll use French as my canonical "easy language". This is a very rough and intuitive estimate, but I would say that it takes two to three times as long to reach a level of comfortable fluency in speaking, reading, and writing Chinese as it takes to reach a comparable level in French. I'm not aware of any formal studies in this area, but there must be an awful lot of anecdotal evidence out there from people who have studied both French and Chinese.

Someone once said that learning Chinese is "a five-year lesson in humility". I used to think this meant that at the end of five years you will have mastered Chinese and learned humility along the way. However, now having studied Chinese for five (going on six) years, I have concluded that actually the phrase means that after five years your Chinese will *still* be abysmal, but at least you will have thoroughly learned humility.

There is still the awe-inspiring fact that Chinese people manage learn their own language very well. Perhaps they are like the gradeschool kids that Baroque performance groups recruit to sing Bach cantatas. The story goes that someone in the audience, amazed at hearing such youthful cherubs flawlessly singing Bach's uncompromisingly difficult vocal music, asks the choir director, "But how are they able to perform such difficult music?"

"Shh — not so loud!" says the director, "If you don't tell them it's difficult, they *never know*."

Footnotes

¹ I'm mainly speaking of the writing system here, but the difficulty of the writing system has such a pervasive effect on literacy and general language mastery that I think the statement as a whole is still valid.

² His sometimes co-author, Daisy Hung, is another person with an interesting name in a list of whimsical East—West combinations that includes Ignatius Ding, Achilles Fang, and Mignonette Chen.

³ A phrase taken from an article by Victor Mair with the deceptively boring title "The Need for an Alphabetically Arranged General Usage Dictionary of Mandarin Chinese: A Review Article of Some Recent Dictionaries and Current Lexicographical Projects" (*Sino-Platonic Papers*, No. 1, February, 1986, Dept. of Oriental Studies, University of Pennsylvania). Mair includes a rather hilarious and realistic account of the tortuous steeplechase of looking up a low-frequency lexical item in his arsenal of Chinese dictionaries.

⁴ Most of what I'm saying also applies to any European country, and, to varying extents, the rest of the world as well. Again, I use French as a quintessential example of a close culture.

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