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# Why Learning To Write Chinese Is a Waste of Time: A Modest Proposal

Joseph R. Allen

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**Abstract:** *This article argues that for students of Chinese and Japanese, learning to write Chinese characters (hanzi/kanji) by hand from memory is an inefficient use of resources. Rather, beginning students should focus on character/word recognition (reading) and electronic writing. Although electronic technologies have diminished the usefulness of Chinese character handwriting, its cultural importance remains. This leads to a hegemony of hanzi/kanji through which the assumed primacy of the written language is reinforced. After reviewing these conditions, strategies are offered to integrate handwriting skills with the new electronic writing technologies, creating an efficient and culturally sensitive program of instruction in hanzi/kanji writing. The article concludes with suggestions for further research needed to explore the theses of the essay.*

**Key words:** *Chinese, Chinese characters, electronic writing, hanzi/kanji, writing instruction*

**Language:** *Chinese*

## Introduction

The title of this essay is perhaps unnecessarily provocative. My thesis is quite simple: Learning to write Chinese characters (*hanzi*, or in Japanese, *kanji*)<sup>1</sup> from memory is an extremely inefficient use of time for students of Chinese as a foreign language—and this may be even more so for students of Japanese as a foreign language. It is inefficient for a very straightforward reason: The time necessary to learn to write the characters is inversely proportionally to the usefulness of that skill. The inefficiency is twofold. First, learning to write Chinese characters consumes an extraordinary amount of time, particularly at the early stages of language learning when the student has no linguistic frame onto which to attach the rote memory; at the same time, opportunities that students will have to practice this skill in any natural fashion are extremely limited in the early (and maybe most) stages of language learning. As Walker (1989) writes:

Chinese orthography is a major factor in the difficulty of learning to function in Chinese. That being so, writing is the most time-consuming activity for the learner. . . . For reasons too diverting to explore now, the return to the learner for the hundreds of hours spent writing characters has a smaller payoff in terms of functioning as a participant in a Chinese society than the work she puts into any other of the skill areas. (p. 65)

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The second contributing factor in this inefficiency is that in almost all Chinese social settings today, the need to write the language by hand is rapidly declining. This is even truer for Japanese, where both *kanji* and the *kana* syllabaries are fully integrated into electronic media. Electronic writing, both on screen and in print, has taken over most of professional and personal correspondence in these languages. Thus, as Walker suggests, the hour spent learning to write Chinese characters (as opposed to working on skills in listening, speaking, and reading) yields very little benefit for the language student—it may benefit him or her in some other arena, such as self-esteem, but not as an early learner of the language.<sup>2</sup> That hour is, literally, a waste of time. I would argue that there are, however, embedded cultural ideologies that complicate this simple formulation; these also need to be addressed.

In the first part of this article, I introduce the sources used for this study, including a review of classroom conditions and attitudes seen in the data; I then speculate on the ideologies that inform these conditions. These arguments might be familiar to colleagues who have experience in teaching Chinese or Japanese as a foreign language; I offer this background for the new teacher and for the researcher interested in the culture of writing generally. In the second part of the article, I suggest different strategies for engaging the changing conditions of the Chinese and Japanese as a foreign language classroom, as well as areas of research that need to be explored further to understand fully these conditions. I address these remarks to colleagues in teaching Chinese and Japanese and in linguistic research. Readers already familiar with contemporary conditions informing the learning and production of Chinese characters may wish to go directly to the second part of the article, which begins on page 244.

## Sources

My information on the conditions of Chinese character writing comes from three

sources: student surveys, interviews with native speakers, and my own observations. Here my data are limited to Chinese as a foreign language, but I expect much of this information applies to Japanese as a foreign language as well—and I look forward to responses from colleagues in that field. The surveys of college students of Chinese as a foreign language included 191 individuals at different levels: 101 in a large state university, 49 at a smaller private university, 33 in summer intensive classes in the United States, and 8 advanced students studying abroad. The interviews of native speakers of Chinese were conducted with educated, middle-class adults, primarily in the service industry in Taiwan: hotel supervisors, secretaries, teachers, librarians, etc. The students were surveyed by a questionnaire about their language learning. Not wanting to skew their responses toward my hypothesis, I did not ask directly about their attitudes toward character writing, but rather posed more general questions related to their study habits. Among those questions, the three of most interest here were related to 1) how much time they spent learning to write Chinese, 2) how often (and how) they used their written Chinese, and 3) the ratio of handwritten to computer-generated materials (see Appendix A). The native speakers were interviewed in person and queried about time spent using computers to write vs. handwriting, as well as the type of Chinese word processors used. For practical reasons, I limited my interviewing of native speakers to those in Taiwan, but I suspect one would find close parallels in other Chinese communities with relatively advanced technology—and again, I assume this would be even more so in Japan. My third source of information, which was actually my initial point of consideration of the questions here, was my 30-year experience as a nonnative learner, instructor, and user of the language. Clearly this does not constitute a full survey of the issues, but I believe my initial findings may yield a representative model of the phenomena under discussion. I eagerly await further research by colleagues

with expertise in the fields of psycholinguistics and second language acquisition to clarify and correct my arguments.

### Native Speaker Responses

The Chinese native speakers interviewed seemed quite confident in giving estimations of their use of the different writing technologies. These estimates showed that they did from 50% to nearly 100% of their writing electronically. Two of the low-end users of word processors had very different reasons: One was an instructor in a Chinese language program and wrote extensively on the board, while the other was a secretary in a university office. The secretary admitted that she was not that comfortable using the computer in Chinese (much of her correspondence was in English); she did say that she would transcribe handwritten materials into electronic versions on occasion because they "looked better"—she commented that she did not think she had attractive handwriting (a topic I will turn to below). Of the high-end users of electronic writing, one was a graduate student in library science at a prestigious university; he also worked part-time in a small governmental library that served both the general public as well as government workers. Obviously this person spent his days in a text-rich environment. Yet when asked, he estimated that 95% of the Chinese he writes is done electronically, primarily using Word software with *zhuyinfuhao* (Chinese phonetic syllabary) input. He said his handwriting was largely confined to filling out short forms, signatures, informational signs, etc. He said the one major exception to this electronically produced writing is that when he took exams in graduate school, the professors insisted that he write by hand! The young man expressed extreme frustration with what he saw as a very old-fashioned way to take exams—library and other informational systems in Taiwan are managed by very high-end electronic software.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, this betrays a generational gap. There were other high-end users, but it was clear that age and general exposure to computers

makes the most difference. Obviously, the role of e-mail is of critical importance and should be investigated separately.

While certain older structural input methods for Chinese word processors (such as Ts'ang Chieh) demanded high character composition skills, most input methods (such as various uses of romanization or the *zhuyinfuhao* syllabary) are now built principally on accurate "spelling" and character recognition skills: If you can say it, spell it, and read it, you can write it. While new contextual methods eliminate much of the need to select characters from electronically generated lists, the further one diverges from straightforward conversation, the more recognition-dependent the writing is.<sup>4</sup> The obvious conclusion from these observations is that in the future students will be "writing" Chinese more and more where skills of accurate pronunciation/spelling and character recognition are of the highest value. Thus, we should be emphasizing those skills in lieu of attention to handwriting. As early as 1989, Walker wrote about the then-emerging electronic writing systems in the study of the language, suggesting:

it is probably only a matter of a relatively short time before students of Chinese routinely produce their assignments on word processors and instruction in writing becomes primarily instruction in composition and the manual reproduction of graphs is assigned to brush and pen calligraphic training. (1989, p. 69)

In my estimation, this still has not happened because, at least partly, of assumptions surrounding the nature of Chinese handwriting. Those assumptions, deeply embedded in different Chinese cultural contexts, are even more complicated when we look at attitudes held by instructors and students in the Chinese as a foreign language classroom. Thus, in addition to the practical applications of new technology, we will need to understand, assess, and engage these attitudes if we are going

to effect systematic change in teaching Chinese writing. First, what do students say about their experiences learning to write Chinese?

## Student Responses

How much time do students spend learning to write Chinese and how does this affect their overall language skill set? Clearly this is very difficult to gauge with any high degree of accuracy and will vary widely by student, background, and program; yet, self-evaluation suggests that first-year students believe that on average they spend a third of their study time on this one skill. This figure is fairly consistent across the groups surveyed. The most compelling evidence is from a survey of 60 students in the same first-level Chinese course where the self-reported time averaged 32%—this was actually in a program that intentionally downplays character writing and promotes recognition skills. In a first-level summer intensive class of 18 students, self-reported assessment was 10 percentage points higher (42%); this may reflect the sense of pressure on the students to learn in an intensive class, or it may be merely the nature of preparation and testing in such an environment. I would note, however, that individual responses in this group ranged widely—from students who said they spent only 5% of their time on writing to those who said they spent as much as 75% of their time on this skill. Without follow-up interviews, these important differences are very difficult to explain. Nonetheless, of the 60 students from the regular first-level class, a majority (33/60) reported that they spent between 20% and 40% of their time learning characters; in the summer intensive class, a majority (11/18) reported times between 30% and 50%. Perhaps spending a third of one's study time to learn to write does not sound wildly out of proportion in developing the four language skills set, but of course in the first year of Chinese as a foreign language, this "writing" is primarily not in composition, but rather in the memorization and reproduction of indi-

vidual character construction. This is very much a prewriting skill, as if someone in first-year French spent a third of his or her time learning the alphabet.<sup>5</sup> Contrast what writing means for a student in beginning Chinese with this statement about teaching writing in the lowest levels of writing proficiency:

In almost all the following activities, writing is not practiced in isolation; rather, skills are practiced in an interdependent fashion. For example, a transcription activity such as dictation or note taking, will involve listening and/or reading comprehension . . . although the activity samples in this section are chosen to illustrate how writing can be used to *support* the learning of formal aspects of the new language, there is some concern as well for structuring these tasks so that students can begin to write in discourse-length frames for communicative purposes. (Omaggio Hadley, 2001, p. 283)

Before students of Chinese can get to such "discourse-length frames," there are hours and hours of memorization and writing of character structure and sequencing. While some classroom time can be allocated to developing these skills (primarily by introducing learning strategies), the bulk of the time spent is solitary and repetitive, much like the time needed to learn to play (not just read) music well. As the student progresses through the levels of language learning proficiency, there is an increasing efficiency in this process, but that efficiency is offset by the increasing vocabulary that keeps demanding new (albeit often cognitively different) levels of memorization. For example, it has been estimated that a college-educated Chinese person "knows" about 4,800 characters, which he or she can use in about 50,000 vocabulary combinations (DeFrancis, 1984).<sup>6</sup> Thus, at any level, writing Chinese is an extremely time-consuming skill to develop.

The survey also asked these beginning students how much time they spent writing electronically for class, as opposed to time spent on nonclass-related activities. This yielded the single most consistent answer of the whole survey: For coursework in the beginning-level classes, there was in effect no word processing being done by the students surveyed, even for those students who knew how to use the Chinese software and used it in their daily lives. In the group of second-level students surveyed (and from other groups as well), there was much more variation in this distribution, but still the average seems to be around 80% of time spent on handwriting and 20% spent on word processing for coursework. For these students, writing Chinese in the context of class work meant handwriting. If this is a representative group of students of Chinese as a foreign language, then this means that coursework is demanding that students spend a great deal of time learning the skill of handwriting. Is this because that is what the program and instructors require or expect? Or is it because of the structure of the materials? Or is it necessarily inherent to the study of the language? In addition to these pedagogical considerations, I suspect that the problem of cultural "authenticity" also haunts these practices: Writing Chinese electronically is not "really" learning to write Chinese. This brings us to the hegemony of *hanzi/kanji*.

### The Hegemony

What constitutes this hegemony of *hanzi/kanji*, anyway? Originally I called this a type of tyranny, but upon reflection, I realized that the cultural power of written Chinese is not one that is imposed on the language learner or instructor, but rather one that is accepted and even promoted by both. That is, this is not tyranny, which engenders resistance, but rather hegemony, where accommodation and co-optation maintain the power relationship.<sup>7</sup> I contend that we unconsciously promote the supremacy of the Chinese handwritten word in the assumptions and prac-

tices of our daily work in language learning and teaching. I base this contention on my experience in and observations of the Chinese language classroom, and I believe it applies to both the native speaker and the second language learner. But we are hardly alone; this ideology of "writeracy," with its special Chinese characteristics, permeates all levels of social and cultural discourse in Chinese societies. Most obviously, this is seen in the extreme aestheticization of Chinese calligraphy, ranging from the elite cultural venues such as the art museum and gallery to the mundane somatic sites of costume jewelry and the tattooed body. We also encounter this fetishization of Chinese characters in some students' motivations for studying Chinese: When asked what attracted them to Chinese language study, most students surveyed had practical and personal reasons, but several just said "the characters." Similarly, in one language program surveyed, an optional Chinese Calligraphy course was the class most consistently overenrolled in the department; the course focused entirely on the aesthetics of brush writing, which by any stretch of the imagination is not a skill that can be put to much practical use. The high valuation of good calligraphy in Chinese cultures throughout history and around the world is very much part of its hegemonic power. Writing in 1996, Björkstén still feels he has to defend the use of the fountain pen in learning Chinese handwriting:

Many teachers of Chinese hold the misconception that in learning calligraphy it is necessary to start practicing with a brush. As a result, many schools give makeshift courses in brush calligraphy, or, more commonly, offer hardly any instruction in the subject at all. In fact, fountain pen calligraphy is becoming more and more popular in the whole Chinese-speaking world; there are many books offering model characters and aesthetic guidance, as well as regular exhibitions and competitions. Practicing with a pen is as good a way to learn

the characters as practicing with a brush. (p. 3)

Such a defense is testimony to the conservative nature of the culture of calligraphy, in which the fountain pen is seen as a corruptive technology—a technology very much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not the 21<sup>st</sup>! Obviously, this is about much more than penmanship. As Kraus (1991) has shown, in its deepest cultural assumption, the Chinese written language, especially calligraphy, has come to be a dominant marker of Chinese cultural identity. In some ways, to write Chinese is “to be” Chinese; we might say that this calligraphy performs Chineseness.

That might be a hyperbolic characterization of the power of the script system, but there are more mundane examples of its cultural weight. How many times in our daily Chinese conversations do we say: “X? And which X character is that?” Like the word processor, we have this virtual list of homophones in our heads through which we want to sort. In order to respond to that sort of query, we need to either write X down, or engage in a “metalinguage” by which we can verbalize the character—“it is the X in X-ray,” etc.<sup>8</sup> Only when we can write it (either actually, or in our head) do we feel we know what X is, although we might very well have full recognition of its meaning in the spoken context. This is more than just an issue of spelling, it is a question of epistemology. The assumption here is that we cannot even use a word in oral-aural communication without knowing how to write it: Without its graphic representation, the word remains “incomplete.” In the classroom, this fetish is sometimes illustrated (although less and less, I would hope) when the instructor provides a “written record” of the conversation on the board, typically introducing a word in conversation (that is often fully comprehensible in context), but then turning to the board (or power point) and writing it out. This is relatively useless information for the beginning language student since he or she receives little semantic or

phonetic clarification from such an act; in fact, it introduces far more complicated data to be processed, distracting the student from the verbal communication. No matter what assumptions students bring to the classroom, under such conditions they quickly learn that the characters are somehow primary to oral-aural forms. Characters are “real” Chinese, and even “real” Japanese. Thus, textbooks still count characters as an index of proficiency. One popular Chinese textbook series, *Integrated Chinese*, describes itself in an advertisement as a publication that “begins the first year of study in Chinese, and introduces 350 characters.” Later the advertisement says the book “presents *pinyin* [romanization system] texts directly above Chinese character texts, so student can focus on speaking and pronunciation.”<sup>9</sup> The message is clear: Characters count. DeFrancis (1984) has argued most forcefully for the speech-based phonetic value of Chinese language, but the primacy of characters remains a widespread cultural value, as he well knows. In this context, Japanese *kanji* in some ways have an even higher cultural value within the script system since they stand out against the phonetically based *kana* systems; the relatively few and linguistically anomalous characters allow them to become even more fetishized. A Japanese textbook, *An Introduction to Modern Japanese*, notes that after completing the book “you should be able to read all the *hiragana* and *katakana* [and] recognize about 450 words in *kanji*” (Mitsutani & Mitsutani, 1977, p. i).

Needless to say, characters as a written form, whether long (full, traditional), simplified, or Japanese, are very important for the language user and learner, and true competency means being able to process them proficiently both in reading and writing. But questions remain: 1) What constitutes proficiency in these skills, especially below superior levels? 2) What is the most efficient way to reach that proficiency? 3) How might we accommodate the everyday practical difficulties of learning to write Chinese given the high cultural value



placed on the script system? In order to begin to answer these questions, we first need to recognize the situations and conditions in which handwriting competence is important, both culturally and practically.

### Important Contexts of Chinese Handwriting

Everyone in the field recognizes that handwritten Chinese characters must be structurally well formed; in addition, a high cultural value is placed on the aesthetics of those forms. Perhaps it would be useful for the nonspecialist to review here the principles behind those assumptions. Typically characters are judged in terms of proportion (internal and external) and stroke sequence—simply put, characters and their components must fit well together in size and shape, and the strokes should be executed in a proper (conventionally accepted) order. Obviously this knowledge is transferable from one character to the next: Character formation follows certain general sequences, such as “right, left; top, bottom,” and stroke order is always the same for shared character forms and/or components. Strategies for maintaining proportions also can be transferred to like contexts. Thus, every time the “word radical” (*yanzi pang*) appears on the left-hand side of the character, it is written first and in the identical seven-stroke sequence; when the component is positioned at the bottom of the character, the stroke sequence remains the same, but its internal proportions are somewhat different and it is written last in the overall formation of the character. One of the central skills that a student with high proficiency in writing develops is the ability to understand the structure of a character and be able to reproduce it in proper proportion and sequence, merely upon sight. This allows students to write characters well that they have never before written or even seen. One of the clearest indices that someone does not really know how to write Chinese is the inability to produce the proper stroke order and proportions when given a previously unseen character to write. That

being the case, students need to be trained to write well what they write by hand; it is not necessary that they always be able to do that from rote memory, however.

Where and when is handwriting from memory important and how does that change with level of competence and cultural context?<sup>10</sup> Let us first acknowledge that in any Chinese or Japanese cultural context, the more one can write well from memory, the better; with the student of Chinese and Japanese as a foreign language, this skill will be noted and praised. There are certainly different points of diminishing returns, however. For the beginning learner, the need to write is very low, even in a native-speaking environment—most native speakers will understand the wide disparity between spoken and written vocabulary for such a student. Typically all that would be expected of the advanced novice, or even the low-intermediate student, would be to write personal data on a registration form or the like—name, institution, dates, addresses, various numbers. As the language learner moves through the levels of proficiency, expectations of written proficiency, of course, would rise, but the disparity between spoken and written skills would remain largely in place; after all, a similar condition exists for many native speakers as well. This natural disparity has been formalized in the language teaching contexts. Thus, in the Chinese Language Proficiency Test at the University of Minnesota, ACTFL Intermediate-Low written skills (again, handwriting is required) are expected to match reading and listening skills at the Intermediate-Mid level, and even this may not be a fair assessment of the inherent disparity. (Note that if electronic writing were allowed in these exam situations, the disparity between reading and writing skills would disappear and writing could exceed speaking levels.) When we move toward advanced levels of proficiency, we find rising expectations in specialized areas of writing—in one’s field of expertise, for example. So someone practicing law would have a discrete set of memorized written

vocabulary forms different from someone working in a bank, although their spoken vocabularies and general writing levels might be quite similar. Moreover, at these advanced levels, *reading* skills (but not necessarily writing skills) are expected to be commensurate with spoken levels—in this environment, writing often involves transcribing materials encountered in reading, such as note taking from texts and other print or screen materials.

Given the widely acknowledged difficulty in writing Chinese characters, no one finds disparities between reading and writing abilities odd. This is true for the native speaker as well as the student of Chinese or Japanese as a foreign language. Two anecdotes might put this in perspective. Recently I was engaged in a conversation with a reference librarian about photography albums held in the rare book room. The conversation was quite fluid and natural, but when I went to fill out a request form for some materials, I could not remember how to write one of the characters in the word photography [*sheying*], although I read it daily and had written it repeatedly. The librarian did not seem to think that was particularly strange; she merely fell into the appropriate metalanguage: “It is the *she* with a hand radical and three ears” [*shouzipang, sange eruo de she*]. Around the same time, I was interviewing a Chinese graduate student about his research. He gave me the names of important scholars in the field, including one of his former professors. Yet when I asked him to write down these names for me (thereby avoiding a complicated metalanguage conversation for me), he could not remember how to write his professor’s given name. Only slightly embarrassed, he wrote down the pronunciation in *zhuyinfuhao*; later I found the character in a dictionary.

To summarize the above discussion:

- Students of Chinese and Japanese as a foreign language should be able to handwrite accurately and well characters that they are asked to memorize—this helps address both the students’

fascination with the script and the high value various cultures place on well-formed characters.

- By the intermediate level, they should have command of enough of these handwriting skills so they also can write well and accurately characters they are transcribing from a printed or screen source—this allows them to write effectively in many types of working environments.
- They should have the highest possible reading (character recognition) skills for their level. These skills should come as close as possible to, or even exceed, their spoken abilities. This will allow them to write in electronic media at levels that close the conventional disparity between speaking and writing.
- In order to be effective users of electronic media, students need to develop and maintain standard, accurate pronunciations (as well as be able to transcribe those pronunciations into the given romanization/syllabary needed). In fact, this process will provide a continuous feedback loop so that accurate standard pronunciations will produce better writing skills, and the more they write, the more reinforcement their pronunciation and spelling will receive.

### A Preliminary Strategy

Further research is needed to verify and sharpen the foregoing postulates regarding the nature of *hanzi/kanji* writing in the current environment of evolving technologies. In the conclusion of this article, I will consider some of the deeper issues and unanswered questions that such research might address. Walker (1989) has said that if Chinese writing instruction is based on electronic word processing, “its very essence will be altered” (p. 69). Here I offer some first steps in devising a strategy for teaching in this new environment, one that helps negotiate the tension between expectations and practicalities of writing Chinese characters.

First, Chinese word processing should be introduced in the beginning weeks of

language learning. This could be done as soon as students have a good command of the given romanization/syllabary that is being used in the classroom and that the software supports—typically *Hanyu pinyin*. Given their wired lives, students should acquire this word-processing skill very quickly. The use of word processing should be integrated into the coursework, not presented as something optional or beyond the “real” work of the class. An assignment in the beginning weeks could be, for example, simply typing out the dialogues that appear in the lessons. Granted this would be relatively mechanical, but it would reinforce pronunciation and vocabulary, and it would introduce the importance of accuracy in the type-and-select process—given the elementary and predictable vocabulary at the beginning stages, accurate input should practically eliminate the need to go to the select part of the process. Once the pronunciation, speaking, and electronic reading/writing skills are solidified, handwriting then could be introduced more effectively.

This approach to writing would require no new texts and very few new materials; however, it would offer a perspective on writing much different from what has become standard practice, which typically starts layering on substantial “wordbook” (handwriting) assignments early on. Those laborious handwriting exercises do double damage: They distract the students from more fundamental skills important at the beginner level (especially pronunciation and tone production and processing), and they contribute toward poor handwriting because they ask the student to produce too many characters too fast. With the early introduction of electronic writing, the student quickly acquires an accurate and elegant way to write, so handwriting can develop at a much slower pace, unhurried by the pace of the acquisition of other skills. Since the student already has been writing in the electronic forms, he or she will have passive recognition of specific characters and also should have a more developed sense of character formation. Finally, the

slower introduction of handwriting also will allow the instructor to pay more attention to character formation beyond mere adequacy; classroom time can be used to introduce handwriting principles and learning strategies, although in the end most of the motor-skill training must happen outside the classroom.<sup>11</sup> This more deliberate, self-paced approach to handwriting should produce students of Chinese as a foreign language who are better in all of the language skills; these strong basics will benefit the advanced learning process immensely.

How will students react to this change in the development of writing skills? With the appropriate supporting instruction in the classroom, the introduction of word processing should help increase character recognition and reading skills in an efficient and natural manner; at the same time, I expect that students will find this skill enjoyable and an answer to any character fetish they might have—they still can impress their friends and family, and the tattoos have a better chance of making sense. Certainly the handwritten forms still will be seen as more authentic and students still will be very interested in learning to write them. It is, of course, important that instructors not send signals to the students that now they are finally writing “real” Chinese when handwriting begins.

If we accept this strategy for the early introduction of electronic writing, we still need to address the issue of how and when to introduce handwriting into the curriculum. Electronic writing can follow the textbook closely with little regard to the complexity of the characters needed (and, of course, these can be written in either full or simplified forms with a single keystroke). The choice of which characters are to be handwritten presents more complicated issues, but also more interesting solutions. Here are four strategies to consider:

1. The Lesson One Strategy: This common procedure is to introduce the characters strictly according to the lessons in the text. Thus, if the text begins with *Ni hao* [Hello] or *Nanji desu ka* [What time is

it], as many of them do, then these will be not only the first electronically produced characters, but also the first handwritten ones, with some built-in delay. The principal advantage to this method is that the student would be following the sequence of learning in electronic writing with one of handwritten forms. Also, one can use materials that come entirely with the beginning texts—exercise books, software, Web-based applications, etc. The disadvantage is that there is no real logic to the introduction of the characters, other than the fiction and choices of the textbook—thus, one can imagine students of Chinese as a foreign language learning to write *tangcu* [sweet and sour] early on; this is not only a relatively complicated compound, but a term that a student would have very little need to write (as opposed to recognize) in any real-world circumstance. An obvious compromise would be to select materials from the text, focusing on characters that contribute most toward useful skills; the following three strategies could help inform that selection process.<sup>12</sup>

2. The Frequency Count Method: We could take our handwriting vocabulary from the numerous frequency lists available.<sup>13</sup> This would generally avoid the “sweet and sour” problem noted above, but if followed strictly, also would produce a list of random characters with little logic, such as *de shi wo bu yi you da* 的是我不一有大. . . . A practical application of such a list would be to coordinate the frequency count with the textbook, producing a shared set of characters. It should be noted, however, that lists such as these not only contain contingent oddities, they tend to atomize the Chinese language into separate characters, which may or may not be useful or functional—for example, in Tsai’s (1996) list, *zi* (as in *ziliao* [materials]) appears 13<sup>th</sup> in frequency, but in actual usage it always appears in a bound phoneme. Nonetheless, with

some additional work and materials, this method could be practical.

3. The Iconic Strategy: There is a common practice in beginning calligraphy classes to have students practice one character, *yong* [forever], over and over because it is said to contain the eight basic strokes of all Chinese characters. While no one would want to regress to such a conservative position (and *yong* is a very low-frequency character), a lesson might be taken from this: Students should learn first to write characters that are structurally most productive. In other words, selection and emphasis could be used to teach students how to write well-formed characters with little regard to textbook vocabulary or frequency. In the past, this strategy has been seen in a limited fashion when students are taught the “radical system” (*bushou*) as a critical component in character formation; that method could be extended to teaching other common components, such as phonetics. While this undoubtedly would help in character cognition and penmanship, it risks separating the process of learning to write from the other three skills—in other words teaching calligraphy, not language, which is a fetishization of its own.
4. Functional Writing: Finally, we could construct a set of practical applications in which handwriting is most likely to occur in a natural language environment and teach writing to that set of tasks sequenced by frequency and difficulty. In other words, we could ignore the textbook and logical character selection, and follow functionality directly: signatures, addresses, forms, numbering systems, common inscriptions, love notes, etc. Of course, there would be some overlap with the textbook and frequency selection, but this could produce a discrete set of characters to write. The great advantage of this approach would be the practicality and efficiency of such training; the disadvantage would be

the separate track (and materials) that handwriting would take in the language learning context.

The second part of the basic question is when should handwriting begin. What should be the delay and pacing of the introduction of the handwritten skill in terms of the overall language program? In a slightly different context, Walker (1984) suggests a delay after 25 to 30 hours of instructional time before introducing Chinese characters, although many textbooks currently have little or no delay. This question depends to some extent on which handwriting strategy is adopted, but I think there would be two obvious shared criteria in making this decision: The student already should have a solid grasp of the aural/oral system of the language—the accurate reception and production of syllable and tones—and the student should have developed recognition skills in reading and writing electronically and practiced them extensively, especially if the Lesson One strategy is used. Finally, we could expect that any increase in this delay would be compensated for over time by the speed of vocabulary acquisition, that is, the longer the delay, the more background and fundamentals the student would have in place on which to build. This was the principle upon which the old Yale textbook, *Speak Chinese*, was constructed, in which all materials were in Yale Romanization, with characters introduced separately and delayed at least by a semester. The development of Chinese word-processing writing makes that system even more appealing.

### Research Is Needed

The thesis and strategies presented above leave many questions unanswered and beg for further research. There are a number of practical questions that remain, some of which I have mentioned. For example, what is, or could be, the role of e-mail in developing Chinese word-processing skills and attitudes? How will allowing students to use electronic media in test taking affect our understanding and evaluation of what

constitutes writing? What would close observation or interviewing of students regarding their memorization of *hanzi*/*kanji* reveal, especially given the disparities in their self-reported time spent on this activity? What is the relationship between course materials and instructors' assumptions about the role of Chinese characters in the study of Chinese and Japanese as a foreign language? Finally, do we need to develop new materials for these new strategies, or can we work with existing textbooks and other instructional media? Among new materials, computer software that teaches handwriting interactively and with sophistication would help deal with that solitary and repetitive practice. Are such materials being developed? Currently, most handwriting software is relatively passive, often reproducing the workbook in electronic form.<sup>14</sup>

A more profound issue at the heart of the assumptions informing this approach that needs to be explored further is the relationship between character recognition and character production.<sup>15</sup> Can students have high recognition skills while having low production skills? In particular, can they learn to read (and write electronically) characters and character combinations that they have never learned to write by hand? Would the characters "stick" over time without the handwriting component? We know that this is currently possible at the advanced level since many speakers, both native and second language, read at levels much higher than they write. But that skill depends on a different language learning experience: Under the old write-as-you-go system, advanced students learned how to write thousands of characters, even if they forgot the specifics of most of them. With this new method, that would no longer be the case; retention would be based on a much more passive learning strategy. Lin and Akamatsu's (1997) review of the literature on reading suggests that the cognitive process for learning to read Chinese is not significantly different than that for English, despite the very different writing systems:

"Some orthographies are apparently much more difficult to learn than others but no significant differences in reading ability can be found among children learning to read the different systems" (p. 381). However, Flaherty's (1997) investigations suggest an important difference in learning to read English and Japanese: Abstract visual memory is much more important in learning Japanese *kanji*. That being so, we need to ask whether writing the characters by hand enhances the use of visual memory. If there is a strong correlation between these latent writing skills and reading, then the Iconic Strategy might be especially effective in compensating for lack of rote memorization. Finally, there is the sociological question of how relatively low handwriting skills over time might affect someone working in Chinese or Japanese language environments, and whether it would matter more for some fields of work than others.

The difficulty in pursuing an investigation of these hypotheses is that any study will have to be controlled and longitudinal to be truly evaluatory. While small, short-term experiments with control groups (such as that by Tsung, 1973) will prove useful, we will not know the full impact of the experiment for years. Summer intensive programs would seem to be the best places to begin conducting this work since the results would come quickly. We also have to consider the ethical issues in experimenting with a student's long-term learning—is it fair to develop a new pedagogy without knowing its full impact? There may be a way to design experiments in which students volunteer to be in the test or the control group, but that introduces issues of uninformed choice and self-selection. For answers to those questions, I turn to my colleagues in the cognitive sciences and second language acquisition fields. Perhaps they can design experiments that effectively test these hypotheses without experimenting with the students in our classrooms.

Given those cautions, I would contend that the early introduction of electronic writing into Chinese and Japanese as a

foreign language classrooms could be only beneficial, even if we retained a write-as-you-go approach to handwriting. But we also should consider new strategies of handwriting that account for the new electronic media. Given time and resources, we might be able to develop materials that offer a combination or sequencing of strategies that would maximize the effort spent on the rote learning of Chinese character writing. If so, we could begin to disassemble the elements in the hegemony of *hanzi/kanji* that are detrimental to students of Chinese and Japanese as a foreign language, while retaining the cultural value placed on Chinese character handwriting.

## Notes

1. Here I use the term Chinese characters to stand for both *hanzi* and *kanji*. I do not deal with the presence of Chinese characters (*hanja*) in the Korean writing system since this falls outside my area of training, although I think it is an interesting area of investigation.
2. The common link of personal character and Chinese handwriting is legend (as are the puns on "character"); this also needs to be addressed, although not here. One of the most important explorations of the myth of personality and calligraphy in modern Chinese cultures is Kraus's *Brushes with Power* (1991). Saussy's "The Prestige of Writing: 文, Letter, Picture, Image, Ideography" in *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China* (2001) provides a deep analysis of the linguistic and cultural debates surrounding the nature of Chinese writing, particularly in European scholarship over the last 200 years.
3. The question of whether students (including those of Chinese and Japanese as a foreign language) should be allowed to use electronic technologies to take exams is a sensitive one. Most environments do not allow this: The rationale seems to be that this would be a form of cheating. We might

want to challenge this with the analogy of the use of English word processing in exam situations, or with the use of calculators in math exams, but that analogy does not take into account the high cultural value placed on Chinese handwriting, as I discuss below.

4. Caley (2003) has a theoretical overview of digital writing in Chinese. For those unfamiliar with Chinese word processing, the basic method is to enter a character's pronunciation by spelling and tone (the tone can be skipped, but that creates much more ambiguity), such as "zhong + 1" [first tone]; this then produces a character of that pronunciation (usually based on frequency and previous usage). If that is not the right character, then you can go to a list of similarly pronounced characters (in this case, 30, listed in frequency/usage order). Older systems always produce a list from which to select, while newer systems work on context recognition, so the more you type, the less ambiguity and higher degree of accuracy of the machine-generated language. Thus, if you type "zhong +1," "wen +2," you will immediately get the compound for "Chinese writing" 中文; if you type zhong + 1," "tou + 2," you will get the compound for "hour" 鐘頭. The more you type without selecting, the more the system eliminates ambiguities, including retroactively.
5. It is difficult to compare the necessary skills and time needed to learn to write *hanzi/kanji* by hand with alphabet or syllabary-based languages. Each character is composed of a unique set of penstrokes, ranging from one to scores (the longest character I know of is 64 strokes, but the average is probably around 10); these strokes occur, however, in subsets that are used to build the character, so in actuality the character is constructed out of smaller, established stroke sequences. When the student of Chinese as a foreign language begins to learn to write, the strokes appear to be more or less random and without context. By contrast, the syllabaries for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean can be learned in a week or so—the Chinese syllabary (*zhuyinfuhao*) is used only for teaching purposes, especially in Taiwan.
6. This is very old data, but I expect that they remain relatively stable, except in the sense of what it means to "know." If we mean "know to write from memory," I expect the numbers for recent college graduates would be substantially lower, but if we mean "know to recognize" and therefore to be able to write electronically, I expect the data apply. Compare Holender's comment (as cited in Lin & Akamatsu, 1997) that "four to five thousand commonly used characters to form many more thousands of words" (p. 372).
7. This is the basic understanding of hegemony as discussed by Gramsci (1971) and developed by many others in cultural studies.
8. For a discussion of Chinese metalanguage (language about language) strategies, see Allen (1992).
9. This comes from an advertisement for *Integrated Chinese* in the fall 2006 catalogue for publishers Cheng & Tsui.
10. Here I can only speak to the competence levels in students of Chinese and Japanese as a foreign language, but to have a full picture of the cultural contexts of handwriting, we need to consider that of native speakers as well. I believe the expectations for handwriting in those populations are structured in special and distinctive ways for different social environments.
11. I will not even try to address here how the workbook approach to character learning strains the resources of the language instructor who must pore over and correct the scrawls that the early exercises produce. This is the one area where we need new, sophisticated software to help relieve the tedium for both learner and instructor.

12. One program surveyed that follows the Lesson One approach (but without the electronic writing component) selects about one-third of the workbook characters for writing and two-thirds for recognition only.
13. A relatively extensive list (along with other data) can be found at Tsai Chih-hao's Web site (<http://technology.chtsai.org/charfreq/>), for example, although these are based exclusively on "big 5" character lists (an encoding system used in Taiwan). An earlier study by Liu and colleagues determined that in a million-character text, 125 characters accounted for 50% of the words in the corpus (as cited in Lin & Akamatsu, 1997).
14. Among the Chinese software for character writing, the materials developed by the University of Southern California for *Integrated Chinese* use an exemplary workbook style built around a complete Lesson One approach. For further information, see [http://www.usc.edu/dept/ealc/chinese/newweb/character\\_page.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/ealc/chinese/newweb/character_page.html).
15. One early study (Tsung, 1973) established the positive correlation between writing and recognition skills that we might expect, but the particularities of that small experiment (and of course there was no electronic writing involved) would not seem to be applicable to this broader question.

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## APPENDIX A

### Sample Questionnaire

#### Questionnaire for Students

Dear Students of Chinese,

I hope you will fill out this short questionnaire about your study of Chinese. This is part of a research project I am conducting on learning and use of Chinese. Thank you for your time. All answers are optional and in confidence.

[Name of instructor and affiliation]

1. How long have you been studying Chinese?
2. What first attracted you to the study of Chinese?
3. Did you have any experience with Chinese language before beginning your studies?
4. With what textbook(s) or material(s) did you begin your studies?
5. Thinking back on the first year of your study of Chinese, please rate which type of learning accounted for approximate percentage of preparation time (outside of class).

% of time spent in preparation outside of class

Speaking \_\_\_\_\_ Listening \_\_\_\_\_ Reading \_\_\_\_\_ Writing \_\_\_\_\_

6. Currently, how much do you use your Chinese on a daily basis, outside of class and preparation (approximate percentage or hours, etc.)?

Speaking \_\_\_\_\_ Listening \_\_\_\_\_ Reading \_\_\_\_\_ Writing \_\_\_\_\_

7. When you write Chinese, how much of that is by hand, how much is by computer?

Handwritten          Computer

Class work? \_\_\_\_\_  
Daily use? \_\_\_\_\_

8. How do you hope to use your Chinese in the future?
9. Would you be willing to be interviewed (10 minutes) about your studies? Your name and contact information:

PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR CHINESE TEACHER