

02 汉字

CHINESE CHARACTER GUIDE



Dimsum Mandarin 普通话

Lesson summary: Learn the basic characters and radicals 一、二、八、十、大、月、木; Learn the characters 上、中、下、早、晚、明、星、期、午、天、谢、再、见、次.

早上好!

Zǎoshàng Hǎo!

Lesson 02

In this character pack, we will be learning:

- seven new basic characters which are also common radicals; and
- fourteen important characters that are used in the phrases in lesson 2.

Students who are interested in the construction and history of the characters can read on. Otherwise, you can skip directly to the worksheets to start practicing the characters.

Basic Characters and their Radical Forms

For this lesson, we will learn the following characters which are also common radicals:

Means	Oracle Bone Script	Seal Script	Modern (Radical)
one	一	一	一
two	二	二	二
eight	𠄎	𠄎	八 (丷)
ten	十	十	十
big	大	大	大
moon	月	月	月
tree	木	木	木

As can be seen, the characters and radicals we are learning today are very fundamental and easy to write. As before, the table shows each character with its ancient oracle bone script, followed by the seal script used during the Qin dynasty, and then the modern script. The first four characters were all originally ideograms, while the last three were all pictograms.

一 (yī): One Ideogram
 The oracle bone script character used a single line to represent the idea of one. This has not changed for 3000 years.

二 (èr): Two Ideogram
 The oracle bone script character used two lines to represent the idea of two. Over 3000 years, the only change was to make the top line shorter than the bottom line.

八 (bā): Eight Ideogram → Loan
 The oracle bone script and seal script characters are both trying to represent the idea that something has been split apart into two. As such, the original meaning of the ideogram was “to split”. When 八 was loaned to mean the number eight, a new character 分 (fēn) was created to mean “to split”. As a radical, 八 can also take the inverted form of 丷.

十 (shí): Ten Ideogram
 The oracle bone script actually used a vertical line to represent the idea of ten. A horizontal line was added later in the seal script, and the character has remained the same since.

大 (dà): Big Pictogram
 The oracle bone script character showed a person with his arms outstretched, to represent the idea of big. The form of the character has basically remained the same for 3000 years as well.

月 (yuè): Moon Pictogram
 The oracle bone script character looks like a new moon crescent. Characters with this radical are usually related to moon, or concepts of time. Take note that the “meat” radical 肉 (ròu) when used as a radical is also written as 月, but characters built on that radical are usually related to muscles and organs in the body.

木 (mù): Wood Pictogram
 In the oracle bone script character, you can see a tree trunk, with two branches growing upwards, and two roots growing downwards. The seal script retained that idea, which can still be seen in the modern character. Characters with this radical are usually related to trees or wood.

At this point, you should check out the sequence of strokes, and familiarize yourself with these basic characters in the worksheets.

Lesson 02 Characters


The following are the characters we will learn from lesson 2. Many characters have multiple meanings. You can focus on the specific meaning of the character that is relevant to this lesson that has been bolded in blue. Radicals that we have not learned are greyed out.

No.	Radical	Char.	Pinyin	Means	Construction
1	一	上	shàng	① [directional] upper, top, above, on ② [temporal] previous, before ③ within the scope of ④ to rise ⑤ to go up ⑥ to go (somewhere) ⑦ to serve (food) ⑧ to appear on (tv, newspaper) ⑨ to attend (class, work, university)	ideogram




No.	Radical	Char.	Pinyin	Means	Construction
2	丨 (gǔn)	中	zhōng	① [directional] center, inside, in, part of ② middle, mid-, average, suitable	ideogram
3	一	下	xià	① [directional] lower, bottom, below, under ② [temporal] next, after ③ to head downwards ④ to descend ⑤ to go to (somewhere) ⑥ to rain, snow, hail etc. ⑦ to dispatch (an order) ⑧ to play (chess) ⑨ to come to (a conclusion) ⑩ to finish (class, work)	ideogram
4	日	早	zǎo	① morning ② early, premature	picto-ideogram
5	日	晚	wǎn	① evening, night ② late, of later origin	picto-ideogram
6	日	明	míng	① bright, clear (in meaning), not hidden, sharp (in intellect) ② eye-sight ③ to understand ④ [temporal] next (day, year)	picto-ideogram
7	日	星	xīng	① star or other astronomical body ② star (singer, actor, etc.)	phonologic
8	月	期	qī	① date; a predetermined date; a period of time ② [measure] issue (of periodical); number of class organized ③ to wait, to hope	phonologic
9	十	午	wǔ	① 11am-1pm; noon ② the 7 th earthly branch	pictogram → loan
10	大	天	tiān	① sky ② day; measure word for a day ③ season ④ that which is attributed to nature or natural causes ⑤ that which is attributed to gods-will or karma	pictogram
11	讠 (yán)	谢	xiè	① to thank ② to be repentant (for a mistake, crime) ③ to decline (something, someone) ④ to wither (plants)	phonologic
12	冂	再	zài	① again ② even (more of something) ③ (consequence) if ④ (non-consequence) even if ⑤ in addition, as well as	picto-ideogram
13	见	见	jiàn	① to see ② to meet ③ to become evident ④ opinion	picto-ideogram
14	欠	次	cì	① rank, order, sequence ② second ③ inferior (in quality) ④ [measure] counting of recurring events	picto-ideogram

Note: The character 星 (xīng) on its own is not related to time. However, when it combines with the character 期 (qī) to form 星期 (xīngqī), it can be understood as “period of the stars”, a period of 7 days, which has its roots in the 28 stars used to track the revolution of the moon around earth in ancient China.

The first three characters 上 (shàng), 中 (zhōng), 下 (xià) are three fundamental characters for directions and locations that are all **ideograms**. These characters were conceptualized as a whole, and the radicals assigned to them at a later time:

- As we saw in the introduction to Chinese characters, in the oracle bone script, a short stroke drawn above a horizontal line was used for the concept of 上 (shàng), while a short stroke drawn below a horizontal line was used for the concept of 下 (xià).
- The oracle bone script character for 中 (zhōng) was actually a flag pole with a circle drawn halfway down the pole to represent the idea of “middle”. 



The next five characters 早 (zǎo), 晚 (wǎn), 明 (míng), 星 (xīng), 期 (qī), are based on the sun (日, rì) and moon (月, yuè) radicals to represent **concepts of time**:

- 早 (zǎo) is a picto-ideogram where a sun rises above a budding seed, symbolizing the idea of the sun breaking out of darkness to represent “morning”. 
- 晚 (wǎn) is also a picto-ideogram. It combines the character of “sun” (日) with the character for “to be rid of” (免, miǎn), representing the idea that the time when the sun has been gotten rid of is “night”. 
- We saw the character 明 (míng) in lesson one, where we explained that the characters for the “sun” (日) and “moon” (月) are combined into a picto-ideogram to mean “bright”. The meaning of the character was then extended to mean “next (day or year)”, and we can also easily see how the cycle of the sun and moon would bring on the next day or the next year as well.
- The character 星 (xīng) is phonologic, where the “sun” (日) is the logic part, indicating that stars are heavenly bodies, and 生 (shēng) is the phono part. The seal script character actually had 

three suns! The character itself refers to stars in the sky.

- The character 期 (qī) is also phonologic, using the “moon” (月) as the logic part to indicate a relationship with time, and 其 (qí) is used to indicate the sound. 期 (qī) on its own refers to a date, or a period of time, and when combined into 星期 (xīngqī) means “week” (refer to note on page 3).

The next character 午 (wǔ) is an interesting character. It was actually a pictogram representing a pestle used to pound grains. The character was later loaned to become the 7th earthly branch, which also referred to the Chinese hour from 11am to 1pm. So when we refer to the hour of 午, we can either mean 12pm itself, or this two hour period from 11am to 1pm. The characters of 上 (shàng), 中 (zhōng), 下 (xià), have the meanings of “before”, “middle of”, and “after” respectively. So when we form the words 上午 (shàngwǔ), 中午 (zhōngwǔ), and 下午 (xiàwǔ), we have “before 午” which is “morning”, “middle of 午” which is “noon”, and “after 午” which is “afternoon”.

The oracle bone script of the character 天 (tiān) was a human figure with the head enlarged. This was supposed to signify the top of a person’s head, which was what the character originally meant. The meaning of the character was later extended to mean the top part of things, including the sky and the heavens. 


The character 谢 (xiè) is phonologic, taking the logic part of 讠 (言, refer to lesson 01) that indicates a relationship to speech, and the phono part of 射. Its original meaning was “to decline”, and was later extended to mean “to thank”.

In the oracle bone script, 再 (zài) was a picto-ideogram that originally showed a fish between the character for “two”, representing the meaning of “two fishes”. The meaning was later extended to mean “twice”, or “the second time”.

The traditional character for 见 (jiàn) is 見, where the top part (目, mù) means “eye”. If you look at the oracle script character for 見, you will see a person with his eyes exaggerated. Hence, the character has the meaning of “to see”.



The character for 次 (cì) combines characters for 二 (èr) on the left, which here means “2nd grade”, with the character 欠 (qiàn), which means “lacking”. Together, it gives the character its original meaning of “inferior”. The meaning was later extended to mean “rank”, “order”, and “sequence”.

In the worksheets, you will find the following:

- A writing sheet for the seven basic characters and radicals.
- A second writing sheet for the 14 characters used in the phrases.
- An exercise sheet to help you connect each character with where it was used in the phrases that we learnt.

In the writing worksheets, the sequence of each stroke is numbered, and the direction of each stroke is indicated by the arrows. You should try tracing each character a few times, and then try rewriting each one in the empty boxes provided.



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