— one (yi¹)

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INTRODUCTION

The Calligrapher's Daughter
How to Use the Book

For reference purposes only

The Calligrapher's Daughter

I was born in Taipei, Taiwan, the daughter of a calligrapher and a ceramic artist, so I grew up immersed in art and with a deep appreciation of the beauty of the Chinese language. Speaking and writing Chinese is an integral part of who I am and how I see the world. But it was only when I had children of my own that I properly understood what a difficult language Chinese is to learn.

Being of Taiwanese descent while raising my children in the UK has made me acutely aware of the differences, but also the similarities, between Eastern and Western cultures. The ultimate goal of Chineasy is to help bridge the cultural gap by demystifying the Chinese language, which acts as a barrier to so many people – my children included!

Chineasy is hugely personal to me. I have done many different things in my life. I consider myself to be part geek, part entrepreneur, part dreamer, and this project is a culmination of all these elements. My experience in technology ventures and my background as an entrepreneur with an artistic upbringing have given me the building blocks to make Chineasy possible, but it is my childhood and my children that have inspired me to make Chineasy a reality. I am proud to share Chineasy with all who want to learn and appreciate the beauty of the Chinese language.

Why Chineasy?

China is home to ancient traditions, breathtaking artwork and what is currently one of the world's strongest economies. It comes as no surprise to me that recent years have seen a cultural trend of Eastern migration by both young people and business-minded individuals. Everyone is starting to pay more attention to China, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and other Asian countries as they become increasingly popular tourist destinations and increasingly important as cultural, financial and industrial hubs.

Call me optimistic, but I see the melding of these two cultures, East and West, as being instrumental in creating a more culturally literate world. I also think that the East and West must understand each other in order for global economic growth to be sustainable. There is, however, a giant roadblock preventing the East and West from communicating effectively and connecting on a deep, cultural level: the Great Wall of Chinese.

The Chinese language has long been considered the most difficult major language to learn, largely on account of the vast number and complexity of the characters. When I began to teach my British-born children Chinese, I realized just how challenging its characters are for a native English speaker. It was like torture for my children! So I spent many years looking for a fun and easy way to teach them how to read Chinese.

After years of searching, I didn't think that any of the methods out there were engaging enough. So I did what any entrepreneur would do: I created my own method to learn how to read Chinese characters – Chineasy. And you know what? It works.

Chineasy's goal is to allow people to learn to read Chinese easily by recognizing characters through simple illustrations. The magical power of the Chineasy method is that, by learning one small set of building blocks (see p. 10), students can build many new characters and phrases. Master a few sets of building blocks, and your learning can be accelerated to a whole new level.

With very little effort, students can quickly learn to read several hundred Chinese characters and phrases, and gain a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural references of the vocabulary. Even though there are tens of thousands of Chinese characters, only a few hundred are actually necessary to comprehend basic Chinese literature, and to begin to delve into Chinese culture and art.

How to Use the Book

A quick overview

Each character in this book is introduced in its Chinese form, followed by its English translation and then its pinyin (the approximate sound of the character; see p. 13). Each building block and compound character (these terms are explained below) has a short introduction that teaches you some fun historical and cultural facts as you are learning the language. Also included are unillustrated phrases (e.g. see 'heart' on p. 87) that will help to expand your vocabulary.

At the end of the book there is a handy index that lists every character and phrase taught in Chineasy, and provides you with its traditional and simplified forms (see opposite) and its pinyin.

Chineasy methodology

The Chinese language is traditionally taught through a series of between roughly 180 and 215 radicals. These radicals are then used to form the characters of the Chinese language. Chineasy has broken down this collection of characters into their most basic and recurring forms, allowing students to learn fewer and simpler radicals that we have termed 'building blocks'.

One building block (e.g. the character 火 for 'fire', see p. 28), or a specific compound form of the building block (e.g. 灬 'fire', see p. 28), can be combined with one or more other characters to make a compound character (e.g. 炎 'burning hot', see p. 29). Two or more independent characters can be placed next to one another to make phrases (e.g. 炎炎 'blazing', see p. 30). In compounds, a whole new character is created; in phrases, the placement of characters next to one another gives a new meaning to the collection of characters. This principle of building blocks is what makes Chineasy so easy!

火
fire
(building block)

炎
burning hot
(compound)
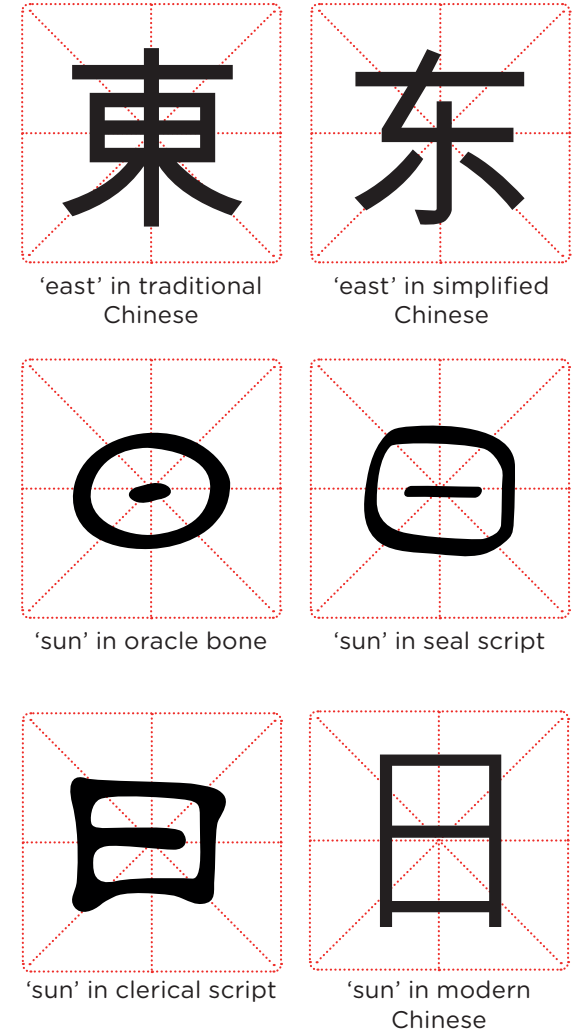
炎
burning hot

炎
burning hot

炎炎
blazing (phrase)
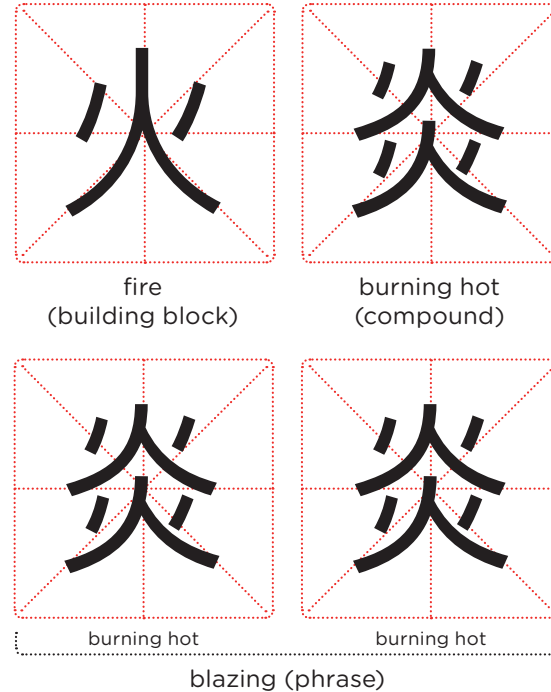
Traditional or simplified?

Chineasy teaches mainly traditional Chinese, which is the written language of Taiwan and Hong Kong. Simplified Chinese was adopted in mainland China in 1949, after the end of the Chinese Civil War and the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Both traditional and simplified forms still share a great number of characters. Chineasy specifies in the character captions when the simplified form is used instead of the traditional form (e.g. 'to follow' and 'crowd' on p. 17). Where no distinction between forms is noted, the traditional and simplified forms of the character are the same.

The evolution of Chinese

As in the case of all languages, Chinese has continuously evolved throughout the course of its existence. Political change, geographic expansion and philosophy have all influenced the stylistic form of Chinese characters. Throughout the book, you will see references to oracle-bone 甲骨文 (c. 1400 BCE), bronze script 金文 (c. 1000 BCE), seal script 篆書 (c. 220 BCE) and clerical script 隸書 (c. 200 BCE) characters. These terms refer to periods in the evolution of Chinese writing from which the modern Chinese language is derived.

The most ancient Chinese characters were developed as logograms, and therefore do not usually indicate how they should be pronounced (see p. 13). However, as the Chinese language became more sophisticated, two or more building blocks were used to form new characters; in this case, one of those building blocks was chosen as the basis for the new character's pronunciation. For example, 'account/bill' (zhang²) on p. 65 comprises the building block for 'shell' (associated with wealth – see p. 130), indicating the meaning of the compound character, and the character for 'length' (chang²), which influences the pronunciation. (See also 'at' on p. 115.)

東
'east' in traditional Chinese

东
'east' in simplified Chinese

'sun' in oracle bone

'sun' in seal script

'sun' in clerical script

'sun' in modern Chinese

Writing 101

Every child who studies Chinese has to go through this exercise when they learn how to write. Each character has to be drawn neatly inside a square. You can see that a single tree fits into a square the same size as the squares used for 'two trees' and 'three trees'.

You should see a slight alteration of the shape from the original 'tree': in order to fit two trees side by side in the square, you must make thinner trees. When three trees are stacked together, all the trees are shorter in order to fit into the square.

In Chinese, certain building-block characters have an alternate form that appears only when used as part of a compound. These characters are traditionally known as 'pianpang' 偏旁. On the right, you can see an example of this in the 'person' 人 = 亻 compound form in the compound 'group' 伙. Other examples of this alternate character form can be seen in 'dog' 犬 = 犭 on p. 26 and 'fire' 火 = 灬 on p. 28. Such compound forms are indicated by a note under the main caption for the building block.

See p. 35 for more information about writing Chinese.

Even though there are several different spoken Chinese dialects, such as Mandarin or Cantonese, they all share the same written characters; it is only the pronunciation of these characters that will differ from one dialect to another – often completely.

The 'pinyin' pronunciation guide used in this book corresponds to Mandarin only, which is the most widely used Chinese dialect and counts over 960 million native speakers (out of a total of over 1.2 billion Chinese speakers) – see 'Speaking 101' opposite for more information about pronunciation.


tree

person

two trees = wood

person compound form

three trees = forest

group
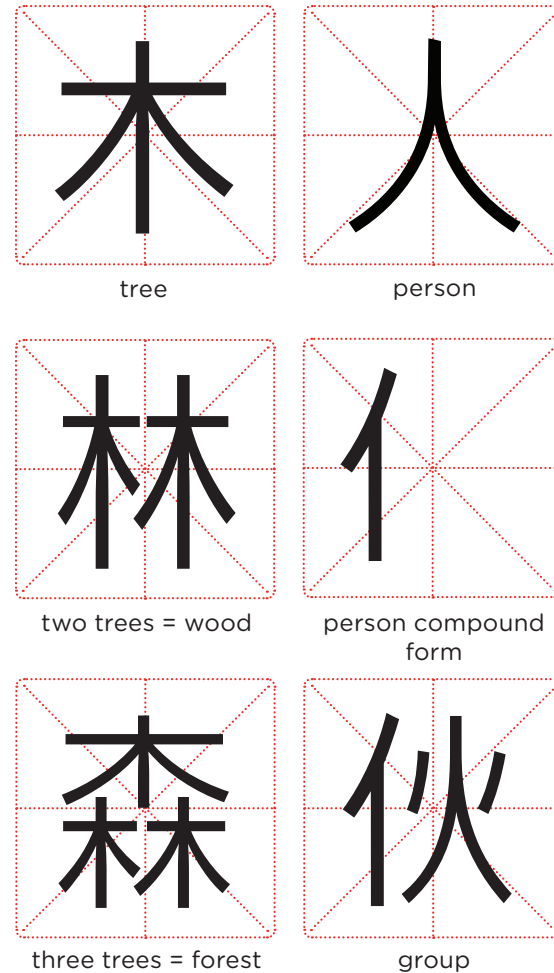
Spacing 101

How can you tell if you are reading a character (字) or a phrase (詞)? A character, whether it's a building block or a compound, fits within one square.

When you see two people squeezed together in a single square, you know it's a character – for example, the simplified character 'to follow' 从.

A phrase, on the other hand, is spaced across two or more squares. That means, if you see two or more characters spread across two or more squares, then you know it's a phrase – for example, 'everyone' 人人.

The beauty of the Chineasy method is that you can construct many new 'words' by combining existing characters. Chinese characters rarely appear alone; it is often only in the context of a phrase that the meaning of a character becomes clear. Learning phrases is a giant but easy step towards improving your Chinese study.


to follow

person

person

everyone
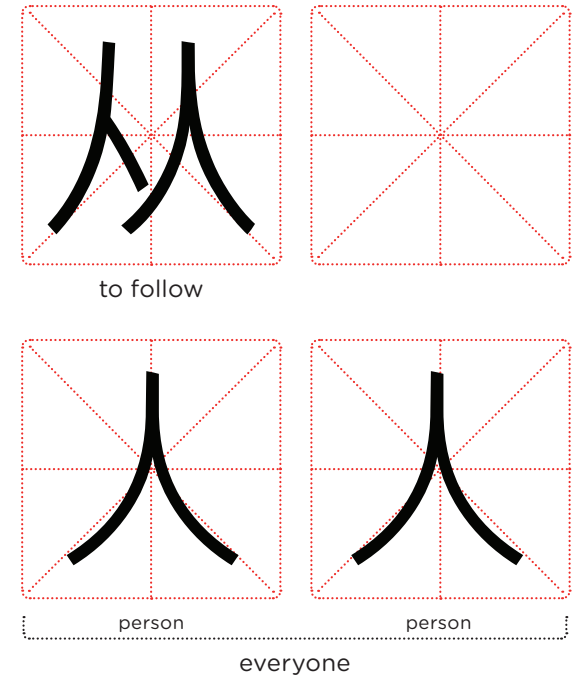
Speaking 101

To teach Mandarin Chinese to non-native speakers, most teachers use pinyin, the only standard phonetic system for transcribing the sound of Chinese characters in the romanized alphabet. Chinese is a tonal language, so the pinyin system uses a series of either numerals or glyphs to represent tone. For instance, the pinyin for 'person' can be written as either ren[2] or rén. Chineasy uses the numerical pinyin system. After every English translation, you will see a word in brackets followed by a number; this acts as a guide to the pronunciation of the character. See, for example, p. 15, 人 'person' (ren2).

Tone 1 = high level tone
Tone 2 = high rising tone
Tone 3 = falling rising tone
Tone 4 = falling tone
No number = neutral tone

二 two (er⁴)
One stroke plus
another is two.
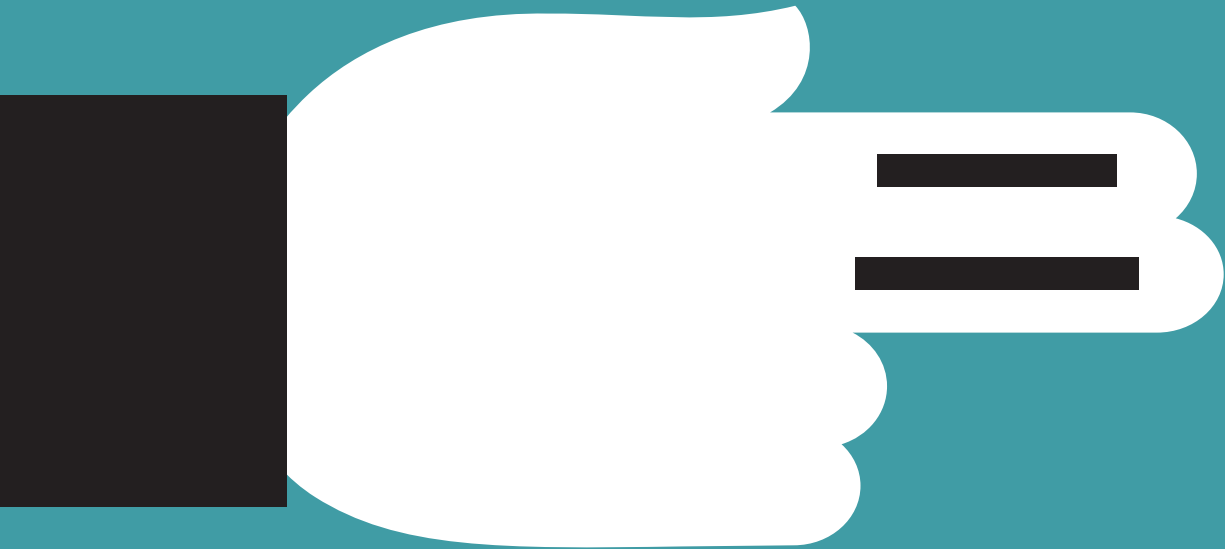
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THE BASICS

Building Blocks, Compounds, Phrases
Advanced Sentences

For reference purposes only

人 person (ren²)

Hello, people! Our first building block is 'person'. This building block traditionally depicted a human in profile. Today it looks like the profile of a man walking.

······································

亻 person (ren²)

This character is the form of 'person' that is used as a component in certain compounds (see explanation on p. 12). It is known as 單人旁, which translates as 'single person side-radical'. See 'group' on p. 29 for an example of this character.

人

to follow

crowd

big

man
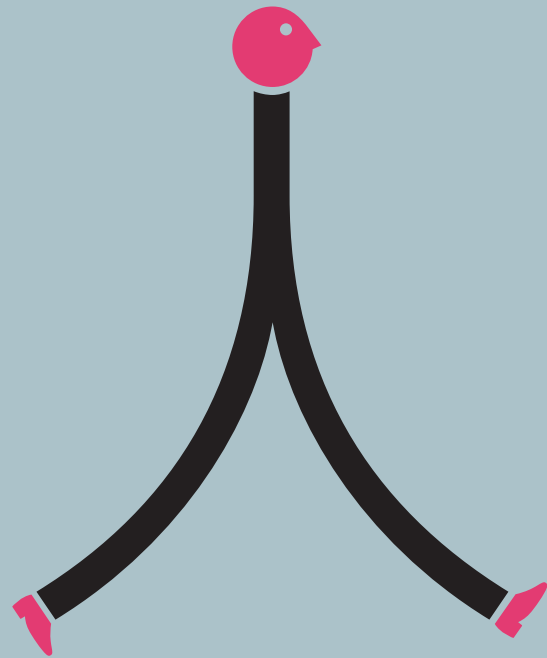
For reference purposes only
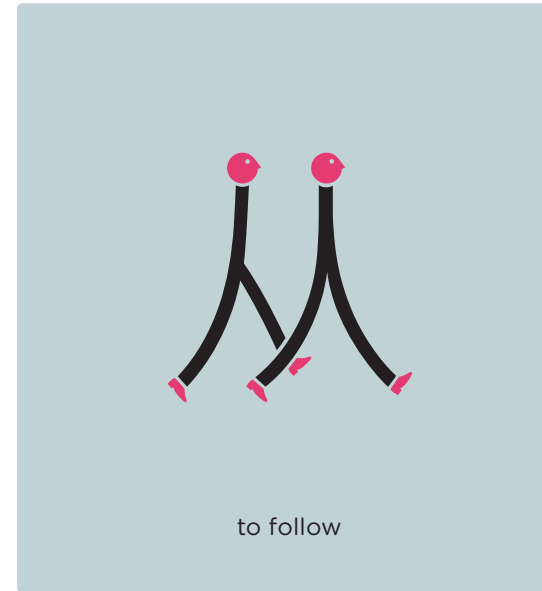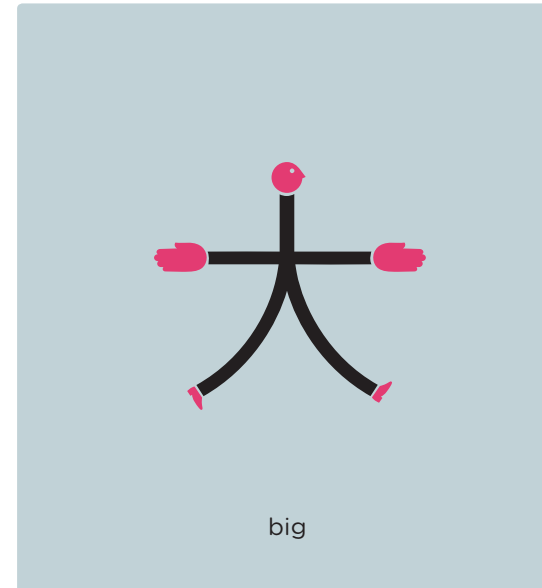
从 to follow (cong²)

This character comprises two building blocks for person. One man leads, the other follows close behind. This is the simplified form; the traditional form of this character is 從.

众 crowd (zhong⁴)

'Two's company, three's a crowd.' Three building blocks for 'person' make a crowd. This is the simplified form; the traditional form of this character is 眾.

大 big (da⁴)

This character depicts a man stretching his arms wide. Imagine that he is saying, 'It was this big.'

夫 man (fu¹)

'Man' is the compound for 'big' with an extra line across the top of the character, like wide shoulders. This line represents the pins in a man's topknot hairstyle.
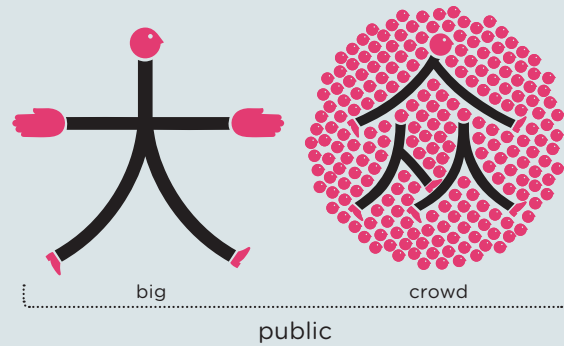
大人 adult
(da⁴ ren²)

Height doesn't always indicate maturity, but, in simple terms, an adult is just a big person.
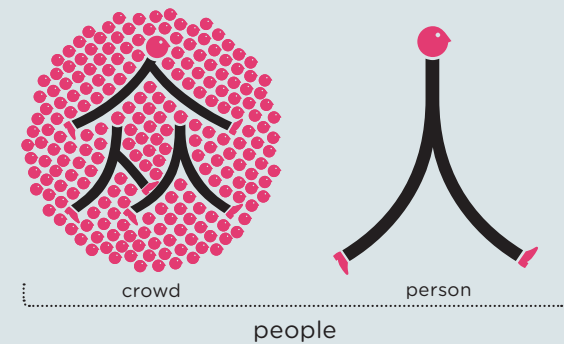big + person = adult
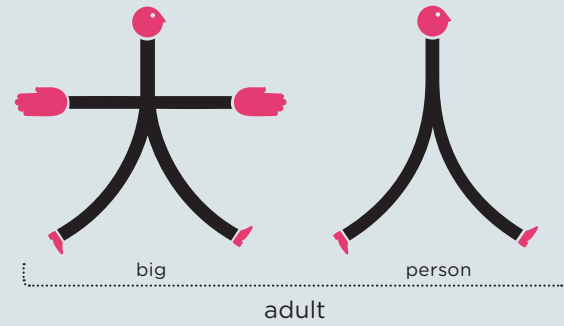
大众 public
(da⁴ zhong⁴)

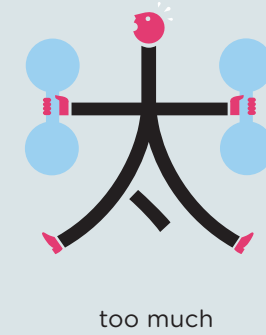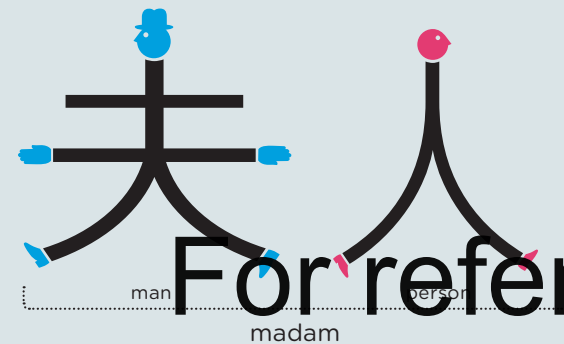The public is made up of a large group of people.
big + crowd = public

众人 people
(zhong⁴ ren²)

A crowd is made up of many different people. This phrase also means 'everybody'. crowd + person = people

夫人 madam
(fu¹ ren²)

In ancient China, a woman became her husband's property after marriage; she became her husband's person. man + person = madam

big · person
adult

big · crowd
public

crowd · person
people

man · person
madam

too much

too much · too much
Mrs

too much · big
**too big**

big · man
doctor

太 too much (tai⁴)

This compound comprises 'big' and a stroke under the character, suggesting something even bigger. It also means 'extremely' or 'excessively'.

太太 Mrs (tai⁴ tai⁴)

This is a strange phrase. To have double too much means 'Mrs' or 'wife'. Do you think this phrase is accurate? too much + too much = Mrs
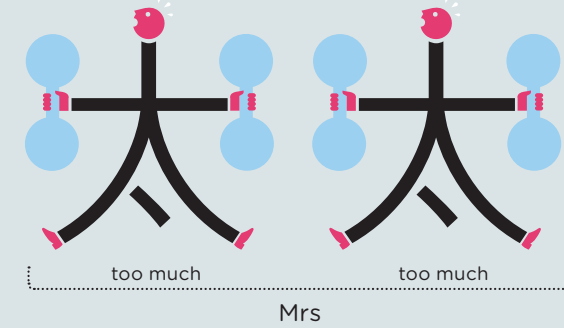
太大 too big
(tai⁴ da⁴)

A straightforward phrase: if something is too big, there is too much of it. too much + big = too big
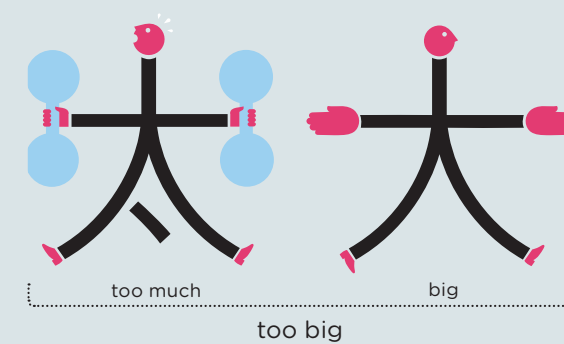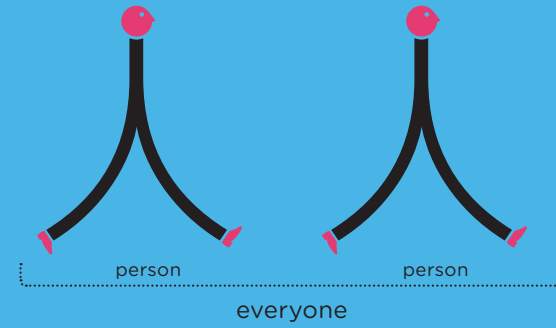
大夫 doctor
(dai⁴ fu)

This phrase has two meanings. When pronounced 'dai⁴ + fu', with a neutral and soft tone, it means 'doctor'. When pronounced 'da⁴ + fu'', it means 'senior official'. Both are rather archaic. big + man = doctor
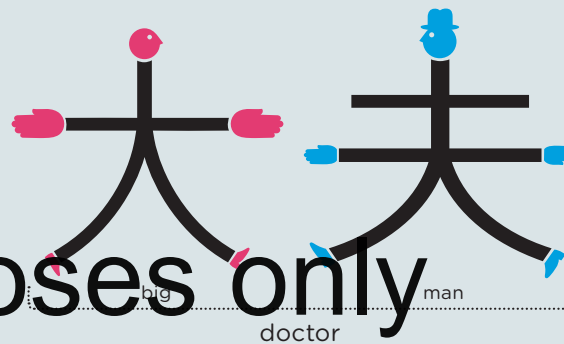
天 sky (tian[1])

When you put a line on top of 'big' **大**, it means 'sky' or 'heaven'. Traditionally, the line represented the spiritual level above man and earth. This character can also mean 'day'.
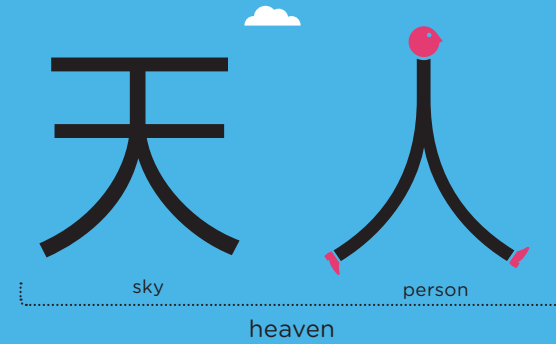
人 人
person   person

everyone

天 人
sky   person
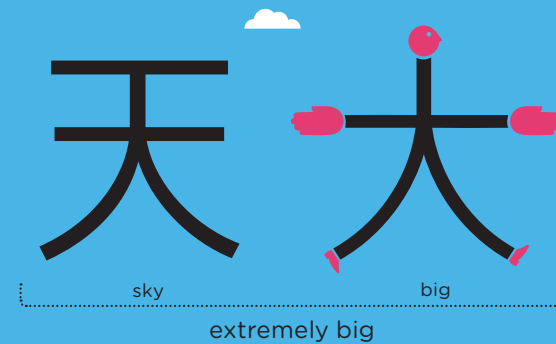
heaven

天 大
sky   big

extremely big

天 天
sky/day   sky/day

every day

天

人人 everyone
(ren[2] ren[2])

person + person = everyone

天人 heaven
(tian[1] ren[2])

sky + person = [literally] sky person = heaven or a person with universal insight

天大 extremely big
(tian[1] da[4])

What could be a bigger space than the heavens? sky + big = [literally] big as the sky = extremely big

天天 every day
(tian[1] tian[1])

As we have already seen opposite, the character for 'sky' also means 'day'. day + day = every day