

LESSON NOTES

# All About #2

## Cantonese Writing System

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# 2

# GRAMMAR

## The Focus of This Lesson is the History and Composition of Traditional Chinese Characters

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### Chinese Uses Written Characters Known as 漢字 [汉字] (*hon3 zi6*)

Traditional Chinese has been used for thousands of years. The traditional script is often considered extremely complex, but it is really a work of art that builds tens of thousands of characters representing different words from a few hundred simple pictographs and ideographs assembled in different combinations. In Cantonese, the traditional character script is called *faan tai ji* (繁體字), which translates as "complex characters." In contemporary Chinese around between three and four thousand characters are in common usage.

Smaller "picture" components within characters combine to create larger characters. Some of these smaller pictures within characters give hints as to the meaning and pronunciation of individual characters (though not always). The first Chinese characters were pictures of simple objects like "man," "hand," "foot," "mountain," "sun," "moon," and "tree." Then logical combinations of simple characters into more complex formulations followed in the Han Dynasty when the modern shapes of traditional Chinese characters first took form. They have been commonly used since the fifth century.

In 1949 the Chinese government introduced and promoted simplified Chinese to improve literacy rates. Mainland China adopted the modern version of simplified characters, while Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan continued to use the traditional script. In overseas Chinese communities, traditional Chinese is still commonly used. In Australia, USA, and Canada, most printed Chinese materials are still distributed in the traditional character form.

### Elements that Make up a Chinese Word

When written on the page, each character takes up exactly the same amount of space, no matter how complex it is or how many strokes it contains. There are no spaces between characters, and we do not group together the characters that make up compound words. So when reading Chinese, you have to figure out what individual characters mean and how to pronounce them. Then you need to figure out which characters are put together into which words.

### Pronunciation

The *Guangzhou* form of Cantonese is considered to offer the most classical pronunciation. Hong Kong Cantonese differs slightly but it also based on Guangzhou dialect. Cantonese Romanization systems are built around the accent used in Guangdong and Hong Kong. One noticeable difference is that Hong Kong Cantonese has been influenced by an influx of foreign loanwords as a result of the territory's British rule. Cantonese has over six hundred combinations of initials and finals, not including tones. A character can have up to nine tones. It is a language with many homophones.

The Cantonese language has three types of Romanization systems. Most native Cantonese speakers are not familiar with any romanization system however, and schoolchildren in Hong Kong and Guangdong are not taught any romanization system. Hong Kong people have adopted a loose unnamed romanization system which was developed by the Hong Kong government.