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Yet I knew right away  
that the note was for me  
it made perfect sense  
with no A, B, or C  
it said “you’ll never find me  
by digging through ground  
the only way here is  
straight up and around”



### Chapter 3 - Building Character(s)

There are no letters in Chinese characters. With languages like English, letters help us sound words out. Even if we don't know what a word means in English, we can usually make a pretty good guess as to how it should be pronounced. Chinese characters don't always have components that tell you how the word sounds. Sometimes there are parts of characters that give you a hint as to how a character might sound, but not always. The same character can be pronounced in very different ways depending on the dialect. Many characters can even be pronounced in two or more ways in the same dialect depending on how the character is being used. For over 2000 years, people all over China wrote Chinese characters in much the same ways. There were different styles, of course, sort unlike different character fonts in English. Even if you couldn't speak the same Chinese dialect with someone, at least you could write notes. In the first two decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government decided to simplify over 2,000 characters to make the Chinese language more accessible to the masses.

Chinese characters almost always occupy the same amount of space as the characters which surround them. Whether a Chinese character has *one stroke* like the number one ( 一 ) or *17 strokes*, like the traditional character for dragon ( 龍 ), it occupies the same sized imaginary square as its neighboring characters. Even though each character represents only one syllable, sometimes "words" in Chinese are made of two or more characters. The word for "almost" 差不多 chàbùduō is made of three separate characters. When writing a sentence in Chinese, there is no additional space that separates "words" from one another. Writing Chinese would be like writing English in syllables instead of words.

Traditionally, Chinese was written vertically, up to down and right to left and there were no punctuation marks. Today, often, Chinese is written horizontally from left to right. Western style punctuation is also commonly used.

Chinese characters are made up of 8 basic strokes:

橫 Héng – horizontal line, 豎 Shù – vertical line, 點/点 Diǎn – a dot; sometimes a dab

提 Tí – a rising stroke from bottom left to top right, 撇 Piě – slanted line from top right to bottom left

捺 Nà – slanted line from top left to bottom right, 钩 Gōu – a hook, and a 折 Zhé – stroke that turns at a right angle

There are also many modifications and combinations of basic strokes and there are rules for the order of writing strokes. Here are some examples:

Horizontal strokes are always written from left to right.

Vertical strokes are always written from top to bottom.

Horizontal strokes are written before vertical strokes.

When strokes are enclosed in a box, all inside strokes are written before closing the box with the final stroke.

Short Lesson on Writing Chinese:                    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

Here are the numbers from 1-10 in Chinese 一 · 二 · 三 · 四 · 五 · 六 · 七 · 八 · 九 · 十

If you combine 十 with 一 · you get 十一 which means 11; 十九 means 19.

If you write a 二 before 十 · you get 二十 which means 20; 二十五 means 25 (note: 二 after 十 (十二) means 12.)

Challenge: With just that information, you could write the numbers 1-99 in Chinese characters. Try it!

The character for moon looks like this: 月。 月 also means month. 一月(lit. one month) equals January, 十二月 equals December

The character for sun looks like this: 日。 日 also means day. To write January 1, you write 一月一日。

Challenge: With just that information, you could write any date in the calendar year in Chinese characters. Try it!