

Learning Chinese: A Professor's View

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Chinese is harder to learn than Western languages partly because Chinese characters, of which an educated person needs to know at least 3,000, are much more complex than Western alphabets. This difficulty is as great for native-speaking Chinese as it is for Westerners learning the language. Some people learn characters more easily than others, but for everyone, time and hard work are the only answers to the difficulty.

For Westerners, a second major challenge of Chinese is its tonal pronunciation. Every human language uses intonation, as when we say "What?" (in a rising tone) or "No!" (in a falling tone) in English. But in Chinese these pitch differences create entirely different words. Chinese toddlers absorb tones without noticing that they are doing so. But natural absorption does not work for people learning Chinese as a second language. Western learners need to train themselves very self-consciously in getting the right tones; only after two or three years do the habits begin to become natural.

Failure to train in tones is the biggest shortcoming of Chinese teaching in the West. Some teachers just give up, thinking that the project is too tedious and that Westerners in any case will never get it right. But, although some students do learn more easily than others, anyone with self-discipline and a good teacher can master the tones.

-- Perry Link, Princeton University professor of Chinese

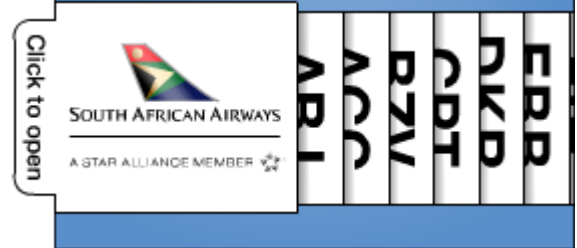
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