Preface (For Educators)

Learning Chinese characters is often approached through English-based definitions and phonetic transcriptions. While such methods may support short-term recognition, they rarely help learners *see* Chinese as a meaning-making system. As a result, many students can decode characters but struggle to develop durable mental imagery, emotional resonance, or a shared interpretive framework—particularly when reading narrative, metaphorical, or literary texts.

This project is grounded in a different premise:

Chinese characters are visual, experiential symbols rather than purely lexical units. Each character reflects how meaning was originally constructed through observation of the physical world—movement, position, distance, transformation, and stillness. Full character comprehension therefore requires not only semantic knowledge, but perceptual and embodied understanding.

Accordingly, this project reverses the traditional instructional sequence. Instead of beginning with English glosses, characters are first introduced through carefully designed visual scenes that convey atmosphere, spatial relationships, and core meaning. Learners encounter characters as *scenes* before analyzing their internal structure, allowing meaning to emerge through perception rather than translation.

Each character is supported by integrated interactive tools. Learners can click directly on the character to hear accurate pronunciation and view an animated stroke-order demonstration. Writing practice and short assessments are provided in parallel tabs, enabling learners to connect visual form, phonological input, and motor memory within a single learning environment.

This design is informed by research in Chinese second-language acquisition and visual cognition. Studies on imagery-based instruction—such as the Key-Image Method (KIM), component analysis, and visual mnemonics—demonstrate significantly improved long-term retention, recall accuracy, and learner engagement compared to rote memorization. Research further shows that engaging visual working memory through imagery and structured component analysis supports consolidation of characters into long-term memory, with retention effects lasting for months. Findings by scholars such as S. M. H. Shen and others underscore the central role of visual processing in Mandarin character acquisition.

The instructional goal of this project is alignment: alignment between form and meaning, between character structure and imagery, and ultimately between the learner's mental representation and that of native readers. When such alignment is achieved, reading Chinese becomes less an act of decoding and more an act of entering a shared cognitive world.

This project offers an alternative model for character instruction—one that is visually grounded, cognitively supported, and pedagogically scalable—designed to foster durable character knowledge and deeper literacy development.

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