UNIT 1

Jiù céng zhī tái, qǐ yǔ lěi tǔ; qiān lǐ zhī xíng shì yú zú xià.
9 level tower, begin by piling earth; 1000 mile journey begins with foot down
A tall tower begins with the foundation; a long journey begins with a single step.
Lǎozǐ

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1.1 Conventions

The previous Unit on ‘sounds and symbols’ provided the first steps in learning to associate the pinyin transcription of Chinese language material with accurate pronunciation. The task will continue as you start to learn to converse by listening to conversational material while reading it in the pinyin script. However, in the early units, it will be all too easy to fall back into associations based on English spelling, and so occasionally (as in the previous overview), Chinese cited in pinyin will be followed by a more transparent transitional spelling [placed in brackets] to alert you to the new values of the letters, eg: máng [mahng], or hěn [huhn].

In the initial units, where needed, you are provided not only with an idiomatic English translation of Chinese material, but also, in parentheses, with a word-for-word gloss. The latter takes you into the world of Chinese concepts and allows you to understand how meanings are composed. The following conventions are used to make the presentation of this information clearer.

Summary of conventions

a) Parentheses (…) enclose literal meanings, eg: Máng ma? (‘be+busy Q’)
b) Plusses (+) indicate one-to-many, eg: hǎo ‘be+well’; nǐn ‘you+POL’
c) Capitals (Q) indicate grammatical notions, eg: Q for ‘question’; POL for ‘polite’. In cases where there is no easy label for the notion, the Chinese word itself is cited in capitals, with a fuller explanation to appear later: Nǐ ne? ‘(you NE)’
1.2 Pronunciation

To get your vocal organs ready to pronounce Chinese, it is useful to contrast the articulatory settings of Chinese and English by pronouncing pairs of words selected for their similarity of sound. Thus ǎo ‘to test’ differs from English ‘cow’ not only in tone, but also in vowel quality.

a)  kǎo cow  b)  xìn sin  c)  shòu show  
hǎo how  qīn chin  zhōu Joe  
nào now  jīn gin  sōu so  
chǎo chow[-time]  xīn seen  ròu row  
sǎo sow[ʼs ear]  jīn Jean  dōu dough  
bǎo [shipʼs] bow  lín lean  tóu toe  

d)  pō paw  e)  bízi beads  
bō bo[r]e  tuō to[r]e  līzi leads  
mō mo[r]e  luō law  xīzi seeds  

1.3 Numbering and ordering

This section contains information that can be practiced daily in class by counting off, or giving the day’s date.

1.3.1 The numbers, 1 – 10:

<p>| | | | | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yī</td>
<td>èr</td>
<td>sān</td>
<td>sì</td>
<td>wǔ</td>
<td>liù</td>
<td>qī</td>
<td>bā</td>
<td>jiǔ</td>
<td>shí</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.3.2 **Beyond 10**

Higher numbers are formed quite regularly around *shí* ‘ten’ (or a multiple of ten), with following numbers additive (shísān ‘13’, shíqī ‘17’) and preceding numbers multiplicative (sānshí ‘30’, gūshí ‘70):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>shíyī</td>
<td>shí ‘ten’ + 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>shí’èr</td>
<td>shí ‘ten’ + 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>shí sì</td>
<td>shí ‘ten’ + 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>èrshí</td>
<td>èr ‘two’ + shí ‘ten’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>èrshíyī</td>
<td>èr ‘two’ + shí ‘ten’ + 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>èrshí’èr</td>
<td>èr ‘two’ + shí ‘ten’ + 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>èrshí sì</td>
<td>èr ‘two’ + shí ‘ten’ + 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>sānshí</td>
<td>sān ‘three’ + shí ‘ten’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>sānshí yī</td>
<td>sān ‘three’ + shí ‘ten’ + 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.3.3 **The ordinal numbers**

Ordinals are formed with a prefix, *dì* (which by pinyin convention, is attached to the following number with a hyphen):

- di-yī ‘1st’
- di-èr ‘2nd’
- di-sān ‘3rd’
- di-sì ‘4th’
- di-wǔ ‘5th’, etc.

1.3.4 **Dates**

Dates are presented in descending order in Chinese, with year first (nián, think [nien]), then month (yuè, think [yu-eh]) and day (hào). Years are usually presented as a string of digits (that may include líng ‘zero’) rather than a single figure: yījūn-jùlǜ nián ‘1996’; èr-líng-líng-sān nián ‘2003’. Months are formed regularly with numerals: yīyuè ‘January’, èr-yuè ‘February’, shí’èr-yuè ‘December’.

- èrlínglíng sān nián bāyuè sān hào ‘August 3rd, 2003’
- yījūbāwǔ nián èryuè shíbā hào ‘February 18th, 1985’

**Notes**

1. Amongst northern Chinese, yīyuè often shows the *yì* tone shift in combination with a following day: yīyuè sān hào. Qi ‘7’ and bā ‘8’, both level-toned words, sometimes show the same shift in dates (as well as in other contexts prior to a fourth toned word): qiūyuè liù hào; báyuè jiǔ hào.

2. In the written language, rì ‘day’ (a much simpler character) is often used in place of hào: thus written báyuè sān rì (八月三日), which can be read out as such, would be spoken as bā ~ báyuè sān hào (which in turn, could be written verbatim as 八月三号).

1.3.5 **The celestial stems**

Just as English sometimes makes use of letters rather than numbers to indicate a sequence of items, so Chinese sometimes makes use of a closed set of words with fixed order known as the ‘ten stems’ (shígān), or the ‘celestial stems’ (tiāngān), for counting purposes. The ten stems have an interesting history, which will be discussed in greater detail along with information on the Chinese calendar in §4.6.2. For now, they will be used in much the same way that, in English, roman numerals or letters of the alphabet are used to mark subsections of a text, or turns in a dialogue. The first four or five of the ten are much more frequent than the others, simply because they occur early in the sequence.
The ten celestial stems (tiāngān)

jiā  yī  bǐng  dīng  wù
甲  乙  丙  丁  戊
A  B  C  D  E

jǐ  gēng  xīn  rén  guǐ
己  庚  辛  任  壬
F  G  H  I  J