

## A Brief Discussion on the Difficulties and Teaching Methods for Japanese Chinese Learners to Learn Chinese Characters

*Ling Shan Lee*

*(The Education University of Hong Kong, China)*

**Abstract:** This study explores the challenges and teaching methods for Japanese learners of Chinese characters. Given the historical and structural similarities between Chinese characters and Japanese kanji, Japanese students often experience both positive and negative transfer effects when learning Chinese. While their familiarity with kanji provides certain advantages, it also leads to confusion due to differences in shape, pronunciation, and meaning. The research analyzes these differences and their impact on Japanese students' learning processes. It highlights the necessity of emphasizing the form, sound, and meaning of characters through writing practice, pinyin integration, and contextual learning. Additionally, the study suggests using multimedia tools, cultural elements, and interactive methods to enhance engagement and understanding. An experimental study was conducted with intermediate-level Japanese learners, comparing traditional teaching methods with a specialized approach focusing on the differences between Chinese and Japanese characters. The results indicate that targeted teaching strategies significantly improve students' proficiency and reduce negative transfer issues. This research underscores the importance of tailored teaching methods that address the unique challenges faced by Japanese learners, promoting a deeper understanding of Chinese characters and their cultural significance.

**Key words:** L2 Chinese teaching, contextual learning, Chinese characters

### 1. Research Background

#### 1.1 Research Topic

There is a special historical relationship between Chinese characters and Japanese kanji, with many similarities between them. In fact, although the Japanese also use kanji to record their language, their understanding and use of kanji are fundamentally different from that of the Chinese.

Both China and Japan use kanji, which brings many unique advantages to Japanese learners of Chinese. Clearly, this has a “positive transfer” effect for Japanese students. However, Chinese characters also have a “negative transfer” effect. Both Chinese and Japanese use kanji, but based on completely different language systems and the development and changes of kanji, the use of kanji from the Japanese perspective is not entirely the same. Nevertheless, the completely different language systems and the evolution of kanji in China and Japan have caused many differences between them.

This paper analyzes the similarities and differences between Chinese characters and Japanese kanji in terms

---

Ling Shan Lee, Master of Arts, The Education University of Hong Kong; research areas: language acquisition, teaching method, intercultural communication. E-mail: [lingshanlee@gmail.com](mailto:lingshanlee@gmail.com).

of shape, pronunciation, and meaning, to illustrate and hypothesize the difficulties Japanese students face in learning Chinese.

## **1.2 Background of the Research**

Teaching Chinese characters has always been a bottleneck in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Some believe this issue mainly affects Western students because they are unfamiliar with Chinese character writing. Conversely, others believe that Chinese characters are not a challenge for Japanese students since they also use kanji. The only problem for Japanese students is that they easily confuse Chinese characters with Japanese kanji.

Research involving writing exercises from Japanese students of different grades, such as homework and dictation exercises, has identified many issues related to their proficiency in Chinese characters. Analyzing these issues, despite the advantages many Japanese students have in writing kanji, reveals differences between Chinese and Japanese characters.

In summary, what are the similarities and differences between Chinese and Japanese characters? How do they affect Japanese students' learning of Chinese? How can we use kanji as a medium to enhance Chinese teaching for Japanese students? We must identify the problems Japanese students face in learning kanji from several aspects to effectively address the difficulties they encounter.

## **1.3 Research Objectives and Significance**

“Characters” are the foundation of Chinese language and hold a very important position in learning Chinese. So, is writing Chinese characters very important for Chinese learners? Chinese characters are a unified entity of form, sound, and meaning. When a character is fully understood and memorized, these three elements are absolutely necessary and cannot be ignored. The most effective way to learn the “form” of characters is by “writing” them and learning to write them “correctly.” Therefore, writing Chinese characters is indispensable in international Chinese (including Japanese) education. Completely abandoning and ignoring the writing of Chinese characters is a misconception. Hence, we must take the learning of Chinese characters seriously and identify the necessary keys from Japanese kanji to help Japanese learners of Chinese understand and analyze the learning of Chinese and Japanese characters.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Research Theories and Existing Findings**

#### **2.1.1 Definition of Key Core Concepts**

Japan belongs to the “Chinese character cultural sphere,” and many international Chinese teachers believe that Japanese people can easily grasp the rules of writing Chinese characters. Therefore, in teaching Chinese characters, Chinese teachers might use methods designed for Westerners, but neglect the specific needs of Japanese students. This can lead to overestimating Japanese students' abilities with Chinese characters, assuming they can write them correctly without instruction. Japanese students indeed have certain advantages over Western students in learning Chinese, but this advantage lies only in their familiarity with the shapes of characters, unlike European students who view Chinese characters as pictures.

#### **2.1.2 Relevant Theories**

Chinese language learners need to pay attention to the structure of Chinese sentences. Generally, learners grasp sentence structures quickly because learning sentence patterns is relatively natural. However, the relationship between sentence patterns and Chinese characters is another level. Before the late 19th century, Chinese linguistics, including grammar, phonology, and linguistics, saw many Western missionaries come to China. These missionaries used Western grammatical theories to learn Chinese and wrote studies on Chinese grammar. Mr. Zhao Yuanren identified the basic unit of Chinese sentence structure, discovering that a Chinese character is a “character” rather than a “word.” Mr. Zhao wrote an article on Indo-European language concepts and their structure and prosody as a unit of sentence structure. He pointed out that a word in Chinese is “obviously of no value” or “when speaking of words in English, a Chinese speaker would refer to ‘characters’.” He clearly emphasized this point. Mr. Zhao, who spoke multiple languages, analyzed the similarities and differences between “characters” and “words” based on relevant facts. He concluded that analyzing Chinese with “words” as units might not align with Chinese thinking. In the Chinese perspective, “characters” are the central theme, and the syllabic rhythm of “character” words determines this form.

After a long period of ups and downs, Chinese linguistics eventually returned to traditional “character” theory research. Recognizing the position of “characters” in Japanese structure, through studying the characteristics and functions of Chinese, Zhao’s “core theme” is that the structure of Chinese is based on “characters,” and sentences are based on “characters.”

### 2.1.3 Mother Tongue Negative Transfer Issues

When the influence of the mother tongue leads to errors in the acquisition or use of the target language, we say that negative transfer or interference has occurred. Due to the inseparable relationship between Japanese kanji and Chinese characters, Japanese students often use their existing kanji knowledge when learning Chinese characters, leading to negative transfer issues. For example, “勉強” in Japanese means “study,” but in Chinese, it has no relation to studying.

### 2.1.4 Review of Related Empirical Studies

For Japanese students, kanji can be considered familiar and similar old concepts, but when encountering new concepts, they become obstacles due to the influence of Japanese. Researchers have categorized the main errors made by Japanese students when writing kanji in class into nine types. Among them, the following four types (1) to (4) are influenced by the way Japanese kanji are written. In the examples below, the character before is the Chinese character, and the one after is the Japanese kanji.

#### 1) Addition or reduction of strokes

步—步 对—对 带—带 况—况 减—减  
凉—凉 决—决 净—净 浅—浅 收—收  
器—器 桌—卓

#### 2) Deformation of characters

所—所 边—边 团—团 写—写  
舍—舍 黑—黑 画—画 别—别

These errors occur because of the mistaken belief that Chinese characters are the same as Japanese kanji, without noticing the subtle differences between them. It should be noted that many of these Japanese kanji are variants of Chinese characters. However, many teachers consider these kanji written by Japanese students as variants of Chinese characters and do not regard them as writing errors.

### 1) Writing habits

长—長 习—習 鱼—魚 风—風 园—園  
师—師 馆—館 绍—紹 场—場 热—熱  
迟—遲 乐—樂 济—濟 乘—乘 预—予  
图—圖 劳—勞 气—氣 广—広

The combination of Japanese kanji and Chinese characters mentioned above, due to the similarity in structure, leads to poor understanding of kanji by Chinese learners. They habitually write in Japanese, which should be noted as a writing error because many are very close to traditional Chinese characters, causing confusion. In fact, Japanese learners may encounter this issue, but teachers do not understand this point. If no one corrects it over time, it becomes a deeply ingrained habit that is difficult to correct.

### 1) Differences in literal meaning

坐—座 树—木 书—本 鞋—靴  
脸—顔  
情人—愛人 菜—料理 报—新聞  
经历—經驗 火车—汽車 工厂—工廠  
蔬菜—野菜 结实—丈夫 行李—荷物  
孩子—子供 有点—長所 电影—映画  
现代化—近代化

The latter kanji is Japanese kanji. When Chinese learners want to express their ideas, Japanese words often come to mind. When writing words, some write Japanese kanji, and some write the corresponding simplified Chinese characters. Japanese kanji still exist in the minds of Chinese learners.

These errors have a common point: replacing Chinese characters with Japanese kanji. Some Japanese words also appear in Chinese characters but with completely different meanings. Some Chinese learners know what they want to express or write in exams, but they struggle with which Chinese word to use, so they temporarily write the Japanese word with the same meaning. For example, using “顔” instead of “脸.” Some Chinese learners have not memorized the corresponding Chinese words and habitually use synonymous Japanese words when making sentences. Additionally, some Chinese learners want to express their ideas but have not yet thought of which Chinese characters to use, so they have to use synonymous or similar Japanese words when expressing themselves.

## 3. Research Methods

### 3.1 Sampling Method

This study sampled two classes of intermediate-level Japanese learners of Chinese from a language school to conduct a teaching experiment and collect data. The two Chinese teachers participating in the study had no prior exposure to the “Chinese-Japanese Character Differences” teaching method. One class was set as the experimental group, where the Chinese teacher received 8 hours of training and explanation on the teaching method from the researcher. The control group teacher did not receive this training. The detailed steps for the two classes are as follows:

Level: Intermediate-level Chinese students, approximately HSK Level 3.

Number of Students: One experimental class and one control class, each with 20 students. The experimental

class focused on teaching the differences between Chinese and Japanese characters, while the control class used traditional teaching methods, emphasizing writing practice without explaining the differences.

Gender: The experimental class had 10 female and 10 male students, while the control class had 9 female and 11 male students.

Identity and Language Background: Japanese nationality, no Chinese heritage, with Japanese as their mother tongue (first language).

Chinese Writing Proficiency: Pre-experiment test scores (out of 100) were approximately 64 for the experimental class and 60 for the control class.

Class Mode: Regular classes, each lasting 1 hour, with approximately 6 hours of classes completed within one month.

### 3.2 Research Methods and Tools

The experimental study targeted Japanese learners of Chinese. One group (experimental class) used the “Chinese-Japanese Character Differences” teaching method, while the control group did not and followed the usual classroom teaching mode (focused on vocabulary teaching). This study used a mixed-case study method to collect data through pre-tests, post-tests, and interviews.

### 3.3 Research Process

Steps for data collection and procedures:

Duration: Total teaching time was about 6 hours, with an additional 2 hours for pre-tests and post-tests.

Steps: All test questions and instructions were provided in both Chinese and Japanese. i) Questionnaire: All students spent 3-5 minutes filling out a questionnaire about their language background. ii) Pre-test: All students completed a test in 1 hour. iii) Teaching: The experimental class used the “Chinese-Japanese Character Differences” teaching method, while the control class followed the teacher’s usual teaching mode. Both classes had the same amount of teaching time (approximately 6 hours). iv) Post-test: The process was the same as the pre-test, with similar content in the test questions. v) Interviews: The researcher interviewed 2 students from the experimental class.

### 3.4 Expected Results Analysis

(1) Methods for analyzing and measuring collected data

	丈夫	下流	勉強	切手	愛人	手紙	汽車
Japanese meaning	durable	downstream	study	stamp	Mistress	Letter	train
Chinese meaning	husband	dirty	reluctantly	cut hand	Wife	toilet paper	car

The experimental class is expected to perform significantly better. Teaching strategies include:

- Explaining these words separately in class.

- Using the differences between Chinese and Japanese characters to attract students' interest in learning.
- Stimulating their continuous learning and discovery of these interesting differences, thereby opening up their comparative study of Chinese and Japanese characters.
- Paying full attention to these differences when using Chinese characters to minimize the negative transfer of Japanese words.

## **(2) Correspondence Between Expected Results and Research Questions**

Given the characteristics of Chinese characters, this teaching method aims to promote students' understanding of the connection between Chinese characters and culture. This method is also suitable for Japanese students, as they lack a rational understanding of the differences between Chinese and Japanese characters. The combination of Chinese characters and language as a morpheme-based teaching method effectively addresses this issue.

### **Teaching Method:**

To effectively teach Chinese characters to Japanese learners, it's important to emphasize the form, sound, and meaning of characters. This can be achieved through writing practice, combining pinyin teaching, and contextual learning. Comparing the differences between Chinese and Japanese characters in terms of shape, pronunciation, and meaning helps avoid confusion. Utilizing multimedia tools like videos, animations, apps, and games can make learning more interactive and engaging.

Integrating cultural elements, such as the history and evolution of characters, along with activities like calligraphy and seal carving, can enhance students' interest. Layered teaching with graded materials and personalized guidance ensures that students at different levels receive appropriate support. Repeated practice and regular testing help reinforce learning, while interactive methods like group discussions and role-playing improve practical usage.

Visual aids, immediate feedback, and self-assessment encourage continuous improvement. Promoting autonomous learning through recommended resources and personal learning plans fosters independent study habits. Cultural experience activities, such as character culture festivals and calligraphy competitions, further stimulate interest. Diverse evaluation methods, including oral tests and project assignments, provide a comprehensive assessment of students' progress.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research has explored the unique challenges and effective teaching methods for Japanese learners of Chinese characters. The historical and structural similarities between Chinese characters and Japanese kanji provide both advantages and obstacles for Japanese students. While their familiarity with kanji facilitates learning, it also leads to confusion due to differences in shape, pronunciation, and meaning.

The research highlights the importance of emphasizing the form, sound, and meaning of characters through comprehensive teaching methods. Writing practice, pinyin integration, and contextual learning are essential for reinforcing these elements. Additionally, comparing the differences between Chinese and Japanese characters helps students avoid common pitfalls.

The experimental study demonstrated that targeted teaching strategies, such as using multimedia tools, cultural elements, and interactive methods, significantly improve students' proficiency. These strategies not only enhance engagement but also minimize negative transfer issues.

In conclusion, tailored teaching methods that address the specific needs of Japanese learners are crucial for effective Chinese character education. By promoting a deeper understanding of Chinese characters and their cultural significance, educators can better support Japanese students in overcoming learning difficulties and achieving greater proficiency in Chinese.

#### References

- 陳絨(2001). “日本學生書寫漢語漢字的訛誤及其產生原因”，*世界漢語教學*, No. 4, pp. 75-81.
- 稲垣紀夫・藤田正(2005). “漢字學習における書字行為に関する研究”，*教育実践総合センター紀要*, Vol. 14, pp. 47-54.
- Hu, X. (2012). “Teaching and learning Chinese characters: The advantages and disadvantages of Japanese students”，*立命館アジア太平洋大學立命館アジア太平洋研究センター*，Vol. 23, No. 10, pp. 21-32, doi: <https://iss.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I000000106198-00>.
- 王幼敏(2020). “日本人中國語學習者によく見られる誤り——具體例からの分析”，*愛知県立大學外國語學部紀要*, Vol. 52, pp. 239-260.
- 大河内康憲(1992). *日本語と中國語の對照論文集*, 日本: <ろしお出版。
- 史有為(2005). “日本所用漢字的漢語‘轉型’初探”，*世界漢語教學*, No. 4.
- 李曉琪(2006). *對外漢語文化教學研究*, 北京: 商務印書館.
- 森岡健二(2004). *日本語と漢字*, 東京: 明治書院.
- 楊德峰著(2008). *日本人學漢語常見語法錯誤釋疑*, 北京: 商務印書館.
- 杉崎哲子(2014). “小學校學習漢字的「手書き」習得を図る指導法の構築: 「書き」の誤答分析を通して”，*教科開発學論集*, No. 2, pp. 159-171.