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Book Review: McGraw-Hill's Chinese Dictionary & Guide to 20,000 Essential Words

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Reviews

Edited by Thomas S. Conner, St. Norbert College

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Chinese

Quanyu, Huang, Tong Chen, and Kuangyan Huang. *McGraw-Hill's Chinese Dictionary & Guide to 20,000 Essential Words*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-07-162924-6-9. Hardcover. Pp. 688.

Chinese Dictionary & Guide to 20,000 Essential Words is a concise dictionary specially designed for learners of Chinese as a foreign or a second language. This dictionary distinguishes itself from other Chinese language dictionaries by its unconventional character look-up system, a system that searches for a character by counting the total number of “*broken marks*” (not linked or unlinked strokes) of each character.

In the preface, the authors clearly state their rationale for inventing this unique look-up system and begin by defining the so-called *broken marks* of the system. According to the authors, the traditional look-up system of other Chinese language dictionaries involves six steps to be used every time when searching for an unknown character: “know about 214 different radicals, identify a character’s radical, count the radical strokes, find the appropriate index number in the radical index list, count the remaining strokes, and find the character from a group of characters according to the remaining strokes” (ix). This complicated look-up system sometimes intimidates even native speakers of Chinese when they turn to a dictionary. Obviously, the complexity of the traditional look-up system becomes a major reason why few Chinese language learners use dictionaries, even though the benefits are well-recognized.

In an attempt to improve the traditional look-up system, *CD&GEW* applied the *Broken Marks Method (BMM)*, an innovative look-up system which the authors created as a remedial solution to help non-native Chinese language learners quickly learn how to use a Chinese reference work. In this method, only two steps are needed when looking up a character. First, count the total marks of each character. Marks in

this system are defined as “a part of a character that is separated from other parts by either physical space or a significant change in direction” (xiii). This method splits traditional linked strokes into broken marks. For example, the character 九 (nine) has two strokes in the traditional counts because 乙 is a linked stroke. This stroke is split up into four marks: 一, |, 丿, and 丨, and these marks lead to a total of five counts for character 九 (i.e., five total marks). The second step involves selecting the character’s first Mark. Four marks are included in this method: 一, 丿, 一, and 丶. The same is true of the character 九. The *BMM* identifies 丿 as the first mark, while traditionally 乙 is written as the first stroke. Therefore, when looking for the character 九, learners need to first look at the five marks section, and then look up the mark 丿 section. The *BMM* seems to be very easy to learn and it can help make the characters accessible to learners at different proficiency levels.

In addition to the *BMM*, many other features of *CD&GEW* also contribute to this dictionary’s practical and friendly character. Although *CD&GEW* mainly applies its *BMM* as a primary look-up system, *CD&GEW* also includes other common search systems, such as a Pinyin Index, a Radicals and Strokes Index, and an English-to-Chinese Index. This thoughtful inclusion makes *CD&GEW* beneficial to those learners who are already familiar with other types of look-up systems.

The hardcover volume consisting of 548 sturdy pages, makes for a very durable desk reference for beginners to intermediate-level learners of Chinese. On each page, the highlighted headwords, which are the target characters, stand out clearly; the reasonably sized font helps users easily locate words and read the text. Under each headword, both the traditional and simplified versions of characters are illustrated with English definitions. For each character, many compound words and phrases are provided and can be easily found in the dictionary by using the total number of total marks stated on the side of each word/phrase. Some country names and place names also appear often on the list.

Two helpful features become readily apparent when reading the explanation and words listed on each page. The first feature is that, in conjunction with standard Chinese parts of speech, the dictionary provides the measure words for all nouns that need measure words. Because correctly using a noun with its measure word is one of the most difficult learning tasks for students learning Chinese, providing measure words with nouns is very helpful. The second helpful feature is that each entry includes a list of related terms in which the target character may appear in the middle or at the end of a word. This feature enables learners to easily look up words either forward or backward, and to search for a character in different locations within words.

However, some aspects of *CD&GEW* may be less helpful. A primary concern relates to the specially designed *BMM*. Although this innovative look-up system simplifies the steps to search for characters in this dictionary, the broken marks may lead to confusion in writing Chinese, whether students are new to Chinese or whether they have already learned to write Chinese by following the stroke orders. For new learners, when their Chinese vocabulary grows out of this dictionary, they will have to consult other dictionaries that do not use the *BMM* look-up system. In this case, those learners face a double challenge: relearn Chinese strokes and get rid of the old counting habit, which sometimes is even more difficult.

In addition, the *BMM* may slow down the speed of writing because of the extra strokes presented in the *BMM*. Although the *BMM* is not intended to be a Chinese writing rule, learners of Chinese may develop a writing habit that follows the number of marks (if not, they may not count the marks correctly). In the above example, the character 九 needs to have five different strokes, but 九 only needs two strokes in the traditional way.

Another concern is that not every word is followed by an example to show how the word is used in different contexts and how the same word means different things if it is a polysemant. For example, the word 人生 is defined as “life” in English. Since “life” can refer to the animate existence or period of animate existence of an individual, inexperienced learners of Chinese may create sentences with 人生 being used incorrectly because *CD & GEW* does not explain that 人生 only means human life in Chinese, not animal life. Therefore, it is not a surprise to see students create sentences such as “我的狗的人生很有意思”(“My dog’s human life is very interesting”) or “我不喜欢鲜花，因为鲜花的人生太短了”(“I do not like fresh flowers because their human life is too short”). More examples or contexts could reduce these errors.

Over-simplified annotation for some words is another issue in this dictionary; take, for example, the words 老大爷 and 老大娘。 *CD & GEW* simply defines 老大爷 as “n. uncle; grandpa,” and 老大娘 as “n. aunt; grandma.” These oversimplified explanations without sample sentences to show how the words are used, may cause two problems. First, students may be confused by the meaning because uncle and grandpa are totally different generations in English. Moreover, without being informed that 老大爷 and 老大娘 are often used to address a stranger who is senior in age, students may understand that 老大爷 or 老大娘 as kinship terms (grandpa only means a father of a parent in English) and they may create sentences such as 我的老大爷在我家 (“My stranger grandfather is at my home”), which sounds a little strange in Chinese.

Finally, although the dictionary covers 2,000 essential characters that generate up to 20,000 words, some common words that Net Generation students cannot live without nowadays are absent from the dictionary. For example, 上网 (surf the Internet), 网上 (online), 短信 (text message), 网吧 (Internet café), 下载 (download), 网友 (net friend), and 手机 (cell phone) cannot be found through either a forward or backward search.

Despite these concerns, *CD & GEW* may serve as an invaluable tool for learners of Chinese because it has the potential to help learners easily find complicated characters and learn the meaning and pronunciation of unknown words. Learners may quickly find the meanings of unknown words in a reading and consult the usage of words or structures (especially the use of measure words) when writing, as well as better understand the idiomatic equivalents of expressions when translating. In addition, the innovative *BMM* look-up system may encourage Chinese language teachers to reconsider how Chinese characters can be more effectively taught to non-native Chinese speakers. However, there is no single dictionary that can satisfy all language learners or all objectives or all proficiency levels. This reviewer suggests that *CD & GEW* be used with caution and that teachers be prepared to help students bridge the two ways of stroke counts—the *broken marks* and the traditional linked-strokes.

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Publisher's Response

The Publisher thanks Professor Hong Zhan for her thorough review of McGraw-Hill's *Chinese Dictionary and Guide to 20,000 Essential Words*. She identifies the key motivation for the development of the Broken Marks Method: the author saw that the complexity of traditional look-up systems resulted in minimal use of dictionaries by Chinese language learners in first and even second year of study. And I am delighted that she finds this approach easy to learn, and also appreciates the legibility of the text and the inclusion of indexes for other search systems, as well as tags indicating measure words.

I would like to clarify one specific point raised, concerning the term 人生 “life.” While the definition is not as expansive as she would like, it is worth noting that the student who uses the English index to look up the word “life” will be pointed to a handful of Chinese entries, including this one. And with regard to the two more general concerns raised by the reviewer, I would like to defer to the author, Quanyu Huang:

“1. The belief that Chinese language learners will come to rely on the Broken Marks method, and that this reliance will hinder written language skill development is, in my opinion, an overstated worry. It emphasizes the “form” of Chinese language writing over the “function” of learning Chinese as a foreign language. This is very understandable given the traditional way in which Chinese is taught in China, but from the perspective of the foreign (e.g., American) student learning Chinese, the worry that the BMM will hinder written absorption of “strokes and radicals” is much less relevant.

For beginners, as the Foreword of the book states, “The more [beginning] learners practice with characters, the sooner they are able to distinguish those components that they will later identify as radicals and phonetics. This will [later] permit them to look up characters in standard dictionaries and predict their pronunciation.” The BMM should be seen as a bridge or stepping stone to fluency with the Chinese language in general (including strokes and radicals). Moreover, it is a bridge that heretofore has not been available to beginning students.

Chinese is a language with an incredibly steep learning curve for a non-native beginner. This difficulty is amplified by the lack of a reliable, accessible dictionary. Currently, all will agree that the vast majority of beginning students forego the use of dictionaries altogether. I would ask whether this state of affairs (i.e., beginning students afraid of and resistant to using any dictionary at all) is preferable to students using the BMM, and developing more comfort, familiarity and experience with the language sooner in their learning careers.

I strongly believe that a student who sees more Chinese characters earlier and gains more facility with the language sooner, will be better off than one who “holds off” on using a dictionary until he or she becomes familiar with strokes and radicals

(which often never happens at all). The BMM is not a denunciation of strokes and radicals. Instead, it is a recognition of the more immediate concerns for most students: functional mastery of the fundamentals of the language.

An easy analogy is English block/print letters. American children all begin by learning how to write in large, garish block print. They do not begin by learning how to write in cursive. This is by design. Block letters are easier to write, remember and understand for children. Children can distinguish between them easier, sooner. Block letters thus allow children to develop basic familiarity with the concepts of letters, words and spelling. Once words are mastered, children can begin on more difficult concepts such as sentences and paragraphs. Thereafter, children learn cursive. In time, this leads to writing whole essays—which in turn lead to advanced concepts of language like style, structure and syntax. Language, like anything else, is learned step-by-step. Few would say the best or correct approach to teaching English is to teach—from the outset—only what is expected at the endpoint in order to avoid “bad habits.” No one would tell a five-year-old, “Write full sentences in cursive, Joey, or write nothing at all.” Even though block letters are different from cursive letters (and a child may come to prefer writing in block print rather than in cursive), block letters are not obstacles or hindrances to learning the language in general. On the contrary, they are a necessary stepping stone or bridge to the next steps of learning. The BMM is no different.

It must be noted that I’ve only heard the critique that BMM will lead to “bad habits” from Chinese people, and never from foreigners learning Chinese. This is understandable. In China, the way a child learns the Chinese language is traditionally bound up with Chinese calligraphy. From a very young age, a child is not only taught what a character means (vocabulary) and how it is used (grammar), but also how it must be written (calligraphy). Indeed, in China, each Chinese character must be written in one, standard way: with one’s right hand (left-handed students must adapt); in a particular grip; in a particular order of strokes (many times illogical or unintuitive); and with precise and proper proportions. The worry that the BMM will lead to “bad habits” largely grows out of a concern that students will not learn the third component (calligraphy) correctly.

But from the perspective of non-native Chinese students, mastery of strokes and radicals (and other calligraphic elements of Chinese) are less important than functional mastery of the language for actual use. The calligraphic elements mentioned above are largely not what the modern, foreign Chinese student wants or needs to learn. The vast majority of students of Chinese, if asked, would likely state their main goals are to speak, read and write Chinese competently.

These are functional goals. In order to speak, read and write competently, a student must learn vocabulary and basic grammar—two aspects of language that all but require an accessible dictionary for improvement. In other words, students must first know what characters mean and know how to use them properly. These are the practical linguistic dividends of an accessible dictionary.

In deference to the “calligraphic” elements of Chinese, however, Chinese dictionaries have traditionally required extensive knowledge of “strokes and radicals” (a calligraphic element) for little more than tradition’s sake. Dictionaries have thus been rendered inaccessible to the people who need them the most. The BMM is an

attempt to reverse this trend. By making a Chinese dictionary accessible to anyone, the BMM seeks to promote exactly these “functional” elements of language learning. While we do not shun the traditional formal calligraphic elements of Chinese (indeed, the dictionary includes an index to locate characters by traditional strokes and radicals), we do not consider familiarity with these elements to be a prerequisite to using a dictionary.

Students who stick with Chinese will learn to recognize strokes and radicals naturally, regardless of whether or not they used the BMM, as they (radicals, in particular) are obvious components of almost every Chinese character. The key, however, is that the student must first stick with Chinese long enough to get to that point. To that end, the BMM is there to help things along.

2. The specter of “limited” definitions and example sentences is a valid and reasonable critique of our dictionary, though it can be said of most printed reference works. The scope of our text was limited by design (focusing on only 2,000 of the most commonly used characters), time and cost considerations. While we tried to be as comprehensive as possible, we never intended (or imagined) that we could comprehensively address the entirety of the Chinese language, or even a majority of it. Given more time and resources, we would love to create a more comprehensive version of the text.

That said, we did our best to include what we thought would be important. With regard to certain useful words that were not included, value judgments were made as to what should (and should not) have been included. A part of this analysis was a survey of existing dictionaries to see what others had (and had not) covered. I am sure if we could do it over again, we would make changes and swap some words for others, but the words included in the final edition were, in our view, the ones most likely to come up in a typical Chinese language learner’s career. If possible, we will certainly update the text in future editions with characters or words we believe should be added, and to that end, the reviewer’s suggestions are most helpful.”

Christopher Brown
 Publisher
 McGraw-Hill Professional

Zhang, Phyllis. *Developing Chinese Fluency*. Cengage Learning, 2009. ISBN10: 1-111-34222-9. Includes workbook (with access key to online workbook).

Developing Chinese Fluency (henceforth DCF) is an outstanding contribution to the field of Chinese language education. It is specifically designed to promote students’ speaking and writing skills. The training program contained in the textbook is built on the proficiency guidelines set forth by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the 5Cs national standards for foreign language education. DCF also incorporates a well- integrated variety of methodologies, such as the lexical approach, the audio-lingual method and communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching. DCF is engaging, motivating and supports a student-centered classroom. Furthermore, it offers ample opportunities for students