

THE CHINA HELPER • FREE LEARNING RESOURCE

100 Essential Chinese Characters for Beginners

Every International Student Should Know in China

A Beginner-Friendly Guide to Understanding Chinese Signs, Words and Daily Life

Signs • Menus • Transport • Campus • Daily Survival



Free Chinese Learning Resource by The China Helper

Welcome to Chinese Characters

Chinese characters may look difficult at first, but you do not need to learn thousands of characters to survive in China.

- Learning the most common characters can help you:
- Understand public street & metro signs
- Read restaurant menus and food labels
- Use public transportation systems
- Recognize important official & campus information
- Build your basic everyday Chinese vocabulary

💡 Extra Tip: You do not need to know how to write every character. For daily survival, recognizing them is enough. Many international students only focus on reading recognition for the first few months in China.



How This Guide Works

This is a survival-recognition guide. Priority: read & recognize, not handwriting practice.

Every character entry includes five sections:

Character— Original Chinese character

Pinyin— Phonetic pronunciation

Meaning— Core English definition

Common Words— Real-life compound words you will actually see

Where You See It— Real-world locations / scenarios you encounter this character

Example

学

xuéStudy : 学习 xuéxí study and learn 学生 xuéshēng student

Where You See It:

School, campus gate, textbook covers, class notice boards



💡 Extra Tip: Screenshot character pages and store on your phone. When you see unknown signs in public, quickly look up this guide. You do not need memorize all 100 characters in one sitting.

Extra important note: Chinese subway stations clearly mark 入口 Entrance / 出口 Exit. These two characters will save you lots of trouble when travelling.

Chinese Signs You Will See Everywhere

💡 Note: These single-character public signs appear on metro, restrooms, building doors, warning posters. Recognize these one character and you understand the whole sign.

PART

1

Basic Everyday Characters



人 rén <i>Person / People</i> Words: 外国人 wàiguórén (foreigner) · 学生 xuéshēng (student) Seen: ID documents, introduction forms, public notice board	大 dà <i>Big / Large</i> Words: 大学 dàxué (university) · 大楼 dàlóu (large building) Seen: University gate, building names, store signs
小 xiǎo <i>Small / Little</i> Words: 小店 xiǎodiàn (small shop) · 小学 xiǎoxué (primary school) Seen: Local convenience stores, street shop signs	中 zhōng <i>Middle / China</i> Words: 中国 Zhōngguó (China) · 中文 Zhōngwén (Chinese language) Seen: Official signs, packaging, campus notice
国 guó <i>Country / Nation</i> Words: 国家 guójiā (country) · 国际 guójì (international) Seen: Passport-related documents, international-office sign	文 wén <i>Language / Writing / Culture</i> Words: 中文 Zhōngwén (Chinese language) · 文字 wénzi (written characters) Seen: Library, textbook, language class notice
学 xué <i>Study / Learn</i> Words: 学生 xuéshēng (student) · 学校 xuéxiào (school) Seen: Campus everywhere, classroom door, university documents	生 shēng <i>Life / Raw / Student</i> Words: 学生 xuéshēng (student) · 先生 xiānsheng (mister) Seen: Student ID, campus registration paper
日 rì <i>Sun / Day / Date</i> Words: 生日 shēngrì (birthday) · 日期 rìqī (date) Seen: Forms, calendar, application documents	月 yuè <i>Moon / Month</i> Words: 月份 yuèfèn (month) · 一月 yī (yuè January) Seen: Application forms, calendars
年 nián <i>Year / Age</i>	多 duō <i>Many / More</i>

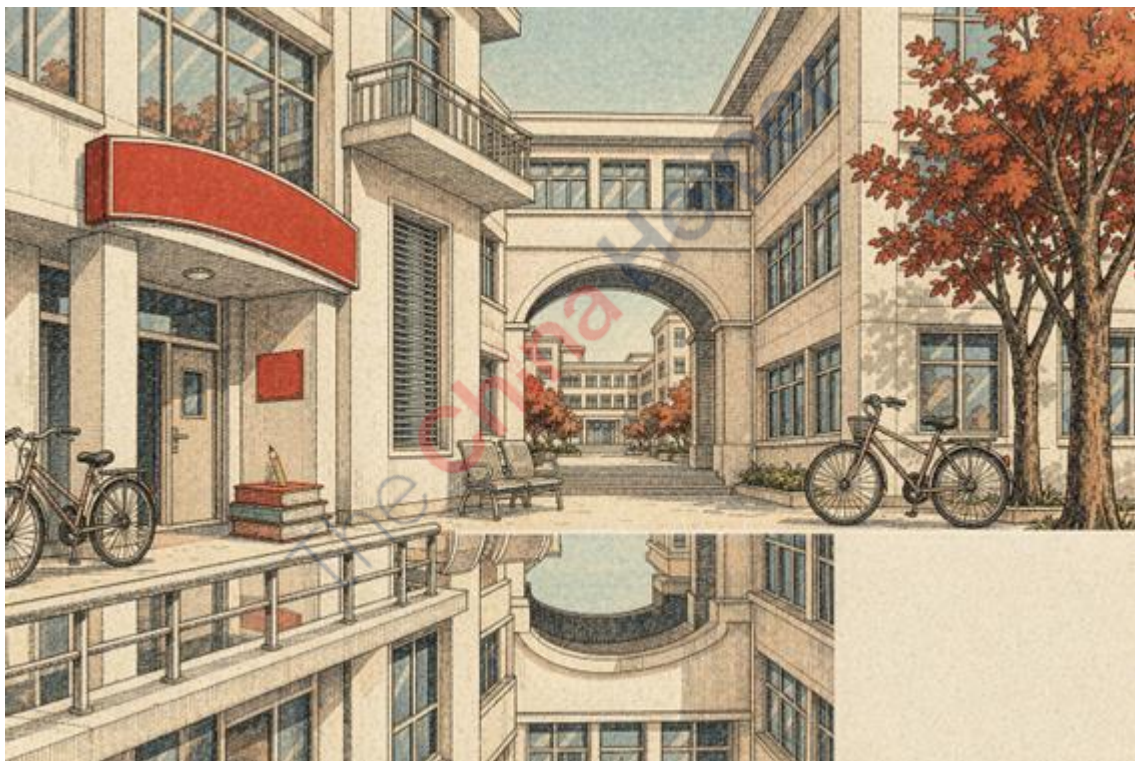
Words: 年龄 niánlíng (age) · 今年 jīnnián (this year) Seen: Registration forms, official paperwork	Words: 多少 duōshao (how many /how much) · 很多 hěnn (duō a lot) Seen: Shops, price tags, questionnaires
少 shǎo <i>Few / Little</i> Words: 少一点 shǎo (yìdiǎn a little less) · 很少 hěnn (shǎo very few) Seen: Restaurant menu, ordering food	好 hǎo <i>Good / Fine</i> Words: 很好 hěnn (hǎo very good) · 好吃 hǎochī (delicious) Seen: Reviews, menu comments, daily conversation text
是 shì <i>Is / Am / Are</i> Words: 我是 wǒ (shì I am) · 不是 bú (shì is not) Seen: Forms, questionnaires, basic written sentences	

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PART

2

Campus & University Characters



校 xiào School / Campus Words: 学校 xuéxiào (school) · 校园 xiàoyuán (campus) Seen: University gate, campus building sign	教 jiào Teach / Instruction Words: 教室 jiàoshì (classroom) · 教学 jiàoxué (teaching) Seen: Teaching building door sign
师 shī Teacher / Master Words: 老师 lǎoshī (teacher) · 教师 jiàoshī (instructor) Seen: Office door, class schedule	课 kè Class / Lesson Words: 上课 shàngkè (attend class) · 课本 kèběn (textbook) Seen: Timetable, classroom notice
楼 lóu Building / Floor Words: 教学楼 jiàoxuélóu (teaching building) · 宿舍楼 sùshèlóu (dormitory building) Seen: Every campus building entrance sign	门 mén Door / Gate Words: 大门 dàmén (main gate) · 门口 ménkǒu (doorway) Seen: Building gate, room door plate
室 shì Room / Chamber Words: 教室 jiàoshì (classroom) · 办公室 bàngōngshì (office) Seen: All kinds of room signs on campus	办 bàn Handle / Manage Words: 办理 bànlǐ (process (formalities)) · 办公室 bàngōngshì (office) Seen: Administration office, student-affairs notice
公 gōng Public / Official Words: 办公室 bàngōngshì (office) · 公开 gōngkāi (public) Seen: Official notice, administration building	宿 sù Lodge / Accommodate Words: 宿舍 sùshè (dormitory) Seen: Student dormitory building sign
舍 shè House / Dorm Words: 宿舍 sùshè (student dormitory) Seen: Dorm building, dorm registration	图 tú Picture / Chart Words: 图书馆 túshūguǎn (library) · 图片 túpiàn (picture)

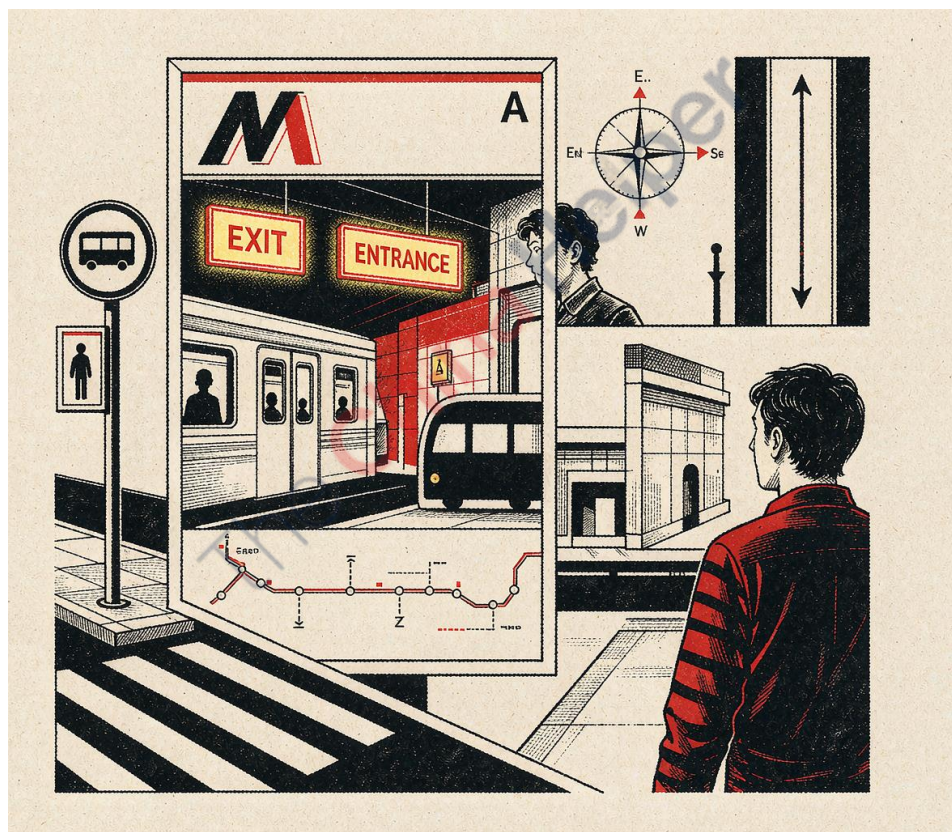
	Seen: Library entrance sign
书 shū Book Words: 图书 túshū (book) · 书本 shūběn (textbook) Seen: Library, bookstore, classroom	馆 guǎn Hall / Venue Words: 图书馆 túshūguǎn (library) · 体育馆 tǐyùguǎn (gymnasium) Seen: Library, sports-building entrance
际 jì Border / Inter- Words: 国际 guójì (international) · 国际学生 guójì (xuéshēng international student) Seen: International student office doorplate	

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3

Transportation Characters



车 chē <i>Vehicle / Car</i> Words: 汽车 qìchē (car) · 火车 huǒchē (train) Seen: Bus station, train station sign	站 zhàn <i>Station / Stop</i> Words: 车站 chēzhàn (station) · 地铁站 dìtiězhàn (metro station) Seen: Metro, bus, railway station everywhere
路 lù <i>Road / Route</i> Words: 道路 dàolù (road) · 公路 gōnglù (highway) Seen: Street name plates, bus route boards	东 dōng <i>East</i> Words: 东门 dōngmén (east gate) · 东边 dōngbiān (east side) Seen: Metro exit number, building gate sign
西 xī <i>West</i> Words: 西门 xīmén (west gate) · 西边 xībiān (west side) Seen: Metro exits, campus gate signs	南 nán <i>South</i> Words: 南门 nánmén (south gate) · 南方 nánfāng (south) Seen: Metro exit, street signs
北 běi <i>North</i> Words: 北门 běimén (north gate) · 北方 běifāng (north) Seen: Metro exit, street name plates	出 chū <i>Go out / Exit</i> Words: 出口 chūkǒu (exit) · 出去 chūqù (go out) Seen: Metro huge EXIT sign, building fire exit
入 rù <i>Enter / Entrance</i> Words: 入口 rùkǒu (entrance) · 进入 jìnrù (enter) Seen: Metro ENTRANCE sign, building gate	地 dì <i>Ground / Land</i> Words: 地铁 dìtiě (metro /subway) · 地方 dìfāng (place) Seen: Metro station sign, street signs

PART

4

Food & Restaurant Characters



饭 fàn <i>Rice / Meal</i> Words: 吃饭 chīfàn (eat meal) · 米饭 mǐfàn (cooked rice) Seen: Restaurant menus, campus canteen	水 shuǐ <i>Water</i> Words: 开水 kāishuǐ (boiled water) · 水杯 shuǐbēi (water cup) Seen: Drink menu, water-vending machine
茶 chá <i>Tea</i> Words: 喝茶 hēchá (drink tea) · 奶茶 nǎichá (milk tea) Seen: Drink shop menus, restaurant beverage list	肉 ròu <i>Meat</i> Words: 牛肉 niúròu (beef) · 猪肉 zhūròu (pork) Seen: Food menu, canteen food label
菜 cài <i>Vegetable / Dish</i> Words: 饭菜 fàncài (food dishes) · 蔬菜 shūcài (vegetables) Seen: Every restaurant menu & canteen board	米 mǐ <i>Uncooked rice</i> Words: 米饭 mǐfàn (cooked rice) · 大米 dànmǐ (rice grain) Seen: Food packaging, menu
面 miàn <i>Noodle / Surface</i> Words: 面条 miàntiáo (noodles) · 面包 miànbāo (bread) Seen: Noodle restaurant menu	辣 là <i>Spicy / Hot-chili</i> Words: 辣椒 làjiāo (chili pepper) · 不辣 bú (là not spicy) Seen: Menu spice-level tags, canteen labels
吃 chī <i>Eat</i> Words: 吃饭 chīfàn (eat meal) · 吃东西 chī (dōngxī eat food) Seen: Food advertisement, menu descriptions	喝 hē <i>Drink</i> Words: 喝水 hē (shuǐ drink water) · 喝茶 hē (chá drink tea) Seen: Beverage menus, drink-shop signs

PART

5

Shopping & Payment Characters



钱 qián <i>Money</i> Words: 花钱 huāqián (spend money) · 有钱 yǒuqián (have money) Seen: Shops, payment counter, price notice	元 yuán <i>Chinese Yuan (CNY)</i> Words: 一元 yì (yuán one RMB) · 五十元 wǔshí (yuán fifty RMB) Seen: Every price tag in China
店 diàn <i>Shop / Store</i> Words: 商店 shāngdiàn (shop) · 饭店 fàndiàn (restaurant) Seen: Store front signboard on streets	买 mǎi <i>Buy / Purchase</i> Words: 买东西 mǎi (dōngxi go shopping) · 买菜 mǎi (cài buy food) Seen: Shopping mall poster, supermarket label
卖 mài <i>Sell</i> Words: 售卖 shòumài (sell) · 外卖 wàimài (take-away food) Seen: Shop signs, food delivery app screenshots	价 jià <i>Price</i> Words: 价格 jiàgé (price) · 价钱 jiàqian (cost) Seen: Price tag, supermarket shelf label
贵 guì <i>Expensive</i> Words: 太贵了 tài (guì le too expensive) · 很贵 hěn (guì very costly) Seen: Bargain conversation text, product comments	便 pián /biàn <i>Cheap / Convenient</i> Words: 便宜 piányi (cheap) · 方便 fāngbiàn (convenient) Seen: Street shop bargaining, convenience-store sign
商 shāng <i>Business / Merchant</i> Words: 商店 shāngdiàn (shop) · 商场 shāngchǎng (shopping mall) Seen: Mall entrance sign	场 chǎng <i>Place / Venue</i> Words: 商场 shāngchǎng (shopping mall) · 广场 guǎngchǎng (public square) Seen: Mall, public-area signboard
有 yǒu <i>Have / There is</i> Words: 有没有 yǒu (méiyǒu do you have) · 有的 yǒu	无 wú <i>No / Without</i> Words: 无烟 wúyān (no smoking) · 无线 wúxiàn

(de there is) Seen: Shop questions, product labels	(wireless) Seen: Public warning signs, product description
收 shōu <i>Receive / Accept</i> Words: 收款 shōukuǎn (collect payment) · 收钱 shōuqián (receive money) Seen: Shop cashier counter sticker	付 fù <i>Pay</i> Words: 付款 fùkuǎn (make payment) · 支付 zhīfù (pay) Seen: Payment sticker on shop counter
货 huò <i>Goods / Merchandise</i> Words: 商品 shāngpǐn (goods) · 货物 huòwù (merchandise) Seen: Supermarket, shop shelf labels	

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6

Digital Life Characters



手 shǒu <i>Hand</i> Words: 手机 shǒujī (mobile phone) · 手表 shǒubiǎo (wrist-watch) Seen: Phone-shop sign, instruction sticker	机 jī <i>Machine / Device</i> Words: 手机 shǒujī (cellphone) · 计算机 jìsuànjī (computer) Seen: Electronic-shop sign, device manual
网 wǎng <i>Net / Internet</i> Words: 网络 wǎngluò (internet) · 上网 shàngwǎng (go online) Seen: Wi-Fi notice, internet service sticker	码 mǎ <i>Code</i> Words: 二维码 èr (wéi mǎ QR-code) · 号码 hàomǎ (number code) Seen: Payment QR-code sticker everywhere
支 zhī <i>Branch / Support / Pay</i> Words: 支付 zhīfù (pay) · 支付宝 Zhīfùbǎo (Alipay) Seen: Shop payment stickers	付 fù <i>Pay</i> Words: 支付 zhīfù (pay) · 付款 fùkuǎn (make payment) Seen: Mobile-payment counter label
信 xìn <i>Letter / Message / Trust</i> Words: 微信 Wēixìn (WeChat) · 信息 xìnxī (information) Seen: Shop payment sticker, chat-app prompt	电 diàn <i>Electric / Electricity</i> Words: 电话 diànhuà (telephone) · 电脑 diànnǎo (computer) Seen: Phone booth, electronic-shop sign
话 huà <i>Speech / Talk</i> Words: 电话 diànhuà (telephone) · 说话 shuōhuà (speak) Seen: Contact-information label	号 hào <i>Number / ID</i> Words: 号码 hàomǎ (number) · 手机号 shǒujīhào (mobile-phone number) Seen: Forms, SIM-card registration document

Important Signs in China



男 nán <i>Male / Men</i> Words: 男卫生间 nán (wèishēngjiān men' s restroom) Seen: Public restroom door sign	女 nǚ <i>Female / Women</i> Words: 女卫生间 nǚ (wèishēngjiān women' s restroom) Seen: Public restroom door sign
入 rù <i>Entrance / Enter</i> Words: 入口 rùkǒu (entrance) Seen: Metro, building, shop gate sign	出 chū <i>Exit / Go out</i> Words: 出口 chūkǒu (exit) Seen: Metro exit, fire-escape sign
开 kāi <i>Open / Turn-on</i> Words: 开门 kāimén (open door) · 开水 kāishuǐ (boiled water) Seen: Shop business-hour notice, switch label	关 guān <i>Close / Turn-off</i> Words: 关门 guānmén (close door) · 关闭 guānbì (closed) Seen: Shop sign, power-switch sticker
停 tíng <i>Stop / Park</i> Words: 停车 tíngchē (parking) · 停止 tíngzhǐ (stop) Seen: Parking sign, traffic notice	危 wēi <i>Danger / Hazard</i> Words: 危险 wēixiǎn (danger) Seen: Safety warning board
禁 jìn <i>Forbidden / Prohibit</i> Words: 禁止 jìnzhǐ (forbidden) · 禁烟 jìnyān (no-smoking) Seen: All kinds of prohibition warning signs	注 zhù <i>Notice / Pay attention</i> Words: 注意 zhùyì (attention) · 注释 zhùshì (note) Seen: Public safety reminder notice
烟 yān <i>Smoke / Tobacco</i> Words: 禁烟 jìnyān (no-smoking) · 香烟 xiāngyān (cigarette) Seen: No-smoking public signs	火 huǒ <i>Fire</i> Words: 防火 fánghuǒ (fire-prevention) · 火车 huǒchē (train) Seen: Fire-safety warning posters

安 ān <i>Safe / Peace</i> Words: 安全 ānquán (safety) · 平安 (safe and sound) Seen: Public-safety reminder sign	勿 wù <i>Do not / Must not</i> Words: 勿碰 wù (pèng do not touch) · 勿入 wù (rù do not enter) Seen: Short formal public warning signs
可 kě <i>Can / Allowed</i> Words: 可以 kěyǐ (can /may) · 可用 kěyòng (available) Seen: Permission-notice sticker	

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Character Learning Tips

You do not need to master complex Chinese grammar or thousands of characters. But knowing simple Radicals (偏旁) can help you guess word meaning when you meet new characters on street.

Radical example 1: 氵 water radical Characters with this symbol are usually related with water: 河 hé river; 海 hǎi sea; 湖 hú lake

Radical example 2: 人 person radical Characters related with human-beings: 休 xiū rest; 你 nǐ you; 让 ràng allow

💡 Practical survival tips: For daily life in China: Recognition > handwriting. You do not have to practice writing each character.

When you see unknown signs, combine context plus known radicals to guess general meaning.

Review small groups of characters every few days instead of cramming.



Quick Reference Sheet

Screenshot and save this table to your mobile phone for quick lookup outdoors.

Final Page — CTA Page (第 36 页 · 结尾联动引流页)

Character	Pinyin	Meaning
人	rén	person
中	zhōng	China / middle
国	guó	country
学	xué	study
生	shēng	student / life
大	dà	big
小	xiǎo	small
日	rì	day / date
月	yuè	month
年	nián	year
水	shuǐ	water
饭	fàn	meal / rice
菜	cài	dish / vegetable
辣	là	spicy
钱	qián	money
元	yuán	Chinese yuan
买	mǎi	buy
卖	mài	sell
店	diàn	shop
贵	guì	expensive
站	zhàn	station
车	chē	vehicle

路	lù	road
出	chū	exit
入	rù	entrance
东	dōng	east
西	xī	west
南	nán	south
北	běi	north
手	shǒu	hand
机	jī	device / phone
网	wǎng	internet
码	mǎ	code / QR-code
男	nán	male
女	nǚ	female
开	kāi	open
关	guān	close
停	tíng	stop / park
禁	jìn	forbidden
注	zhù	attention
是	shì	is / are
有	yǒu	have
无	wú	no / without
多	duō	many
少	shǎo	few
好	hǎo	good
吃	chī	eat
喝	hē	drink
楼	lóu	building
室	shì	room

Continue Learning Chinese



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- 50 Essential Chinese Phrases
- HSK Preparation Guide

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Download China arrival checklist, phrase survival guide and this character handbook for international students.