Challenges and Countermeasures of Teaching and Learning Chinese Characters in Sudan

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Abstract
The shapes of Chinese characters are complicated, this is a big shortcoming but it is also the biggest advantage which can benefit learners in a multi-lingual education context. The paper is an investigation into the practice of teaching and learning Chinese at Khartoum University. The study focuses on the shapes of Chinese characters by analyzing the shapes created by the learners in their homework after they have learnt the methods by which the Chinese create pictographic characters, self-explanatory characters and so on, then compare them first with "Xiaozhuan" (an ancient style of calligraphy, adopted in the Qin Dynasty for the purpose of standardizing the script) and secondly with the regular script in Chinese calligraphy. After doing the comparison, I will know the points which are similar to the standard Chinese characters and the ones which are not. I will use the correct shapes of Chinese characters and symbols to show the meanings and the cultures they contain. If the characters written by the learners are different from the standard Chinese characters, I will point out to them that it is as a result of their different cultural and linguistic background, since they have been used to Arabic. The purpose of this study is to develop an effective methodology for teaching and learning Chinese characters and cultures in Sudan.

Key words: Chinese characters, shapes, learning, methodology for teaching

Introduction:
Most Chinese experts believe Chinese characters are developed from pictures, so they are almost like pictures, especially the ancient pictographic characters. But as time passed, the shapes of these characters have been changing, so it is hard for modern generation to know the original and radical meaning when they come across the simplified Chinese characters. What they can do is relate these simplified Chinese characters to ancient characters, especially to "Xiaozhuan". Luckily, they are still kept in Chinese ancient books, of which "Shuowen" is an important one. This research is based on the theory of "LiuShu" and most of the “Xiaozhuan” are quoted from this book.

Chinese characters are ideographic ones; most of their shapes can convey the meanings. That is to say, the foreigners don’t know the pronunciation when they meet some strange characters on their first encounter, but, perhaps, after learning some theories (E.g. the methods by which ancient Chinese people created characters) about Chinese characters, they can guess and get the right meanings by analyzing the shapes. Furthermore, most of the Chinese characters are pictophonetic and are made up of two parts: meaning radicals and phonetic radicals. Foreigners can
also get the probable pronunciation if they can tell which part is a phonetic radical.

According to the theory of Cognitive Linguistics, although different people lived in different cultures and linguistic backgrounds (For example, the students in Khartoum university stay in a multi-lingual education context), people can express an idea using similar thinking pattern, so it is easy for the language learners to get meanings and cultures if the teacher can point out similar thinking patterns and different backgrounds of cultures in due courses. In order to find these patterns and backgrounds, I investigated the practice of teaching and learning Chinese at Khartoum University: I requested some students to try to write or create some characters by imagination which they had not learnt before, then I compared the shapes of these characters with those of ancient Chinese characters, after which I drew conclusions and gave some advices. The amount of characters that I used in teaching and researching were restricted to 140², which are most useful Chinese characters. Only a few others are added when necessary.

**Theory of Cognitive Linguistics and “Liushu”**

As F. Ungerer and H. J. Schmid (1996) point out, “Cognitive linguistics…is an approach to language that is based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it”. Even though we live in different places and/or different times, some of “our experiences of the world” are the same. Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green (2006) further explain that:

1. **Universals in cognitive linguistics.**

   Linguistic organization is held to reflect embodied cognition, which is common to all human beings. Instead of seeing language as the output of a set of innate cognitive universals that are specialized for language, cognitive linguists see language as a reflection of embodied cognition, which serves to constrain what it is possible to experience, and thus what it is possible to express in language.

2. **Languages may differ “on the surface”** (for example, in terms of the speech sounds they use or in terms of word order), beneath the surface they are broadly similar, and this similarity is explained by the existence of a universal set of primitives together with a universal set of principles that operate over these primitives.

A Chinese scholar, Lin Ma (2008) shares the same viewpoint as Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green as follows:

1. Why do Chinese people and native English speakers express the idea by using similar thinking pattern? The reason is that human beings are universally endowed with the ability to use language metaphorically.
2. Metaphors in different cultures reflect a similar thinking pattern, thus indicating metaphors are universal because human nature is the same.

From this perspective, the Chinese and the Sudanese share some similar thinking patterns. Therefore, the students can learn Chinese very well if the teacher can find out as many similar cognitive mechanisms as possible and pay enough attention to the different socio-cultural factors. At the same time, the students should work a bit harder and practice more. According to the Chinese traditional theory of characters, especially what is explained in the ancient book of *Shuowen*, people divided the Chinese characters into six groups (called *Liushu*). Five of them are:

1. Pictographic characters. These characters are like pictures, Ancient Chinese characters were pictographic, outlining the rough shape of things with simple lines. For example, ancient people used “

   \[ \text{\textsymbol{人}} \]

   to symbolize “人” (human).

2. Indicative characters. Some experts name it “self-explanatory characters”. Chinese ancient people used abstract symbols to indicate the meaning. One class of such symbols is purely symbolic (e.g. one short line over a long one indicating the meaning of “above” in position). The makeup of the other class is through the addition of some stroke(s) carrying abstract meaning to a pictographic character.

3. Associative characters. Two or more pictographic characters are put side by side to describe an action, a process or something abstract. For instance, people used the imitation of a woman holding her baby in her arms to convey the concept of “good”, for it is something desirable for a new life to be born.

4. Pictophonetic characters. One component of the characters with two components can give indication to the sound, referred to as phonetic side/radical, while the other conveys the meaning, termed the meaning side/radical.

5. Borrowed characters. Another borrowed character which has the same or similar pronunciation to substitute and express the meaning of the quondam character. For example, the original and radical meaning of this character “

   \[ \text{\textsymbol{令}} \]

   is “order, command”, but this character is borrowed to express the meaning of “

   \[ \text{\textsymbol{令}} \]

   (the head of a county), there is no relation between the borrowed characters to the quondam one except the pronunciation.

The first four groups are about how Chinese characters are created; the last group is about how Chinese
characters are used. Different groups have different usages:

i) We can get the meanings by analyzing the shapes of almost any characters except the borrowed ones.

ii) We can get the probable pronunciations by analyzing the shapes of pictophonicet characters.

iii) We can get the cultural message behind by analyzing the shapes of any characters.

How to get the meanings by analyzing the shapes of Chinese characters

Chinese characters are ideographic. This means that by analyzing the shapes of Chinese characters, we can get some clues on the meaning of a character we meet: if you forget the meaning of a character you had learnt before, perhaps the shape would remind you of the exact meaning. Similarly, you can use the theory of Liushu to analyze the shapes of characters you have not come across before and then get their probable meanings. Furthermore, by analyzing the shapes of Chinese characters and connecting them with the meaning, students would find them (the shapes and meanings) easier to memorize. For example, as Peng Wang-yong(2008) points out, this is an image of the head of a cow, we can see the flexural horns, big ears and nose clearly. This image was changed to when it is chiseled and recorded on to a bone, then changed to in Xiaozhuan and at last changed to in the simplified Chinese characters. Whereas the shape of a cow has been simplified and standardized in Chinese characters, we can still find the horns, ears and nose. Actually, after I analyzed the strokes, components and the shape of a cow, then connect them with the meaning, students find it easy to memorize this character.

There are so many pictographic, indicative and associative characters whose meaning can be got easily by analyzing their shapes. Some examples include3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Shapes in Xiaozhuan</th>
<th>Simplified character</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>日</td>
<td>Sun, the shape almost likes the sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>月</td>
<td>Moon, pictographic character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>人</td>
<td>Person, we can find the head, arm, leg and buns.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
And some indicative characters: 一 (one), 二 (two), 三 (three); 十 (ten), 十十 (twenty) 廿 (thirty).
After they have learnt the methods by which the Chinese create pictographic characters, self-explanatory characters and so on, the students tried to draw and write some of them: I discovered that they were almost the same as ancient Chinese characters⁴:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students A</th>
<th>Students B</th>
<th>Students C</th>
<th>Student D</th>
<th>Chinese characters</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>不</td>
<td>木</td>
<td>木</td>
<td>不</td>
<td>不</td>
<td>No, not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>子</td>
<td>子</td>
<td>子</td>
<td>子</td>
<td>子</td>
<td>Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>手</td>
<td>手</td>
<td>手</td>
<td>手</td>
<td>手</td>
<td>Hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>木</td>
<td>木</td>
<td>木</td>
<td>木</td>
<td>木</td>
<td>Grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>斗</td>
<td>斗</td>
<td>斗</td>
<td>斗</td>
<td>斗</td>
<td>Fight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first character “不”, as Shuowen explains" the bird goes to the sky and does not fall down” (other books point out that the shape of this character is almost like an embryo). Following this explanation, the students tried to write the character “不”. The shape that student A and B wrote is almost the same as the character "不”; student C added a cloud at the foot of the character; student D drew the cloud clearly, but a bit complicated. This should be simplified (because Chinese people often try their best to simplify the characters if possible) to make it easier to write and at the same time to save time. Last but not least, the remarkable difference between the characters which were written by the students and those written by ancient Chinese people is: the upper and the other lower stroke(s) were detached in the student’s hand, but they are
connected in the Chinese character system. Actually, Chinese people often write characters by connecting some strokes.

In the second character “子”, student A and C thought that the child should stand up and should use his hand, which is the same as the thinking of the ancient Chinese people; student B and D believed that the child is too little to stand, so they add a “” at the left side, which means something used to sit on- they emphasized that the child is “little”, which shares the same thinking as the ancient Chinese people.

In the third character “又”, all of the students emphasized a long arm and most of the students wrote three or four fingers, that is to say, some parts are omitted (five fingers are simplified to three or four fingers). This is just the same as in the Chinese character. In addition, the direction and the position of the character varied from student to another. The shape of the character was also influenced by the students’ personal ideation, but in Chinese, its direction and the position has been established by usage.

In the fourth character “”, all the shapes are almost the same; the difference is the amount of grass. In Chinese character system, there are two parts to show grass.

The last character is “鬥”, which has been substituted with the borrowed characters “斗”. Student A and B thought that the two people are fighting each other, but C and D believed that one person is standing and is being fought by the other. All students thought that the two people should stand next to each other to be able to fight, which is the same in the Chinese characters. What is funny is that student A adds four dots at the head of the character, dots means “sweat”. He thought that when two people are fighting, they often sweat a lot. From this character, we can conclude that, although the understanding of the meaning of the word or character is influenced by personal ideation (adding the sweat), we share the same thinking pattern (fighting requires more than one person).

To sum up, we can find out more similarities about the ideas and the differences in cultural backgrounds if we try to. It is easier for the students to get the meanings by analyzing the shapes of characters because they share the similar thinking pattern as Chinese ancient people; what they should do is to pay more attention to the differences.

How to get the probable pronunciations by analyzing the shapes of Chinese characters
Almost any language has its pronunciation. Some languages share the same pronunciation in expressing the same meaning. For example, in
Kiswahili, Polish, Chinese language and some other languages, the sound /ba:ba/ conveys the meaning of father and /ma:ma/, mother.

Some languages are easy to pronounce because there is only a slight difference between the orthographic representation and the phonetic representation. For example, in Kiswahili, the pronunciation of initial consonant and vowel in these two sentences does not change in the sentences “Hakuna matata”, “Unasema nini”. However, in some languages (especially a language that has a long history and high population of speakers), it is a bit hard to pronounce because some of the initial consonants and vowels have two or more pronunciations. For example, in English, the vowel “a” has five pronunciations in the sentence “a large [laːd ] number of language [ˈl ŋgwɪd ] data[ˈdeɪt ]”: , a:, , i and ei. So perhaps a foreigner would pronounce “data” as [ˈdeɪt ], [d ˈteɪ], [ˈdɪt ], [ˈdɪtə:] and so on if he or she does not know the real pronunciation. Chinese language is harder than Kiswahili, Arabic and English to pronounce, especially the initial consonants (zh, ch, sh), the vowels (ü, uai, ang, uang, ueng e.t.c.), and the four tones which the students may not be familiar with. Nevertheless, the students can get the probable pronunciations of the pictophonetic characters.

There are more than 90 percent of Chinese characters that are pictophonetic (with one element indicating meaning and the other sound). In this kind of characters, the students can get the probable pronunciations if they can tell which component is the phonetic side/radical after they have analyzed the shapes. Actually, in most of the cases, the meaning side has few strokes and so it is easier to write, while the phonetic side is often made up of more strokes and it is harder to write compared to the meaning side. There are mainly about six kinds of pictophonetic characters as shown below:

1. Meaning side on the left and phonetic side on the right. For example, in (mother) indicates the sound and 女 (female) carries the meaning.

2. Phonetic side on the left and meaning side on the right. For example, in (A place, surname) indicates the sound and 邑 (place-the shape has changed) carries the meaning.

3. Meaning side at the top and phonetic side at the bottom. For example, 零 (fall) indicates the sound and 雨 (rain) carries the meaning.

4. Phonetic side at the top and meaning side at the bottom. For example, 想 (miss) indicates the
sound and 心 (heart) carries the meaning.

5. Meaning side at the inside and phonetic side at the outside. For example, in (ask) indicates the sound and □ (mouth) carries the meaning.

6. Phonetic side at the inside and meaning side at the outside. For example, 伐 in (valve) indicates the sound and (door) carries the meaning.

When the students met a multi-component character, they had better first tell whether this character belongs to left-right structure, top-bottom structure or inside-outside structure, e.t.c, then calculate the number of the strokes and compare which component is complicated and harder to write, and finally check if it is a character, then read it. If it is not, try to find other characters which also use this component as a phonetic side; if found out, they can use the same pronunciation (of the other characters which use the same component) to read this multi-component character.

Need to reaffirm is that most of the time, we can get the probable pronunciation, not the exact pronunciation. As Liu Yan-mei points out, During the course of learning, you should recognize the significance of the side, and meanwhile develop a reasonable point of view on the relationship between the characters and its side. Not all Chinese characters are related to their meaning sides in meaning, nor are they related to the phonetic side in sound. You should try to avoid taking things absolutely, for the Chinese language has undergone a history of more than 3,000 years and the characters have experienced some changes.

When the side is powerful in expressing meaning or sound, make full use of this advantage; when it is not so powerful, do not get confused, for your final aim is to remember the character.

Before we use this method masterly, we must memorize pronunciations of the characters as many as we can (only when we have enough language experience can we use it and develop it freely, which is the same in Arabic, Kiswahili, English, Chinese and other languages). The more the pronunciations we memorize, the easier and the more exact pronunciation of a new character we can get.

How to get cultural message by analyzing the shapes of Chinese characters

As quoted above, cognitive linguistics is an approach to language that is based on our experiences of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it. Sometimes we share the same perception of the world, which will benefit us to learn a new language. For example, we create the
word “grass” to name the object “grass” in the real world. The word “grass” stands for the properties that all grasses have: most of the grass in the world grows on the ground, not too long, need sunshine and water to grow up and often have two or more leaf-stalks. These properties of the real grass would influence our thinking, which accounts for the reason why students A, B, C and D were able to write almost the same character “ ” as ancient Chinese people. Furthermore, as a component, “ ” is related to “grass” or “vegetable”, so we can get the cultural message behind it by analyzing these characters; (blue), 苦(bitter), 菜(vegetable), (shade), 落(to fall), 芳(fragrant), 藏(to store) and 薄(thin) . Actually there are at least 453 characters kept in Shuowen, all of which use “ ” as a component, with some of them carrying the meanings of herbs. After pointing out the similarities of the related cultures and the thinking between the students and the Chinese, they were able to memorize the shapes, meanings and the cultures behind “ ” quickly. Another example, although perhaps the students in Sudan have not seen the ice and snow in their real world, their first response to the word “cold” is ice and snow. I think this is owing to the multi-lingual education context: some of them have learnt English and got the conception from the books (and/or from the internet, TV, radio) that ice and snow are cold; this conception is also the same with the Chinese people- they use ice “ ” to express the coldness of something: 冰, 冷, 冬. From these shapes of the characters above (for grass and ice), the students can get the cultural message of Chinese vegetables and the natural phenomena.

As we all know, any word in any language contains a cultural message, and Chinese characters are also the same. These cultures have been created in China; they belong to China and also belong to the whole world. Undoubtedly, the cultures behind Chinese food, tea, martial arts, medicine, people’s worship, ancient transportations and so on can be extracted from the shape of the characters. As Han Wei (2003) points out, Chinese characters, in the process of their creation by the ancients, were endowed with abundant cultural implications in their structures. By looking into their formation, we can further trace their origin and evolution, and discern the relationship between their structures and meanings so as to reveal the splendid culture of the Han people. For example, in the times of bond slave, females were often associated with disability and impotence. So some of the characters which used the component “女”
(female) as meaning side often had a bad meaning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese character</th>
<th>English meaning</th>
<th>Analyze</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>woman</td>
<td>a female “女” who is using a broom to clean the house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>奴</td>
<td>slave</td>
<td>“女” carries the meaning of lowly, “又” indicates the sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>婢</td>
<td>slave-girl</td>
<td>“女” carries the meaning of lowly, “卑” indicates the sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>face is ugly</td>
<td>“女” carries the meaning of bad, “舌” indicates the sound</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>嫉,妒</td>
<td>jealousy</td>
<td>“女” carries the meaning of jealousy, “疾”, “畜” indicate the sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>妨</td>
<td>hamper</td>
<td>“女” carries the meaning of bad affect, “方” indicates the sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>妄</td>
<td>rush or absurd</td>
<td>“女” carries the meaning of chaos, “亡” indicates the sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>嫌</td>
<td>dislike and avoid</td>
<td>“女” carries the meaning of bad action, “兼” indicates the sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>奸</td>
<td>wicked rape</td>
<td>“女” carries the meaning of bad action, “干” indicates the sound</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Kiswahili, the woman is also depicted as weak and not so important member of the society. e.g ‘wacha kuwa mwoga kama mwanamke. Kuwa mwanamwe (Can you stop being afraid like a woman, be a man). This statement shows that only women supposed to be afraid and for one to be considered a man, they have to be strong. It has been stereotyped that men not women are strong and should endure pain no matter what the situation is.

Although, nowadays, females share the same right as their male counterparts, these negative meanings still remain in the ancient characters, so we can get this cultural message by
analyzing the shapes, which will help the people to learn the Chinese culture easier and deeper.

**Challenges in Chinese character learning in Sudan**

The Sudanese students “may get” the meaning, sound and the culture in the Chinese characters by analyzing their shapes, but, there are still some challenges for those students to face. As we all know, Chinese characters differ from Arabic alphabet in writing system, which prevent Sudanese students from learning Chinese characters freely and easily, that is to say, it is difficult for Sudanese students to read, to memorize, to write and to use Chinese characters.

**Hard to differ subtle distinction between some strokes or/and characters**

It is not very hard for a foreigner, who learns Arabic as a second language and had learnt Arabic alphabets before, to pronounces Arabic words accurately (even if he or she meet with them for the first time), to write Arabic words down rightly (if he or she heard the pronunciation of these words). But it is too difficult for a foreigner, who learns Chinese as a second language, to read a new character accurately after he or she learn pinyin, or to write it down rightly after hearing its pronunciation. Chinese characters are so difficult to read for its confused strokes and components in writing system, as David Moser writes in the article “Why Chinese is so damn hard”.

What does it take for a person to master the Chinese writing system? There is nothing that corresponds to an alphabet, though there are recurring components that make up the characters. How many such components are there? Don't ask. As with all such questions about Chinese, the answer is very messy and unsatisfying. It depends on how you define "component" (strokes? radicals?), plus a lot of other tedious details. Suffice it to say, the number is quite large, vastly more than the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet. And how are these components combined to form characters? Well, you name it -- components to the left of other components, to the right of other components, on top of other components, surrounding other components, inside of other components -- almost anything is possible. And in the process of making these spatial accommodations, these components get flattened, stretched, squashed, shortened, and distorted in order to fit in the uniform square space that all characters are supposed to fit into. In other words, the components of Chinese characters are arrayed in two dimensions, rather than in the neat one-dimensional rows of alphabetic writing.

Quite large number of strokes and components appear in Chinese characters, and so many ways to combine to form
characters, which may also puzzle any Sudanese learner. That is to say, some Sudanese students may pay little attention to a small change in one Chinese character at the first sight, and read it wrongly without a doubt. In the eyes of the Chinese, a new Chinese character may appears after a small change in a character, the small change is the stroke( for example, long stroke, short stroke, sequence of the stroke, the direction of the stroke, and so on) and the combination. For example, the character “夫” are made up of components “二”and “人”, but the similar characters “天” are also made up by them, if the learner cannot differ the subtle distinction between the“夫”and the “天”, he would read “天” as “夫” (the learner sometimes cannot differ the subtle distinction between “末”;“未”, “朱”,“本” and “米”either), and vice versa.

Difficult to memorize so many Chinese characters, for too many strokes make up a character

As we all know, Chinese characters are difficult for Sudanese students to memorize, that is because: first of all, most Chinese characters are complicated, more than two strokes, components can be found in a character, for example, “漂” is made up of “氵” and “票”, and the left side carries the meaning, the right side indicates the sound. there are fourteen strokes in “漂”.Another example, “ 虜” is made up of four “龍”(“龍”, is a traditional character, and the simplified character of it is “ 龍”), there are Sixty-four strokes in“ 虜”. And most Chinese characters have 9 (or 10) strokes, that is why David Moser complain as follow, I have seen highly literate Chinese people forget how to write certain characters in common words like “tin can”, “knee”, “screwdriver”, “snap” (as in “to snap one's fingers”), “elbow”, “ginger”, “cushion”, “firecracker”, and so on. And when I say "forget", I mean that they often cannot even put the first stroke down on the paper. Can you imagine a well-educated native English speaker totally forgetting how to write a word like “knee” or “tin can”? Or even a rarely-seen word like “scabbard” or “ragamuffin”? I was once at a luncheon with three Ph.D. students in the Chinese Department at Peking University, all native Chinese (one from Hong Kong). I happened to have a cold that day, and was trying to write a brief note to a friend canceling an appointment that day. I found that I couldn't remember how to write the character 嗝, as in da penti 打 嗝 “to sneeze”. I asked my three friends how to write the character 嗝, and to my surprise, all three of them simply shrugged in sheepish embarrassment. Not one of them could correctly produce the character. Now, Peking University is usually considered the
“Harvard of China”. Can you imagine three Ph.D. students in English at Harvard forgetting how to write the English word “sneeze”? Yet this state of affairs is by no means uncommon in China. English is simply orders of magnitude easier to write and remember. No matter how low-frequency the word is, or how unorthodox the spelling, the English speaker can always come up with something, simply because there has to be some correspondence between sound and spelling. One might forget whether “abracadabra” is hyphenated or not, or get the last few letters wrong on “rhinoceros”, but even the poorest of spellers can make a reasonable stab at almost anything. By contrast, often even the most well educated Chinese have no recourse but to throw up their hands and ask someone else in the room how to write some particularly elusive character.

Secondly, compared with Arabic writing system, Chinese characters are different in pattern of combination. Some strokes are wrote from right to left, but the others are wrote from left to right, from up to bottom, from inside to outside and so on, which makes Sudanese students feel very unhappy to memorize it. Thirdly, it’s very hard for foreigners to memorize the traditional characters. After comparing the simplified characters with traditional characters, the learners would get some clues on memorizing traditional characters, but, actually, the association between traditional characters and simplified characters is so complicated, with the result that learners still cannot read the classic Chinese literature after they memorize more than 1500 simplified characters in 5 years.

**Difficult to choose right character from homophones or homonyms**

A homophone is a character that is pronounced the same as another character but differs in meaning or derivation. The characters may be pronounced almost the same, such as 棋, 其, 期, , 奇, and旗(all of them are pronounced like [qi] in Chinese pinyin system, the Initial, tone and final are all the same). Homonyms, that is to say, one of two or more words spelled and pronounced alike but different in meaning, such as 奇, 七, 气, 起, 漆and汽(all of them are pronounced like [qi] in Chinese pinyin system, the Initial and final are the same ,but the tones are not the same,奇, the second tone, 七 and 漆, the first tone, 汽 and 汽, the forth tone ).

As analyzed in this paper, there are more than 90 percent of Chinese characters that are pictophonetic characters (with one element indicating meaning and the other sound). If Sudanese students meet this kind of characters, they can get the
probable pronunciations if they can tell which component is the phonetic side after they have analyzed the shapes. But on the other hand, it is difficult for learners to choose right character from those pictophonetic characters when they hear the pronunciation or when they need to use the homophones. To sum up, there are still large numbers of challenges in Chinese character learning for the Sudanese students: It is sometimes too difficult to read Chinese books (which wrote by Chinese characters), for it is hard to differ subtle distinction between some characters and cannot get the exact meaning. It is troublesome for Sudanese students to memorize so many Chinese characters, for these characters are always complicated. It is a great trial to use Chinese characters for the beginners, for there are so many homophones exist in Chinese, which is unable to understand what it is all about. With the increasingly development of Chinese characters learning in Sudan, students would face more and more Challenges.

By analyzing these challenges in Chinese character learning in Sudan, we can get the most difficult issue, the most important issue and the last important issue that learners met, only analyzed these can we get various ways to teach Sudanese students the Chinese characters and the Chinese cultures afterward.

Ways and suggestions in Chinese character teaching in Sudan

We acquire a key to get the meaning, sound and the culture in the Chinese characters, that is: by the way of analyzing their shapes. But, there are still some challenges above for those students to face, one key is not enough! What should the learners and the teachers do to face these challenges?

Teaching students to read characters first

The human being always get knowledge step by step, and prefer to learn a language from ABC to difficult words, which is also reasonable in learning Chinese characters. The first thing that the teacher should do is to help students to do the easy things: learn from the teacher to get the right pronunciation, after that, the teacher can teach students how to write characters. As we all know, reading Chinese characters is much easier than write them down, that’s why so many Sudanese students prefer to read Chinese characters.

In order to memorize a large number of components of Chinese characters, most students should spend a lot of time in speaking, writing, and speaking, and writing... During that time, students cannot experience the joy of success, but if they read
characters first to build the association with the pronunciations and the meanings, so that that they can use these characters to talk to others, they would feel happy, because they can experience the joy of success of using characters.

They can read Chinese characters, they have knew the pronunciation and can pronounce the characters rightly, they have got the meaning of the characters, they have got the culture of the characters, after that, they have enough enthusiasm, and can do the difficult and uninteresting things: try to memorize the shapes of the Chinese characters.

**Teach easy characters first, difficult characters afterward**

Learn characters from easy ones to difficult ones, students can learn them well, but if learning characters from difficult ones to easy ones, students would spend too much time, or cannot learn the difficult ones and the easy ones well.

Chinese characters are difficult, if students have not learnt easy strokes, easy components and easy characters before; they would have no foundation of learning the difficult Chinese characters afterward and would confused, which is a bad trying for the characters learning.

Learning is a gradual process, during this process, we should learn the simple Chinese characters which are made up of a few strokes, and then learn complicated characters which are made up of a number of strokes and components. From easy characters to complicated characters, from simplified characters to traditional characters, this is the best learning sequence. That is to say, the beginners should learn 140 basic and easy Chinese characters at first, and learn 2000 characters afterward. Only they have learned 140 characters well then can they try to learn 2000 complicated characters.

**Try to use multimedia**

There are various kinds of advantages about the multimedia teaching, firstly, it can bring vivid images and sounds, which can help learners to associate the old characters to the new ones, to enhance the learner’s imagination, so as to stimulate students' memory and improve the quality of learning. For example, the teacher tries to add character on the strange, interesting, special, whimsical, playful, tragic or passionate pictures when he or she teach Chinese. When students forgot the character they have learnt, they can try to imagine what the special picture they have seen with the character, and find the association between the imagine with the character, which would help students recall the exact character. Secondly, we can get a creation of learning situations, which will help the students to find a good topic in the class, in that topic; they can try to use
the characters they have learnt just before. Thirdly, multimedia teaching can take full advantage of the interactivity between the computers to students. This would help teacher to track each student’s real-time learning situation on characters, so as to improve teaching efficiency. Fourthly, multimedia teaching can make the abstract theory of characters (for example, “liushu” theory) into concrete, simple and easy issue. By using a computer, the pronunciation and the culture behind characters are able to reveal quickly.

Thanks to the multimedia, we can get a high quality of class, and thanks to the internet, our teacher can get a sea of teaching resource, which will help the students deal with the challenge in learning characters if their teacher can make good use of the materials.

**Teach characters and cultures at the same time**

Any Chinese character contains a cultural message, by looking into its shapes and formation; the learners can trace its origin and evolution, and discern the relationship between their structures and meanings so as to reveal the splendid culture of the character.

It is easy for us to remember the culture, but it is hard for us to memorize the shapes, what the teacher should do is to remind the learners, by pointing out cultural implications in its shape of the character, to memorize the shapes. This can help the learners associate the relationship with the shapes and the cultures, so as to memorize the writing systems of the characters. For example, “眉” (brows) is an indicative character, and there are two components in this character, the lower component is 目, but the shape has changed to 门; The upper component is 夫, looks like the hair (on the human head), So the character “眉” is 夫, looks like brow.

From this character, we can easily get the point that Chinese people use the character to describe the real world that they have seen. It is easy for students to memorize the character “眉” after the teacher points the meaning and the culture.

**Analyze the Common error and propose solution**

As we all know, in the field of applied linguistics, there is a Theory, called “error analysis”:

What is error analysis? As the name suggests, it is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make. Unlike contrastive analysis (in either its weak or strong form), the comparison made is between the errors a learner makes in producing the TL and the TL form itself. It is similar to the weak version of contrastive analysis in that both start from learner production data; however, in contrastive analysis the comparison is made with the native language, whereas in error analysis it is made with the TL.
Error analysis showed that contrastive analysis was unable to predict a great majority of errors, although its more valuable aspects have been incorporated into the study of language transfer. A key finding of error analysis has been that many learner errors are produced by learners making faulty inferences about the rules of the new language. Errors may also be classified according to the level of language: phonological errors, vocabulary or lexical errors, syntactic errors, and so on.

By analyzing the common errors that Sudanese students made, we can predict what the mistake would happen and remain the students to pay more attention to it. For example, Sudanese students often write "我" as "找", "士" as "士", and so on.

Learners’ character learning systems are greatly influenced by their shapes of first language—Arabic, so Chinese teacher should make good use of Arabic letters and compare them to Chinese characters when necessary. By doing excessive training, Chinese characters learners may successfully develop the skills of writing characters, so the teacher should arrange some exercise after class.

**Conclusion:**
Although the shapes of Chinese characters are complicated, it is very important for learners to make full use of them, because the meanings, pronunciations and cultural message are closely related to these shapes. It is also a feasible way to teach Chinese characters and language by analyzing these shapes. Wu Hong-song (2008) asserts that, “Through the analysis of ancient features of some Chinese characters, I take the views that applying the knowledge of Chinese ancient character may help foreigners to study and learn Chinese ancient character and Chinese traditional culture.” It is especially suitable in the multi-lingual education context in Sudan, for some of the learners have learnt English and Arabic, it is easier than others who use only one language to understand the similar viewpoints and the cultural message, but at the same time, the Sudanese learners should not forget to pay enough attention on the differences between Arabic, English and Chinese.

We can refute the claims that the methods of learning the meaning, sound and the culture in the Chinese characters by analyzing their shapes is omnipotent. Actually, Chinese characters have experienced some changes, and hence, we sometimes can get the clues by analyzing them but cannot rely on them entirely.

To sum up, there are so many challenges in Chinese characters learning for Sudanese students, and it is difficult for them to read, to memorize, and to use complicated characters. But we can find effective ways to face the challenge, so as to teach and learn Chinese characters well.
Endnotes:
1 Shuowen was written by xv Shen in Donghan Dynasty, which keeps lots of “Xiaozhuan”, it is extremely important for modern generation to get the radical meanings which are analyzed and explained after these “Xiaozhuan” in this book.
2 140 Most useful Chinese characters, and the first one is the most popular and the popularity decreases as we go down:

3 Some of the images and Xiaozhuan are quoted from Li Leyi. 1995. « Tracing the roots of Chinese characters: 500cases». Beijing: Peking Language Institute Press.
4 These characters are written by the students Okoth Michael Otieno, Pauline N. Nyumu e.t.c. The “Chinese characters” in the table are edited by my wife Xu Youzhen who studied in Jiangxi Normal University; Heilong and Qingkong from Chinese department, faculty of arts in Khartoum University edit some English mistakes.
5 These four characters belong to the type of “meaning side in left and phonetic side in right”

References: