

1.7 Dates

In unit 1, you learned the components of dates: nián ‘year’, yuè ‘month’ and hào ‘day’. It was also noted that dates, though spoken with hào, are usually *written* with rì ‘sun; day’.

年 月 日 (號/号)

1+5	4+0	4+0	3+2
nián	yuè	rì	hào
year	month	day	date

Notes

The characters used for yuè and rì are representational, being squared off versions of what were originally drawings of the moon and sun. Nián, on the other hand, is not obviously representational, so you might need to construct a nonsense etymology, such as: ‘A year contains four seasons; the first stroke (piě) stands for the winter, the three horizontal strokes (héng) are the growing and harvesting seasons (spring, summer and autumn); the short fourth stroke (nà) marks the harvest, and the vertical (shù) representing the continuity of the year – beginning with spring.’ However, note that the short nà stroke on the 3rd horizontal is drawn before the lowest horizontal, presumably following the stroke order principle of closing stroke last.

Dates are frequently written using Arabic numerals, as in these examples, which could be taken from the banners of Mainland newspapers:

1999 年 7 月 26 日
2002 年 2 月 11 日
1998 年 5 月 7 日

Interestingly, it is often the traditional, ‘lunar calendar’ dates that are written out in full, with the numbers also represented in Chinese characters. The Chinese lunar calendar consists of 12 months of 29 to 30 days, plus intercalary months inserted every few years to make up the difference. The lunar new year begins some weeks after the solar one. Lunar years are counted in cycles of 60, which exhausts all combinations of a set of 10 ‘stems’ and 12 ‘branches’ (ie 1-1, 1-2 ... 1-11, 1-12, 2-1 ... 10-12, for a total of 60). Though the first lunar month has a special name, the rest are all written with yuè; rì is usually left out of lunar dates. The correspondence is as follows:

International dating:	1999 年 7 月 26 日
Traditional Chinese:	己卯 年 七 月 二 十 六
	jǐ-mǎo

Most newspaper banners give dates in both forms. But even in traditional dates, zero líng is usually written as 〇 rather than with its complicated character, 零.

Exercise 2.

a) The following are all significant dates in Chinese history. Practice reading them aloud, and see if you can find out (or recall) the event that took place on each date.

一九四九年 十月 一日

一九二一年 七月 一日

一九一九年 五月 四日

一九八九年 六月 四日

一九四五年 八月 十五日

一九一一年 十月 十日

b) Now, in the spaces provided, write the following dates in Chinese:

November 23, 1949

April 18, 2003

February 15, 1994

October 19, 2001

1.8 Days

今天

昨天

明天

2+2 3+1
jīntiān
today

4+5
zuótiān
yesterday

4+4
míngtiān
tomorrow

Notes

a) It is useful to distinguish simplex characters from compound. The latter contain parts that can themselves be simplex characters: for example, 明 míng ‘bright’ is composed of the two graphs 日 rì ‘sun’ (or ‘day’) and 月 yuè ‘moon’ (or ‘month’). While more common characters are often simplex, the vast majority

are compound. The form of simplex graphs can often be said to be representational and thereby rationalized by non-linguistic reference (eg 日 originated as a representation of the sun, 月 yuè, of the moon). Graphic elements are compounded, however, not to form new representations, but typically, to combine linguistic elements of sound and meaning (cf. Units 2 and 3).

b) 天 tiān has the root meaning of ‘sky; day’, and it is said to be based on a drawing that represented the sky above the earth. 明 míng, [apparently] composed of the characters for ‘sun’ and ‘moon’, appears in compounds with the meaning ‘bright’, so think of ‘a bright tomorrow’. 今 jīn- and 昨 zuó- are both compound, the latter combining the semantic 日 rì ‘sun’ with the phonetic 乍 zhà.

Exercise 3.

The list of days and dates below [which could be from diary entries] is out of order. Read the entries in numerical order, beginning with the numbers on the left. Though you would normally read the day out as rì, once you have read it, you can pass it on as information with hào: “Dì-yī, míngtiān wǔyuè shí rì (ie shí hào).”

七:	今天	四月	二十日
三:	昨天	九月	十八日
六:	明天	三月	四日
二:	昨天	十二月	十七日
九:	今天	八月	二日
一:	明天	五月	十日
四:	今天	九月	二十五日
五:	明天	十一月	三十日
八:	昨天	六月	十四日
十:	今天	二月	九日
