As a supplement to our elementary Chinese language courses, I will be posting on the NYU Blackboard a few comments on each chapter of *Integrated Chinese*. The comments will mainly address vocabulary (occasionally grammar) in each of the eleven lessons covered in the fall semester. Although I am not a native speaker of Chinese, I have taught elementary Chinese for more than twenty years, and I have also done a number of translations from Chinese to English. Using a dictionary is crucial in learning any language, English or Chinese. Students might also be encouraged to make a dictionary. This is one of the best ways to reinforce your study of Chinese. Like English and other languages, the Chinese language is quite systematic. To learn each word as a member of a group of related words is essential to mastering Chinese. These relations may have to do with meaning, written form, or sound. All three elements, meaning, form, and sound, contribute to the social artifact we call a word.

Visually speaking, each Chinese character occupies a square of the same size, though few characters actually delineate the square. Among the words in lesson one the character for gate (p. 16 # 36; learn the full form of this graph) comes closest to outlining the square. The space within the square may be divided in a variety of ways. For example graphs with two elements might be drawn side by side 50-50, top and bottom 50-50, side by side unequally, top and bottom unequally, one element surrounding or framing another, and so forth. Moreover each square is equidistant from the square before and after it, whatever the relationship to its neighbor word-squares (in terms of grammar and meaning) may be. Chinese permits no changes at all in the interior of the square or its proximity to other squares. As a result all meaning derives from the order of the word-squares. This is why the line or sentence is called *hang*² 行 in Chinese. *Hang* 行 means a military line of march. Discipline is strict. No one is permitted to break ranks.

Within each square you will find as few as a single element and as many as five, as few as one stroke and as many as thirty. It is of the utmost importance that you learn to distinguish the separate elements within each square. Most characters consist of two or three separate elements; characters with four or five are much less common, and characters with six are rarely seen.
Most of the graphs in lesson one have two elements, either side by side as in peng\textsuperscript{2} 朋 and you\textsuperscript{3} 友 (friend), ni 你 and hao 好 (hello, how are you?), or top and bottom as in the surname Li 李 (mu 木 - tree over zi 子 - child), while De\textsuperscript{2} 德 (Germany, virtue) actually has five elements, one on the left and four stacked vertically on the right.

We might begin however by observing that there are a few hundred primary graphs that consist of a single indivisible element. Three examples in lesson one are sheng\textsuperscript{1} 生 (born, alive), xiao\textsuperscript{3} 小 (small, young), and Ri\textsuperscript{4} 日 (sun, Japan). These primary graphs might be called mono-graphs. Dictionaries use the mono-graphs – “radicals” (bushou 部首) or “section chiefs” – as organizing labels. A traditional dictionary has 214 “radicals” and groups together all words written with a particular “radical” arranging them by the number of strokes in the remainder of the character.

In studying characters take note of recurring forms, for example, the graph for female on the left of hao 好 and jie 姐 (elder sister). The mono-graph for mouth (kou 口) makes several appearances in this lesson. We find it in wen 問 (to ask a question) in the phrase qingwen 請問. Here it is located inside the gate (men 門) which carries the sound for this graph. Mouth is also found in ne 呢 (the final particle for specification), in ma 嗎 (the final particle for questions) in jiao 叫 (to call), and in ming\textsuperscript{2} 名 (name, to call). In the simplified Chinese for the book’s title Integrated Chinese, the mouth is on the left of the character ting 听 (listen), but the traditional form of this character has the same right hand structure as de 德 (virtue), while an ear dominates the left side of the graph; underneath the ear is the true phonetic, ting 聽. This phonetic is lost in the simplified graph. Learn both forms of this important character.

In addition kou 口 appears at the lower end of the “radical” on the left of the word qing 請 request politely). That “radical” (yan 言, #149 of the 214, meaning “words”) is obscured in the simplified form because the simplified form uses an ancient handwritten shorthand form. Learn both the simplified and the traditional written forms of yan 言. We can go further in deconstructing the word qing 請. It is part of the word family whose ancestor is the mono-graph sheng 生, see lesson one item 1, p. 21. Xian 先 means “earlier” and sheng means “born” so Mr. < prior-born, i.e. a senior.
*Xiansheng* 先生 is also a polite way to refer to a teacher, and the Japanese version *sensei* is perhaps even more respectful, “master.” *Laoshi* 老師 for teaching is also respectful since *shi* 師 means master or musical director. We find *sheng* 生 again in item 6 p. 22 meaning “surname” (“born-of-woman”), a possible remnant of a vanished naming system. The sound is slightly altered, the graph here representing *xing* 姓, the sound for the word. Less obvious is the fact that *sheng* 生 is also the phonetic in *qing* 請 (request politely) where it stands in the upper right above another graph which we can discuss another time but it’s not the element in *peng* 朋 (friend). The top right element which carries the sound is not obvious because it is missing the short curved stroke at the left of the first horizontal line (the *pie* 撇, p. 16 #4) and so it looks like another character. *Sheng* 生 itself is a word of many meanings: not only “born” but also “alive, vivid, living, fresh, strange.” *Shengzi* 生字 means new or strange word; *Shengren* 生人 means stranger.