Lesson Three

p. 55 item #4 xingqi 星期 star-period. Note once again the use of sheng 生 to represent the sound xing 星. The twinkling star was a “living light” to the Chinese. The phonetic of qi 期-period is on the left (a classical demonstrative still frequently used in the modern language) and moon on the right, just as moon is at the core of English “month.”

p. 56 item 13 wan 晚-late. The phonetic is on the right, an important word pronounced mian 免 meaning avoid. The older sound may have been mwan; once an “i” crept in before the vowel, “w” had to change to “m.” Compare “xing” and “sheng.” Neither “w” nor “sh” will tolerate an “i” after it. On the left of wan 晚-late is the sun; “the sun is avoiding us” the graph seems to say.

Item #15 zenmeyang 怎麼樣 “in what way,” or “what do you think?” This should be broken up as follows: yang 樣 means type, way, form, manner, or style. Zenme is thought to be a corruption of a Tang dynasty phrase zuo wu 做物 (do what? or do some thing) Zenme or zemma alone means “how” in modern Chinese.” Wo zenme xiexie ta 我怎麼謝謝他? means “How shall I thank him?” Wu-thing becomes me because “m” and “w” often interchange (see previous paragraph); both are bilabial initials.

In the next term #16, xiexie 謝謝-to thank, note that the graph consists of three mono-graphs side by side: on the left “word,” in the middle “body,” and on the right “hand.” The phonetic is probably she 射 body + hand, meaning to discharge (an arrow), so perhaps to thank is to “discharge verbally,” to “disclaim,” or to “acknowledge,” depending on whether one is saying “No, thank you” or “Yes, thank you.” There are many verbs in Chinese formed by repeating a word.

p. 56 item #16 tai 太, a variant of da 大-large, means excessive; taiduo 太多 means too much; taiduole 太多了 is a bit more emphatic. Le 了 (liao) is one of the most overused (hence difficult to explain) words in Chinese. The basic meaning is “over and done with; no more to say already.” After a stative verb like duo 多 it suggests that the amount has “gone too far,” is “more than needed,” has already reached too great an extent. Taihaole 太好
了 means “That makes it even better than I expected.” Later on we will summarize the primary uses of le 了.

p. 56 #19 These compounds should be learned from the point of view of external grammar and of internal grammar. Internal grammar refers to the relation of the characters within a compound or phrase; external grammar refers to the relation of the phrase to the rest of the sentence. Haishi 還是 means “or” as a choice or question about alternatives (see p. 68: “Do you prefer speaking Chinese or English” is a haishi 還是 sentence. The word hai 還 originally pronounced huan 還 means “to return something to where it belongs or originated,” huanshu 還書 means return a book to its owner. The idea of haishi 還是 may be “What do you finally prefer after considering alternatives?”

p. 56 #20 keshi 可是 means a “but” which may still “allow” the preceding statement. Other words for “but” refute or deny the preceding statement. “I’d like to attend college but my parents do not have the money” is a keshi 可是 sentence. Keshi 可是 is probably a verb-object compound from the standpoint of internal grammar: ke 可 means “allow” and shi 是 means “that” (rather than “is”). This is a survival of a classical usage of shi 是 as a demonstrative pronoun. (The basic meaning of shi 是 is “right, correct, true.” Thus, shi, shi, shi 是,是,是 means “yes, right / that’s true.”)

p. 60 #8 shenme 甚麼 means what and wei 為 in the 4th tone means “for what purpose.” Yinwei 因為 then means “the reason for that is.” Yin 因 is an ancient word meaning underlying cause; the graph depicts a man of importance (da 大) sitting on a mat. Pronunciation of the wei 為 of yinwei 因為 may vary among 4th tone, 2nd tone or neutral tone. Wei 為 is an old and important word and deserves careful study. Historically it has two tones. In the 2nd tone it is a verb meaning “to become, to constitute, to make, to do, to be.” As a phrase yinwei 因為 may have originally meant “the reason being . . . ” i.e. 2nd tone wei. The text book and many dictionaries give 4th tone, but this may merely reflect its responsiveness to the 4th tone wei 為 of weishemma 為甚麼. Other dictionaries represent the phrase yinwei 因為 as first-neutral tone.