A Brief Introduction to the Chinese Language

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A very old yet still living language:

- Several thousand years long history, ever changing, but never interrupted.
- Belong to the “Sino-Tibetan” language system.
- More people speak Chinese than any other language in the world.
- One of the five official languages of UN.
- About 2 million American residents are Chinese home speakers.
60% of Korean vocabulary comes from Chinese.

Written Japanese has several thousand characters borrowed from Chinese.

It has been estimated that until the 18th century more than half of the world's printed books were in Chinese.
Some confusing terms:

- Chinese Language
- Hanyu
- Mandarin
- Putonghua
Is Cantonese Chinese?

- Yes!
- It’s only one of the many dialects of Chinese (Yue Dialect).
- The difference is mainly in pronunciation, slightly in vocabulary and grammar, but not in writing system.
The Map of Chinese Dialects

- Northern
- Wu
- Yue
- Min
- Xiang
- Gan
- Hakka
What is “Pin Yin”? 

- The Romanized phonetic spelling system created in 1950’s for Mandarin or standard Chinese (Putonghua)
- It is based on Beijing Dialects, a branch of the Northern dialects of Chinese language
- It uses 25 letters in English except “V”.
Chinese (Mandarin) Phonetics

- **Initials** (consonants)
- **Finals** (a vowel, or a combination of vowels, sometimes with a nasal at the end)
- **Tones** (four distinct and one light tones)
- Each Chinese character corresponds to one **syllable**. A syllable is consist of an initial, a final and a tone.
## 21 initials (consonants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unaspirated</th>
<th>Aspirated</th>
<th>Nasal</th>
<th>Voiceless fricative</th>
<th>Voiced fricative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labial</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>f</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alveolar</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td>l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Velar</td>
<td>g</td>
<td>k</td>
<td></td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palatal</td>
<td>j</td>
<td>q</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental sibilant</td>
<td>z</td>
<td>c</td>
<td></td>
<td>s</td>
<td>r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retroflex</td>
<td>zh</td>
<td>ch</td>
<td></td>
<td>sh</td>
<td>w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>y</td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# 35 finals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6 simple finals:</th>
<th>a o e i u ü</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 compound finals:</td>
<td>ai ao ei ia iao ie iou (iu) ou ua uai üe uei (ui) uo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 nasal finals:</td>
<td>8 front nasals: an en ian in uan üan uen (un) ün</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 back nasals: ang eng iang ing iong ong uang ueng</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

er
4 tones, and a light tone

High    Up    Low    Down    light

mā      má      mǎ      mà      ma
Māma qí mǎ, mǎ màn, mā mà mǎ.

妈妈骑马，马慢，妈骂马。

Mother is riding on a horse, the horse walks too slow, so mother curses it.
Combinations of initials and finals, plus several special cases, result in 411 possible combinations.

Applying the four tones, we get a total of around 1,600 unique syllables.
Zhōng Guó  China  Měi Guó  USA

中国  美国
Běi Jīng 北京
Nán Jīng 南京
Dōng Jīng 东京
Běi kǎ luó lái nà 北卡罗来纳
Why not use “Pin Yin” to replace Chinese characters as Chinese writing system?

- Impossible! Because there are too many homophonic characters.

- Zhao Yuanren, a famous Chinese linguist, wrote an article entitled 施氏食狮史(《The Story of Mr. Shi Ate a Lion》), the whole article only use one syllable “shi”.
When did the earliest Chinese Characters appeared?

- No later than 14 century B.C.
- Oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1028 B.C.)
Inscription on tripod vessels
Large seal script
(1100-256 BC)
Inscription on stone stele, Qin Dynasty (221 B.C.-206 B.C.) small seal script
“Li shu” or Clerical script:
Han Dynasty (220 B.C.-206 A.D.)
“Kai Shu”, the standard script
Tang Dynasty (618-907)
The evolution of Chinese Characters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Script Type</th>
<th>Date Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oracle bone script</td>
<td>(1400-1200 BC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large seal script</td>
<td>(1100-256 BC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small seal script</td>
<td>(221-207 BC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical script</td>
<td>(207 BC-220 AD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard script</td>
<td>(Since 207 BC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running script</td>
<td>(Since 207 BC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass script</td>
<td>(Since 207 BC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplified script</td>
<td>(Since 1949)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Human  rén
Mountain  shān
Sun  rì
Horse  Mà
Are all the Chinese characters pictographs?

- No! Only some basic words are.
- Chinese works pictographically as well as phonetically.
How do Chinese characters constructed?

- Xu Shen, a scholar lived in Han Dynasty, summarized “Six Ways”:
  - 指事 (zhǐshì) - Direct Referential
  - 象形 (xiàngxíng) - Pictographic
  - 形声 (xǐngshēng) - Phono-Graphemic
  - 会意 (huìyì) - Intuitive
  - 转注 (zhuǎnzhù) - Transliteration
  - 假借 (jiǎjiè) - Chiasmic

- Later scholars pointed out that only the first 4 are the principle of constructing Chinese characters, the rest two are ways of using them.
The Main 4 Principles for Character Construction:

- Pictographs (≈4%)
- Ideographs (≈1%)
- Logical Aggregates (≈13%)
- Phonetic Complexes (≈82%)
Pictographs:
Represent real-life objects by drawings (≈4%)
- Animal, plants, parts of the body etc.
- Example (Scripts from oracle bone)

- Horse 马
- Human 人
- Sun 日
- Mountain 山
- Big, great 大
- Hand 手
- Knife 刀
- Tree, wood 木
Ideographs:

Represent positional and numeral concepts by indication (≈1%) 

Example:

- 一 二 三
- 上 下
- 本 末

- Heaven 天
- Separate 分
Logical Aggregates:

Form a new meaning by combining the meanings of two or more characters (≈13%)

Example

- Wood: 木  Small Forest: 林  Big Forest: 森
- Person: 人  Small Group: 从  Large Group: 众
- Person + Ground: 土 = Sit: 坐
- Hand + 分 + Hand = 瓜 = Hand + To separate + Hand = To separate sth with two hands
Phonetic Complexes

Form a character by combining the meaning of one character and the pronunciation of another character (≈ 82%)

Example:

- 江 河 湖 海 流 浴 潮
- 椅 杆 杨 桐 案 架 梨
- 妈 码 玛 骂 蚂 吗 狗
- 驴 骆 驼 驾 驶 骑 驻
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stroke</th>
<th>Name of stroke</th>
<th>Writing the stroke</th>
<th>Example Characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>(the horizontal)</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>不 王</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>(the vertical)</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>工 中</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≡</td>
<td>(the sweep to the left)</td>
<td>(\backslash)</td>
<td>八 人</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≈</td>
<td>(the sweep to the right)</td>
<td>(\backslash)</td>
<td>大 人</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¬</td>
<td>(the dot)</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>们 这</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>(the upward stroke)</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>汉 我</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≻</td>
<td>(the hook)</td>
<td>(↓\rightarrow)</td>
<td>字 小 民</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>±</td>
<td>(the horizontal turn)</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>口 日</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≅</td>
<td>(the vertical turn)</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>亡 忙</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How many Chinese characters in all?

- 9,353 in 1st century C.E. (《说文解字》)
- 47,043 in 1716 (《康熙字典》)
- ~60,000 in 1990

Occurrence

- 1,000 characters 90%
- 2,400 characters 99%
- 3,800 characters 99.9%
- 6,600 characters 99.999%

300 of the most common characters will help you survive in Chinese daily life.
Chinese word building:

- Some words are single syllable (one character)
- Majority words in modern Chinese are double syllable (two characters)
- Some words are multi-syllable (three or more characters)
学 (xué): learn, study

- 学校 school
- 小学 primary school
- 中学 secondary school
- 大学 university
- 学院 college
- 学生 student
- 学分 credit
- 学费 tuition
- 学期 semester
- 学者 scholar
- 奖学金 scholarship
- 哲学 philosophy
- 科学 science
- 物理学 physics
- 形而上学 metaphysics
- 人类学 anthropology
- 医学 medicine
- 汉学 sinology
Strong capability in make new words:

电 (diàn): thunder flash, electricity

- 电力 electricity power
- 发电站 power plant
- 电灯 electric light
- 电车 trolley bus
- 电话 telephone
- 电影 movie

- 电池 battery
- 电视 TV
- 彩电 color TV
- 电脑 computer
- 电子邮件 E-mail
Is Chinese grammar complex?

- Not any more complex in general compared with other languages. Some aspects are even much simpler.

- Main features:
  - No inflection of nouns, verbs, etc.
  - The order of words is more important.
  - Functional empty words.
  - Many measure words.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English:</th>
<th>Chinese:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to be ----- am, is, are, was, were, been, being, have been,</td>
<td>always “是” （shì）.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>study, studied, studying</td>
<td>always “学习” （xué xí）.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
我在姑妈家。 I am in auntie's home.
姑妈在我家。 Auntie is in my home.
我姑妈在家。 My auntie is at home.
我家姑妈在。 My auntie is right here.
Learning Chinese: A rewardable long-term investment

- If my kids were of very young ages today, I would be asking them, and encouraging them, to learn Chinese.
  
  (Howard Schultz, Chairman, Starbucks - Seattle Times, 12/25/2005)

- If you want to get ahead, learn Mandarin...learning Chinese will provide an edge in the 21st.

  (Time magazine, June 19, 2006).
Some useful internet resource index web pages:

- Ocrat.com  http://www.ocrat.com/
- Leaning Chinese Online  http://www.csulb.edu/~txie/online.htm
- MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching)  http://www.merlot.org
Thank you!