

# 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 中文
- Hanyu 汉语
- Mandarin 官话
- Putonghua 普通话

# 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)

	Unaspirated	Aspirated	Nasal	Voiceless fricative	Voiced fricative
Labial	<b>b</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>m</b>	<b>f</b>	
Alveolar	<b>d</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>n</b>		<b>l</b>
Velar	<b>g</b>	<b>k</b>		<b>h</b>	
Palatal	<b>j</b>	<b>q</b>		<b>x</b>	
Dental sibilant	<b>z</b>	<b>c</b>		<b>s</b>	
Retroflex	<b>zh</b>	<b>ch</b>		<b>sh</b>	<b>r</b>

**y**

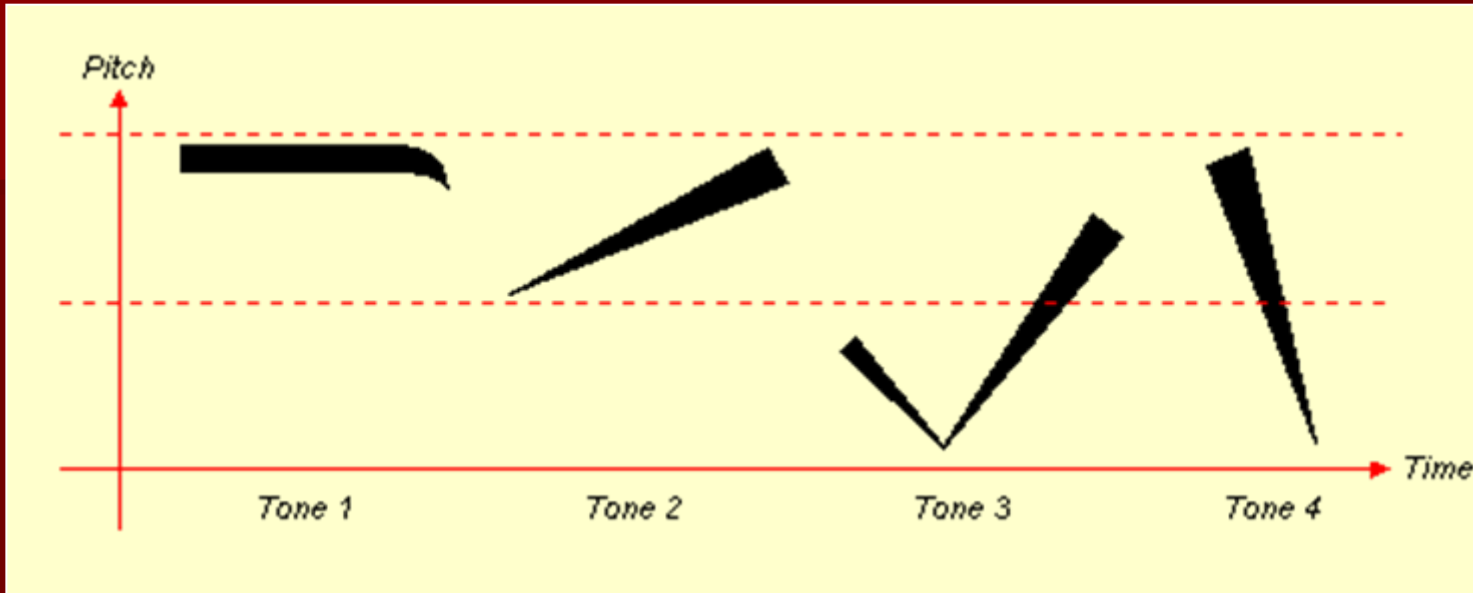
**w**

# 35 finals

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

er

# 4 tones, and a light tone



**High**

mā

**Up**

má

**Low**

mǎ

**Down**

mà

**light**

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

中国

China

Měi Guó

美国

USA

Běi Jīng 北京

Nán Jīng 南京

Dōng Jīng 东京

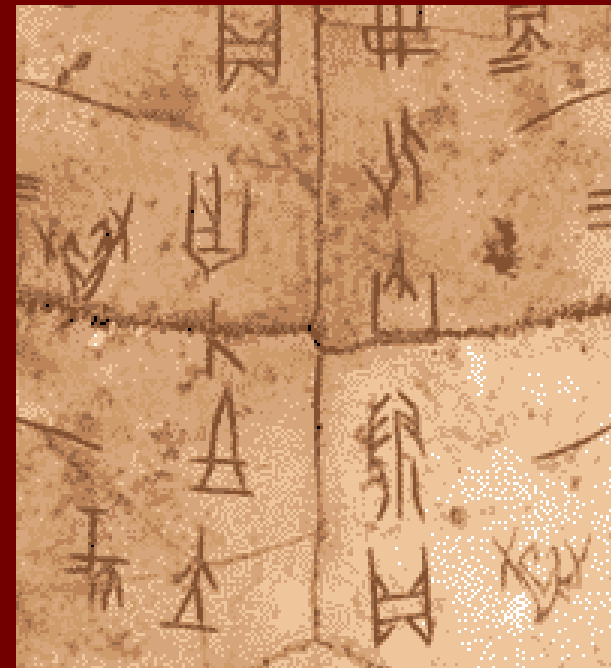
Běi kǎ luó lái nà 北卡罗来纳

# 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 施氏食獅史( *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)

西周晚期 / 毛公鼎  
Mao-kung Ting  
Late Western Chou dynasty



皇帝立國維初杜吉無世稱王許伏  
評威動四極志義直方戎臣奉詔經時  
不之濊火暴強廿武火季上薦高甯  
道顯即獻齋成之降專惠廟軌遠方  
登于釋山羣臣翻省咸受攸焉迨命  
世分土畫報白屏弄理功鞅曰作流  
於野自齋古始世蘇象鬣既及五帝  
象禁止適今皇帝覽家不下兵不復  
留周除新晉肅庭和澤安之羣臣

Inscription on  
stone stele,  
Qin Dynasty  
(221B.C.-206 B.C )  
small seal  
script

“Li shu” or Clerical  
script:

Han Dynasty (220  
B.C.-206 A.D.)



心佛和  
下 離 尚  
如 田 即  
地 相 眾

- “Kai Shu”, the standard script  
Tang Dynasty  
(618-907)

# The evolution of Chinese Characters.

Oracle bone script (1400-1200 BC)	Large seal script (1100-256 BC)	Small seal script (221-207 BC)	Clerical script (207 BC-220 AD)	Standard script (Since 207 BC)	Running script (Since 207 BC)	Grass script (Since 207 BC)	Simplified script (Since 1949)
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Human  
**rén**

Mountain  
**shān**

Sun **rì**

Horse **Mǎ**

# *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、象形、形声、会意、转注、假借
- 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 ( $\approx 4\%$ )
- Ideographs ( $\approx 1\%$ )
- Logical Aggregates ( $\approx 13\%$ )
- Phonetic Complexes ( $\approx 82\%$ )

# Pictographs:

Represent real-life objects by drawings ( $\approx 4\%$ )

- 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 ( $\approx 1\%$ )

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 ( $\approx 13\%$ )

## Example

- Wood 木 Small Forest 林 Big Forest 森
- Person 人 Small Group 从 Large Group 众
- Person 人 + Ground 土 = Sit 坐
- 手 + 分 + 手 = 掰 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	沐	潮
■ 椅	杆	杨	桐	案	架	梨
■ 妈	码	玛	骂	蚂	吗	犸
■ 驴	骡	骆	驾	驶	骑	驻

# 9 basic strokes

Stroke	Name of stroke	Writing the stroke	Example Characters
一	(the horizontal)		不 王
丨	(the vertical)		工 中
丿	(the sweep to the left)		八 人
㇇	(the sweep to the right)		大 人
丶	(the dot)		们 这
㇇	(the upward stroke)		汉 我
丨→㇇	(the hook)		字 小 民
┐	(the horizontal turn)		口 日
└	(the vertical turn)		亡 忙

# *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 compare 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.

English:	Chinese:
to be ----- am, is, are, was, were, been, being, have been,	always “是” (shì) .
study, studied, studying	always “学习” (xué xí) .

- 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!***

