

## Topic Page: [Chinese language](#)

Definition: **Chinese** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Group of languages spoken by c.95% of the population of China and by millions more in Taiwan, Hong Kong, SE Asia and elsewhere. There are six major languages, which are not mutually intelligible; the most common is Mandarin, spoken by c.66% of the Chinese population. All Chinese languages are written in a single common non-alphabetic script, whose characters number in the thousands and in some cases date back several thousand years. This single writing-system leads to the traditional classification of all Chinese languages as dialects of one language. Chinese has twice as many users as any other language in the world. See *also* Cantonese

Summary Article: **Chinese**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

subfamily of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages (see Sino-Tibetan languages), which is also sometimes grouped with the Tai, or Thai, languages in a Sinitic subfamily of the Sino-Tibetan language stock. Chinese comprises a number of variants; those that are mutually unintelligible are considered separate languages by some linguists but are classed among the many dialects of Chinese by others.

### **Forms of Chinese**

The most widespread form of Chinese is Mandarin, which may be regarded as modern standard Chinese. It has several dialects and is spoken as a first language by some 835 million people in central and N China, as well as Taiwan, claiming more native speakers than any other language. An additional 100 million speak it as a second language. Originally the language of the court at Beijing during the imperial period, Mandarin was then called *kuan hua* [official speech]. After the Nationalists seized control in 1911, the name was changed to *kuo yü* [national tongue]. The Communist government adopted and simplified the Beijing dialect of Mandarin as the basis for a national language, renaming it *putonghua* [generally understood speech]. Mandarin in its various forms is spoken by about 70% of the population of China. It is the official language of both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan and is employed as one of the official languages of the United Nations.

Other leading forms of Chinese include Wu, the tongue of about 65 million people in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provs.; Fukienese or Northern Min, with some 50 million speakers distributed in Fujian prov., Taiwan, and SE Asia; Cantonese or Yue, spoken by over 65 million persons residing in Guangxi and Guangdong provs., Hong Kong, SE Asia, and the United States; Hakka or Kejia, the language of about 35 million in Guangdong and Jiangxi provs.; and Amoy-Swatow or Southern Min, the mother tongue of 15 million living in Fujian and Guangdong provs., Taiwan, and the South Pacific.

### **Grammar, Pronunciation, and Vocabulary**

The various forms of Chinese differ least in grammar, more in vocabulary, and most in pronunciation. Like the other Sino-Tibetan languages, Chinese is tonal, i.e., different tones distinguish words otherwise pronounced alike. The number of tones varies in different forms of Chinese, but Mandarin has four tones: a high tone, a rising tone, a tone that combines a falling and a rising inflection, and a falling tone.

Chinese (again, like other Sino-Tibetan languages) is also strongly monosyllabic. Chinese often uses

combinations of monosyllables that result in polysyllabic compounds having different meanings from their individual elements. For example, the word for “explanation,” *shue-ming*, combines *shue* (“speak”) with *ming* (“bright”). These compounds can embrace three and even four monosyllables: *shuo-ch’u-lai*, the word for “describe,” is made up of *shuo* (“speak”), *ch’u* (“out”), and *lai* (“come”). This practice has greatly increased the Chinese vocabulary and also makes it much easier to grasp the meaning of spoken Chinese words.

The elements of Chinese tend to be more grammatically isolated than connected, because the language lacks inflection to indicate person, number, gender, case, tense, voice, and so forth. Suffixes may be used to denote some of these features. For example, the suffix *-le* is a sign of the perfect tense of the verb. Subordination and possession can be marked by the suffix *-te*. The position and use of a word in a sentence may determine its part of speech and its meaning.

## The Chinese Writing System

The Chinese writing system developed more than 4,000 years ago; the oldest extant examples of written Chinese are from the 14th or 15th cent. B.C., when the Shang dynasty flourished. Chinese writing consists of an individual character or ideogram for every syllable, each character representing a word or idea rather than a sound; thus, problems caused by homonyms in spoken Chinese are not a difficulty in written Chinese. The written language is a unifying factor culturally, for although the spoken languages and dialects may not be mutually comprehensible in many instances, the written form is universal.

Traditionally, the characters are written in columns that are read from top to bottom and from right to left, or in horizontal lines that read from left to right. The Chinese characters, although universal to all dialects, have proved to be an obstacle to mass literacy, for one needs to know at least several thousand characters to read a newspaper and even more to read literary works. In an attempt to deal with this problem, the People's Republic of China in 1956 introduced simplifications of commonly used characters. This was intended as a transitional phase until a workable alphabet could be devised and adopted.

Also in 1956 an alphabet based on Roman letters (Pinyin) was developed in mainland China. Its purpose, however, was the phonetic transcription of Chinese characters rather than the replacement of them. Since alphabetic writing requires a standardized spoken language, the local differences in the pronunciation of Chinese present a serious obstacle to the development of a satisfactory alphabet. The Chinese government has made a great effort to standardize the pronunciation of Mandarin, which is essentially a spoken language, and to have it adopted throughout China. The Beijing dialect of Mandarin was chosen because it was already the most widely used.

The literary language of Chinese differs greatly from the spoken form. Known as *wenyan*, the literary language is the same for all variants of Chinese as far as vocabulary, grammar, and the system of writing are concerned, but pronunciation differs locally according to the dialect. Under Nationalist leadership a movement began in 1917 to employ the popular, everyday speech (called *paihua*) in literature instead of *wenyan*. Since 1949, under the Communists, *paihua* has been used for all writing, including governmental, commercial, and journalistic texts as well as literary works.

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