

Chinese – The Basics

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This article was first published in the "Chinese Language Corner."

Chinese isn't as hard as reported (or Chinese grammar is simple)

"Chinese is one of the most difficult languages requiring years of study to master." We've all heard this before. Let me contradict this statement and then agree with it. What we often think of when we refer to the Chinese language, is usually the Mandarin dialect. It is one of many dialects currently spoken throughout the world. Spoken Chinese is by no means standard across dialects, but more on this later. For purposes of this article, I'll address the Mandarin dialect specifically.

The grammar of Mandarin Chinese is almost dream-like in its simplicity. Imagine a language that lacks conjugated verbs, tenses, plural nouns, and case agreement between words (subjects, verbs, objects, articles,) in a sentence. This is Mandarin Chinese. Chinese grammar is very simple when compared with Romance, Semitic, German, or Slavic languages. To start speaking Chinese, you don't have to stop and think, "how do I conjugate that verb in the past tense" or "do my subject and object need to agree for case here?" *I'll make basic grammar the subject of the next column.*

Yeah, but what about the tones? Do they matter?

Yes, tones matter. They are not similar to the use of inflection in western languages (i.e. raising your tone at the end of a sentence indicates a question in English). Rather, tones are an aspect of pronunciation - they change the meaning of the word itself. Chinese is a language of homophones - words that sound alike but differ in meaning. Therefore, many characters share the same "pinyin or romanization" and possibly share the same tone but differ in meaning. So, when you want to look up your child's Chinese name or understand the meaning of a pinyin or a Chinese word spelled out in the English (roman) alphabet, you must start with the characters. Some dictionaries allow you to look up the word from the romanization, but you will see that the words are then ordered according to tone, stroke order, stroke number and radical (this varies by dictionary).

Wait a minute, what is romanization?

Pinyin is considered a "romanization" (i.e. a rendering of pronunciation into a roman alphabet) rather than a character. There are many romanizations still in use internationally but Pinyin is becoming the accepted worldwide standard. Pinyin was first developed and adopted in mainland China as a teaching and romanization tool. Bopomofo (or zhuyinfuhao) is a phonetic alphabet used to render Chinese pronunciation rather than a romanization. Bopomofo/Zhuyinfuhao was developed in the 1930's and is used throughout the primary school system and to teach foreign students Chinese in Taiwan. Unlike Pinyin, Bopomofo is not a romanization and does not serve to transliterate Chinese into western languages. Due to the developmental history surrounding both systems, there are political as well as methodological considerations surrounding their use in Chinese instruction.

Why do I want/need to learn Pinyin or bopomofo?

Both pinyin and Bopomofo are tools to learn the pronunciation of Mandarin Chinese. They each have advantages and disadvantages. Both methods should be viewed as an aid to help you learn new words. However, you cannot use either method as a means to communicate effectively in writing. Learning one or the other is no substitute for learning Chinese characters. An important part of the beauty and historical meaning of Chinese words are the characters themselves. So you can incorporate either method in your language learning process, but don't neglect the real writing system.

There are distinct advantages to learning Pinyin. It is now used for computer input of Chinese characters, text messaging in telephones and portable devices, and it is the accepted standard for romanizing Chinese in academic

publications. Bopomofo is also very helpful as a learning tool. Using Bopomofo avoids the potential for alphabet confusion because it looks nothing like a western alphabet, and it opens up the door to utilizing children's books from Taiwan which are printed with the bopomofo next to the characters in lower elementary level books.

Egads! What about characters?

Now, even with the extremely simple grammar of Mandarin Chinese, which makes learning to speak faster than that required in other languages, there is a zinger to be dealt with - the writing system. You can rapidly attain verbal skills, but when you want to read and write, you encounter a new host of difficulties. To sum up, because Chinese is grammatically straightforward and simple, speaking and listening skills can be developed in a *VERY* short time period. Becoming literate in Chinese is another matter and does require years of study. Here are a couple of articles that addresses this question: <http://www.transworldeducation.com/articles/chinese1.htm>, <http://academic.bowdoin.edu/chinese/studying/html/difficult.shtml>.

Chinese Characters - a Primer

Each Chinese character represents a morpheme or syllable. Characters in turn are comprised of basic semantic and phonetic elements. The semantic elements are often called radicals. These 214 radicals provide some insight into the nature of the word represented such as its original composition. For instance, the character for an item originally made from bamboo might contain the bamboo radical. Learning radicals is an important step toward literacy in Chinese. A program or curriculum that teaches Chinese characters without teaching radicals puts students at a distinct disadvantage. If you would like to learn more about radicals, please visit the following websites that provide radicals lists, stroke order, and meaning:

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/sobelman/radicals/>
<http://home.att.net/~jameskass/chiradtest.htm>

Radicals in turn are made up of strokes (brush strokes from writing with a bamboo brush). There are both "simplified" (jiantizi) and "traditional" (fantizi) characters. Simplified characters are used in mainland China while traditional characters are used in Taiwan and many overseas Chinese communities (this is changing gradually). Simplified characters are easier to learn and can lead to "faster" rates of literacy for native speakers, however they are not necessarily easier for students of Chinese as a second language. The radicals contain pictographic elements that give students an idea of what the character was made of or what it represented. The simplified radicals sometimes take these "clues" away by replacing one radical with another. Therefore starting with simplified characters is not really the "easy way out." Many universities outside of Asia require students to learn both when studying Chinese. At Chinese for Families, we do advocate that you begin with Traditional and move to Simplified later on. It is important not shortchange yourself by choosing to focus on one system. What you want to learn is dependent on how and where you will use your Chinese skills. If you want to learn to converse in Chinese and to read books, newspapers, and street signs, either one will do. If your goal is to work toward literacy in Chinese and to pursue Chinese at the college level, you need to learn traditional characters.

Where is Mandarin spoken?

Spoken Mandarin is standard. So, Mandarin speakers from Taiwan, Beijing, or Singapore all speak the same dialect, with some minor pronunciation differences. Mandarin is the official language of instruction in many Chinese-speaking communities. So, even if you speak a local dialect of Chinese at home and on the street, you will learn Mandarin in school. Written Chinese is also standard across dialects (we'll stick with this for argument's sake). So, a Cantonese speaker can read what a Fujianese speaker wrote without being able to converse face to face. There is a raging debate in academic circles about whether the differences between Chinese dialects are significant enough to constitute different languages, or if they are merely dialects of the same language. However, some of the differences between Chinese dialects are numerous enough that when applied to other languages (such as Russian and French for example) they would constitute different languages.

How can I learn pinyin and tones without driving myself crazy?

A wonderful website hosted by the Beijing Teachers University explains the basics of the Chinese language and provides tutorials in pinyin, tones, strokes, and radicals (the primary components of Chinese characters) -- look under the "abc's of Chinese" & "syllables" sections. This website also has an excellent list of the most commonly used radicals and their meaning:

<http://www.hello-han.com/en-education/index.php>

<http://www.ctcfl.ox.ac.uk/Pinyin.htm>

For Zhuyinfuhao/Bopomofo see the following website:

<http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuyin#Writing>.