

Chinese for Beginners

汉语
初步

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CHINESE FOR BEGINNERS

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INTRODUCTION

What is usually referred to as “Chinese” is really the language of the Han nationality, which makes up over 90 percent of China’s population. It has many different dialects. The Chinese known as *putonghua* (common speech) which is being popularized throughout China today is based on the northern dialect with Peking pronunciation as the standard. The lessons given here are in *putonghua*.

The Chinese language, with a written record of over 3,000 years, has developed greatly in the last several decades. Especially since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the vigorous development of the socialist revolution and socialist construction has created many new terms like 大跃进 (big leap forward), 人民公社 (people’s commune), 试验田 (experimental plot), 上山下乡 (move to the countryside), etc. These have enlarged and enriched the Chinese vocabulary and strengthened the power of expression of the language.

Using the phonetic alphabet to write Chinese is the fundamental orientation for the reform of the Chinese written language, but this cannot be realized in a short time. Much work on the reform of the written language has been done since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, including simplification

of characters. Since 1956 over 2,000 commonly used characters have been simplified. For example, 聲 simplified is 声, 種 simplified is 种. The simplification of characters reduces difficulty in learning them and makes them much more convenient to write.

Organizations responsible for the reform of the written language are continuing to collect and study simplified characters created by the people in their everyday practice. More simplifications will be officially recognized and popularized. Our language lessons use the simplified forms.

CHINESE PRONUNCIATION

Before we get to pronunciation, a few words about the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet. This alphabet uses letters from the internationally-accepted Latin alphabet to indicate the pronunciation of the Chinese characters. As the characters themselves do not represent sounds, the phonetic alphabet is a convenient tool which helps overcome difficulties in reading, writing and remembering the characters.

The key to pronunciation of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet below uses as a guide the International Phonetic Alphabet and similar sounds in English.

I. Key to Chinese Phonetic Alphabet

(1) Initials

C.P.A. ¹	I.P.A. ²	Key Words
b (o)	b̥	bay (de-voiced ³)
p (o)	pʰ	pay
m (o)	m	may
f (o)	f	fair
d (e)	d̥	day (de-voiced)
t (e)	tʰ	take
n (e)	n	nay
l (e)	l	lay
g (e)	g̥	gay (de-voiced)

¹ Chinese Phonetic Alphabet

² International Phonetic Alphabet

³ "De-voiced" means the vocal cords do not vibrate

k (e)	k ^ʰ	kay
h (e)	x	hay
j (i)	tɕ	jeep (palatal ¹)
q (i)	tɕ ^ʰ	cheer (palatal)
x (i)	ç	she (palatal)
zh (i)	tʂ	judge (retroflex ² , de-voiced)
ch (i)	tʂ ^ʰ	church (retroflex)
sh (i)	ʃ	shirt (retroflex)
r (i)	ʐ	leisure (retroflex)
z (i)	ts	reads (de-voiced)
c (i)	ts ^ʰ	hats
s (i)	s	say
y (i)	j	yea
w (u)	w	way

(2) Finals

C.P.A.	I.P.A.	Key Words
a	a	father
o	ɔ	saw (approximately)
e	ɤ	her (British)
i (after z, c, s, zh, ch, sh, r)	ʒ;ʐ	
i (elsewhere)	i	see
u	u	rude
ü³	y	French tu, German fühlen (i with rounded lips)
er	əɹ	err (American)
ai	ai	eye
ei	ei	eight
ao	au	now

¹ "Palatal" means the front of the tongue touches the hard palate.

² "Retroflex" means the tip of the tongue is slightly curled.

³ After j, q, x, y, u is pronounced ü but the two dots are omitted.

ou	ou	oh
an	an	can (more open)
en	ən	turn (British)
ang	ɑŋ	German Gang
eng	ʌŋ	sung
ong	uŋ	German Lunge
ia	ia	Asia
ie	iɛ	yes
iao	iaʊ	ye owl
iu	iou	yoke
ian	iɛn	yen
in	in	in
iang	iaŋ	young (approximately)
ing	iŋ	sing
iong	iuŋ	German jünger (approximately)
ua	ua	guano
uo	uɔ	wall
uai	uai	wife
ui	uei	way
uan	uan	one (approximately)
un	uən	went (approximately)
uang	uɑŋ	oo + ahng
üe*	yɛ	ü + eh
üan*	yan	ü + an
ün*	yn	German grün

II. Tones

In Chinese the pitch and change in pitch of a syllable makes for a difference in meaning. Such pitch contours are called the "tones". There are four tones in the Peking dialect, shown by the following marks:

* See footnote 3, p. 4.

—1st tone, high and level

/ 2nd tone, rising

∨ 3rd tone, falling-rising

∖ 4th tone, falling

The tone mark is placed above the main vowel, and when the main vowel is “i”, the dot is omitted.

Each character has its own definite tone. For example, **mǎi** 买 (to buy) is 3rd tone, **mài** 卖 (to sell) is 4th tone. Both syllables have the same initial and vowel, but because their tones are different, their meanings are also different. Here are a few more examples:

1st tone	2nd tone	3rd tone	4th tone
一 yī (one)	移 yí (move)	椅 yǐ (chair)	译 yì (translate)
屋 wū (house)	无 wú (none)	五 wǔ (five)	雾 wù (fog)
居 jū (dwell)	局 jú (bureau)	举 jǔ (raise)	句 jù (sentence)
通 tōng (through)	铜 tóng (bronze)	桶 tǒng (barrel)	痛 tòng (ache)
织 zhī (weave)	直 zhí (straight)	纸 zhǐ (paper)	治 zhì (rule, cure)
穿 chuān (wear)	船 chuán (boat)	喘 chuǎn (pant)	串 chuàn (string)

枪
qiāng
(gun)

墙
qiáng
(wall)

抢
qiǎng
(rob)

呛
qiàng
(irritate the
throat)

晕
yūn
(dizzy)

云
yún
(cloud)

允
yǔn
(permit)

运
yùn
(transport)

靴
xuē
(boot)

学
xué
(study)

雪
xuě
(snow)

血
xuè
(blood)

街
jiē
(street)

节
jié
(festival)

姐
jiě
(older sister)

借
jiè
(lend, bor-
row)

Syllable Drill

1. Monosyllabic words:

qīng 轻 (lightweight)
kǒu 口 (mouth)

huá 划 (draw lines)
diào 掉 (lose, drop)

2. Disyllabic words:

jùchǎng 剧场 (theater)
xūyào 需要 (need)
cānjiā 参加 (participate)
gōngyuán 公园 (park)
zàijiàn 再见 (good-bye)
fùnǚ 妇女 (woman)

qúnzhòng 群众 (masses)
yīyuàn 医院 (hospital)
rénmín 人民 (people)
xióngmāo 熊猫 (panda)
zázhì 杂志 (magazine)
huánghūn 黄昏 (twilight)

3. Polysyllabic words:

pīngpāngqiú 乒乓球 (table tennis)
bāléiwǔ 芭蕾舞 (ballet)
hézuòshè 合作社 (cooperative)
túshūguǎn 图书馆 (library)

shèhuìzhǔyì 社会主义 (socialism)
gāogāoxìngxìng 高高兴兴 (gladly)

(Note: The **i** after **z, c, s, zh, ch, sh** and **r** sounds like the voiced prolongation and weakening of the preceding initial.)

III. The Neutral Tone, Change of Tones and the Retroflex Ending -r

1. Neutral tone

When a syllable is unstressed, it loses its original tone and becomes weak and short. No tone mark is written above syllables of the neutral tone. For example:

tāmen 他们 (they)	míngzi 名字 (name)
xǐhuan 喜欢 (fond of)	kèqi 客气 (polite)

2. Change of tones

Half-third tone: A syllable of the 3rd tone followed by a syllable of the 1st, 2nd, 4th or neutral tone is pronounced with only the falling part of the tone without its final rise. We call this the half-third tone. For example:

Běijīng 北京 (Peking)	zhěngqí 整齐 (orderly)
fǎngwèn 访问 (visit)	nuǎnhuo 暖和 (warm)

When a third tone is followed by another third tone, the first third tone is read as a second tone. For example:

yǒuhǎo (yóuhǎo) 友好 (friendly)
lǐxiǎng (líxiǎng) 理想 (ideal)
yǒnggǎn (yónggǎn) 勇敢 (brave)
Nǐ hǎo! (Ní hǎo!) 你好! (How are you!)
Nǐ zǎo! (Ní zǎo!) 你早! (Good morning!)

3. Retroflex ending -r In Chinese, there are many words which are pronounced with a retroflex **-r** at the end. The retroflex **-r** is not an independent syllable itself, but combines with the preceding final, often changing its sound.

huā-r→huār 花儿 (flower)

gē-r→gēr 歌儿 (song)

wán-r→wár 玩儿 (play)

xiǎohái-r→xiǎohár 小孩儿 (child)

yìhuǐ-r→yìhǔēr 一会儿 (a moment)

yídiǎn-r→yídiǎr 一点儿 (a little)

CHINESE CHARACTERS

I. Characteristics

Chinese characters are the symbols used to write Chinese. Modern Chinese characters fall into two categories: one with a phonetic component, the other without it. Most of those without a phonetic component developed from pictographs. From ancient writing on archaeological relics we can see their evolution.

				rì	sun
				yuè	moon
				rén	person
				mù	tree

It is possible to draw a picture of a concrete object but abstract concepts were represented by symbols.

				shàng	up
				xià	down

Aside from these, there are also characters made up of two or more other characters. For example, 日 and 月 combine to give 明 **míng** (bright); 人 leaning against 木 gives 休 **xiū** (rest).

Characters of this type which do not contain phonetic components account for only a small proportion of all Chinese characters, but many of them are in common use.

The overwhelming majority of Chinese characters contain a phonetic component. In addition to this phonetic, they contain a signific, which indicates the meaning. For instance, in the character 草 **cǎo** (grass), the signific 艹 (originally a picture of grass) carries the meaning while the phonetic 早 **zǎo** provides an approximate guide to the sound.

Learning to recognize phonetics and significs is a help to learning characters. Knowing the pronunciation of one character, by analogy it is possible to infer the pronunciation of many others containing the same phonetic.

For example:

方 **fāng**:

芳 **fāng** 防 **fáng** 房 **fāng** 妨 **fáng**
纺 **fǎng** 访 **fǎng** 放 **fàng**

巴 **bā**:









吧 **bā** 疤 **bā** 笆 **bā** 芭 **bā** 把 **bǎ**
爸 **bà** 耙 **bà**

Because pronunciation has changed over the centuries, many phonetics now indicate only the approximate sound, like 早 **zǎo** in 草 **cǎo**. Others no longer indicate the sound at all. Owing to changes in the form of characters, some significs no longer have their original shape. Therefore significs and phonetics are only a limited aid in learning characters.

II. Structure of Characters and Rules for Writing

Some characters are quite complex, and to remember them one must analyze them. Characters are generally composed of several basic structural parts called "character components". Some character components can stand by themselves; for instance, 人 is itself a character. Most characters, however, are made up of two or more components. Some are made up of upper and lower parts, like **sī** 思 (think) and **cǎo** 草 (grass); others of right and left sides, like **pāi** 拍 (tap) and **hóng** 红 (red); still others of inside and outside parts, like **guó** 国 (country) and **kāng** 康 (healthy). Although the number of characters is quite large, there are only a limited number of character components.

All character components are written with the following eight basic strokes:

Stroke	Name		
	点	diǎn	dot
	横	héng	horizontal
	竖	shù	vertical
	撇	piě	left-falling
	捺	nà	right-falling
	提	tí	rising
	钩	gōu	hook
	折	zhé	turning