

Chinese language

More people speak Chinese than any other language in the world. Currently about twenty percent of the world's population, or over one billion people, speak some form of Chinese as their first native language. Various languages have evolved across China and these different languages are often known as dialects. There are between six and twelve main regional groups of spoken Chinese. The most commonly spoken group is Mandarin (北方话/北方話 or 官话/官話 c. 850 million speakers), followed by Wu (吳 c. 90 million), Min (閩 c. 70 million) and Cantonese (粵 c. 70 million). Whilst the same written characters are common to all the Chinese language groups, the spoken forms are largely, mutually unintelligible. China's official language (Modern Standard Chinese) is based on the Beijing dialect of Mandarin. *Putonghua* 普通話 (the Common Language) refers to the current standard form of Chinese used by the government of the People's Republic of China.

Written Chinese is considered to be the longest, continuously used writing system in the world and can be traced back to the Shang dynasty (c. 1650– c. 1027 BC) when the first indisputable examples of Chinese writing were found on the oracle bones. Written Chinese comprises the written symbols known as Chinese characters which evolved over time from the earliest forms of hieroglyphs. These characters often consist of a number of strokes representing physical objects, abstract notions or pronunciation. The writing system for Chinese characters was divided into two separate systems in the twentieth century; one system is known as traditional Chinese (*fantizi* 繁體字) and the other as simplified Chinese (*jiantizi* 简体字). Traditional Chinese, still used in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and Chinese-speaking communities outside mainland China (except Singapore and Malaysia), is based on standardised character forms dating back to the late Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). The simplified Chinese character system, developed in mainland China in 1954 to promote mass literacy, simplifies the most complex traditional characters into a form with fewer strokes.

Chinese is a tonal language with four standard tones which give different meanings to a word. For example, *ma* can mean “mother” (*mā* 妈), “hemp” (*má* 麻), “horse” (*mǎ* 马) or “to scold” (*mà* 骂), depending on how it is spoken. Besides these four standard tones, there is also a neutral tone which is considered as a lack of tone and usually comes at the end of a

word or phrase. To simplify the pronunciation of written Chinese, several systems of transcribing the sounds of Chinese into the Latin alphabet have been developed. The most commonly used system is *Hanyu Pinyin* (汉语拼音), often known simply as *pinyin* (拼音), which was introduced in 1956 by the People's Republic of China. It is the form usually used for teaching standard spoken Chinese in schools and universities across Europe, America and Australia.