

Chinese language

More people speak Chinese than any other language. Currently about 20% of the world, over one billion people, speak a form of Chinese as their first language, mainly in the form of a regional or local dialect. There are between seven and thirteen main regional groups of spoken Chinese. The most commonly spoken group is Mandarin (*beifanghua* 北方话 or *guanhua* 官话, c. 850 million speakers), followed by Wu 吴 (c. 90 million), Min 闽 (c. 70 million) and Cantonese (*yue* 粤, c. 70 million). While the written language is the same for all groups, spoken forms are mostly mutually unintelligible. China's official language (Modern Standard Chinese) is based on the Beijing dialect of Mandarin. Putonghua 普通话 (the Standard Language) refers to the current standard form of Chinese used by the government of the People's Republic of China.

Chinese is a tonal language with four standard tones. These 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 pronounced. Alongside these four standard tones is a neutral tone (considered a lack of tone) which usually comes at the end of a word or phrase. Several systems for transcribing Chinese sounds into the Latin alphabet have been developed. The most commonly used is Hanyu Pinyin 汉语拼音, often referred to as *pinyin* 拼音, which was introduced by the government of the People's Republic of China in 1956. It is the system usually used for teaching standard spoken Chinese in schools and universities across Europe, America and Australia.

Written Chinese can be traced back to the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1050 BC) and the so-called 'oracle bones', on which the divinations of the king were recorded. Written Chinese uses symbols, known as 'characters', evolved from early pictograms. These characters consist of a number of strokes representing physical objects, abstract notions or pronunciation. In the mid-1900s the Chinese writing system was divided into two separate systems: traditional Chinese (*fantizi* 繁体字) and 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–AD 220). 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. The spoken language is unaffected by the changes in the writing system.

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