

Chapter 1

I Say It How? Speaking Chinese

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting a handle on basic Chinese sounds
 - ▶ Perfecting the four basic tones
 - ▶ Practicing Chinese idioms
 - ▶ Understanding basic Chinese phrases and gestures
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Time to get your feet wet with the basics of Chinese. This chapter gives you the guidelines that help you pronounce words in standard Mandarin (the official language of both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan) like a native speaker and helps you get a handle on the four tones that distinguish the Mandarin dialect. After you have the basics down, we show you how to construct basic Chinese phrases.

But before you dive in, here's a bit of advice: Don't be intimidated by all the tones! When studying a foreign language, don't worry about making mistakes the minute you open your mouth.

The Written Word: Yikes! No Alphabet!

With so many distinct dialects in Chinese, how do people communicate with each other? The answer lies in . . . (drum roll) . . . the written word.

Say you see two Chinese people sitting next to each other on a train traveling from Canton to Shanghai. If the Cantonese speaker reads the newspaper out loud, the guy from Shanghai won't have a clue what he's saying. But if they both read the same newspaper article silently to themselves, they could understand what's going on in the world. That's because Chinese characters are uniform all across the country.



Chinese words are written in beautiful, often symbolic configurations called *characters*. Each character is a word in and of itself, and sometimes it's a part of a compound word. It makes no difference if you write the characters from right to left, left to right, or top to bottom, because you can read and understand them in any order.

During the Han dynasty, a lexicographer named Xu Shen identified six ways in which Chinese characters reflected meanings and sounds. Of these, four were the most common:

- ✓ **Pictographs:** These characters are formed according to the shape of the objects themselves, such as the sun and the moon.
- ✓ **Ideographs:** These characters represent more abstract concepts. For example, the characters for “above” and “below” each have a horizontal line representing the horizon and another stroke leading out away above or below the horizon.
- ✓ **Complex ideographs:** Combinations of simpler characters, such as the sun and moon together which mean “bright.”

✓ **Phonetic compounds:** Also called *logographs*, these compound characters are formed by two graphic elements — one hinting at the meaning of the word and the other providing a clue to the sound. Phonetic compounds account for more than 80 percent of all Chinese characters.

No matter which type of character you see, you won't find any letters stringing them together like you see in English. So how in the world do Chinese people consult a Chinese dictionary? In several different ways.

Because Chinese characters are composed of several (often many) strokes of the writing brush, one way to look up a character is by counting the number of strokes and then looking up the character under the portion of the dictionary that notes characters by strokes. But to do so, you have to know which radical to check under first. Chinese characters have 214 *radicals* — parts of the character that can help identify what the character may signify, such as three dots on the left-hand side of the character representing water. Each radical is itself composed of a certain number of strokes, so you have to first look up the radical by the number of strokes it takes to write it, and after you locate that radical, you start looking once more under the number of strokes left in the character *after* that radical to locate the character you wanted to look up in the first place.

You can always just check under the pronunciation of the character (if you already know how to pronounce it), but you have to sift through every single character with the same pronunciation first, according to which tone the word is spoken with — first, second, third, or fourth. And because Chinese has so many homophones, this task isn't as easy as it may sound (no pun intended). For example the word pronounced “ma” if spoken with a first tone, means “mother,” with a second tone it means “hemp,” with a third tone it means “horse,” and with a fourth tone it means “to scold.” So if you're not careful you can scold your mother and call her a horse.

I bet you feel really relieved that you're only focusing on spoken Chinese and not the written language about now.

Pinyin Spelling: Beijing, Not Peking

To spell the way it sounds . . . that's the literal meaning of **pīnyīn**. For decades, Chinese had been transliterated in any number of ways. Finally, in 1979, the People's Republic of China officially adopted **pīnyīn** as its official romanization system. After the adoption, U.S. libraries and government agencies diligently changed all their prior records from other romanization systems into **pīnyīn**.

Keep in mind the following quick facts about some of the initial sounds in Mandarin when you see them written in the relatively new **pīnyīn** system:

- ✓ **J:** Sounds like the “g” in “gee whiz.” An “i” often follows a “j.” “**Jǐ kuài qián?**” (*jee kwye chyán*) means “How much money?”
- ✓ **Q:** Sounds like the “ch” in “cheek.” You never see it followed by a “u” like in English, but an “i” always follows it in **pīnyīn**, possibly before another vowel or a consonant. **Qīngdǎo** (*cheeng daow*) beer used to be spelled “ch’ing tao” or “Tsingtao.”
- ✓ **X:** The third letter that’s often followed by an “i.” It sounds like the “sh” in “she.” One famous Chinese leader, **Dèng Xiǎopíng** (*dung shyaw peeng*), boasted this letter in his name.
- ✓ **Zh:** Unlike “j,” which often precedes a vowel — making it sound like you’re opening your mouth — “zh” is followed by vowels, which make it sound like your mouth is a bit more closed. Take **Zhōu ēnlái** (*joe un lye*), for example, the great statesman of 20th-century China. When you say his name, it sounds like Joe Un-lye.

- ✓ **Z:** Sounds like a “dz.” You see it in the name of the PRC’s first leader, **Máo Zédōng** (*maow dzuh doong*), which used to be spelled Mao Tse-tung.
- ✓ **C:** Pronounced like “ts” in such words as **cài** (*tsye; food*) or **cèsuǒ** (*tsuh swaw; bathroom*).
- ✓ **B, D, and G:** In the past, the sounds made by these three letters were represented by P, T, and K, respectively, and the corresponding *aspirated* initial sounds (like in the words “pie,” “tie,” and “kite”) were written as “p’,” “t’,” and “k.” Today, the letters “P,” “T,” and “K” represent the aspirated sounds.

Sounding Off: Basic Chinese Sounds

Don’t worry about sounding like a native speaker the first time you utter a Chinese syllable — after all, who does? But the longer you procrastinate becoming familiar with the basic elements of Chinese words, the greater your fear of this unique language may become.



The main thing to remember about the Chinese language is that each *morpheme* (the smallest unit of meaning in a language) is represented by one syllable, which in turn consists of an initial sound and a final sound, topped off by a tone. This applies to each and every syllable. Without any one of these three components, your words may be incomprehensible to the average Chinese person. For example, the syllable “**mā**” is comprised of the initial “m” and the final “a,” and you pronounce it with what’s called a first tone. Together, the parts mean “mother.” If you substitute the first tone for a third tone, which is written as “**mǎ**,” you say the word “horse.” The following sections break up the three parts and give each their due.

Starting off with initials

In Chinese, initials always consist of consonants. Table 1-1 lists the initials you encounter in the Chinese language.

Table 1-1		Chinese Initials
<i>Chinese Letter</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>English Example</i>
b	baw	bore
p	paw	paw
m	maw	more
f	faw	four
d	duh	done
t	tuh	ton
n	nuh	null
l	luh	lull
g	guh	gull
k	kuh	come
h	huh	hunt
j	gee	gee
q	chee	cheat
x	she	she
z	dzuh	"ds" in suds
c	tsuh	"ts" in huts
s	suh	sun
zh	jir	germ
ch	chir	churn
sh	shir	shirt

<i>Chinese Letter</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>English Example</i>
r	ir	"er" in bigger
w	wuh	won
y	yuh	yup



The initials **-n**, **-ng**, and **-r** can also appear as finals (see the next section for more on finals), so don't be surprised if you see them there.

Ending with finals

Chinese boasts many more consonants than vowels. In fact, the language has only six vowels all together: **a**, **o**, **e**, **i**, **u**, and **ü**. If you pronounce the vowels in sequence, your mouth starts off very wide and your tongue starts off very low. Eventually, when you get to **ü**, your mouth becomes much more closed and your tongue ends pretty high. You can also combine the vowels in various ways to form compound vowels. Table 1-2 lists the vowels and some possible combinations.

<i>Chinese Vowel</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>English Example</i>
a	ah	hot
ai	i	eye
ao	ow	chow
an	ahn	sonogram
ang	ahng	angst
o	aw	straw
ong	oong	too + ng

(continued)

Table 1-2 (continued)

<i>Chinese Vowel</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>English Example</i>
ou	oh	oh
e	uh	bush
ei	ay	way
en	un	ton
eng	ung	tongue
er	ar	are
i	ee	tea
ia	ya	gotcha
iao	yaow	meow
ie	yeh	yet
iu	yo	leo
ian	yan	Cheyenne
iang	yahng	y + angst
in	een	seen
ing	eeng	going
iong	yoong	you + ng
u	oo	too
ua	wa	suave
uo	waw	war
ui	way	way
uai	why	why
uan	wan	want
un	one	one
uang	wahng	wan + ng

<i>Chinese Vowel</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>English Example</i>
ueng	wung	one + ng
ü	yew	ewe
üe	yweh	you + eh
üan	ywan	you + wan
ün	yewn	you + n



Tone marks in pīnyīn always appear above the vowel, but if you see a couple of vowels in a row, the tone mark appears above the first vowel in that sequence. One exception is when you see the vowels **iu** and **ui** together. In that case, the tone marks fall on the second vowel.

Sometimes vowels appear without initial consonant accompaniment, but they still mean something. The word **ǎi**, meaning “short” (of stature), is one example.

Perfect pitch: Presenting . . . the four tones

Mandarin has only four tones. The best way to imagine what each of the four tones sounds like is to visualize these short descriptions:

- ✓ **First tone:** High level. The first tone is supposed to be as high as your individual pitch range can be, without wavering. It appears like this above the letter a: **ā**.
- ✓ **Second tone:** Rising. The second tone sounds like you’re asking a question. It goes from the middle level of your voice to the top. It doesn’t automatically indicate that you’re asking a question, however — it just sounds like you are. You mark it like this: **á**.
- ✓ **Third tone:** Falling and then rising. The third tone starts in the middle level of your voice

range and then falls deeply before slightly rising at the end. It looks like this if you were to see it above the letter a: **ǎ**

- ✓ **Fourth tone:** Falling. The fourth tone sounds like you're giving someone an order (unlike the more plaintive-sounding second tone). It falls from the high pitch level it starts at. Here's how it looks above the letter a: **à**.



Even though tones reduce the number of *homophones* (words that are pronounced alike even if they differ in spelling, meaning, or origin), any given syllable with a specific tone can have more than one meaning. Sometimes the only way to decipher the intended meaning is to see the written word.

One third tone after another

When you have to say a third tone followed by another third tone out loud in consecutive fashion, the first one actually becomes a second tone. If you hear someone say “**Tā hěn hǎo**” (*tah hun how*; she's very well), you may not realize that both “**hěn**” and “**hǎo**” individually are third tone syllables. It sounds like “**hěn**” is a second tone and “**hǎo**” is a full third tone.

Half-third tones

Whenever a third tone is followed by any of the other tones — first, second, fourth, or even a neutral tone — it becomes a *half-third tone*. You only pronounce the first half of the tone — the falling half — before you pronounce the other syllables with the other tones. In fact, a half-third tone barely falls at all. It sounds more like a level low tone (kind of the opposite of the high level first tone). Get it?

Neutral tones

A fifth tone exists that you can't exactly count among the four basic tones, because it's actually toneless, or neutral. You never see a tone mark over a fifth tone, and you only say it when you attach it to grammatical

particles or the second character of repetitive syllables, such as **bàba** (*bah bah*; father) or **māma** (*mah mah*; mother).

Tonal changes in yī and bù

Just when you think you're getting a handle on all the possible tones and tone changes in Chinese, I have one more aspect to report: The words **yī** (*ee*; one) and **bù** (*boo*; not or no) are truly unusual in Chinese, in that their tones may change automatically depending on what comes after them. You pronounce **yī** by itself with the first tone. However, when a first, second, or third tone follows it, it instantly turns into a fourth tone, such as in **yìzhāng zhǐ** (*ee jahng jir*; a piece of paper). If a fourth tone follows **yī**, however, it automatically becomes a second tone, such as in the word **yíyàng** (*ee yahng*; the same). I know this all sounds very complicated, but when you get the hang of tones, pronunciation becomes second nature. These concepts will sink in quicker than you expect.

Adding Idioms and Popular Expressions to Your Repertoire

The Chinese language has thousands of idiomatic expressions known as **chéngyǔ** (*chung yew*). Most of these **chéngyǔ** originated in anecdotes, fables, fairy tales, or ancient literary works, and some of the expressions are thousands of years old. The vast majority consists of four characters, succinctly expressing morals behind very long, ancient stories. Others are more than four characters. Either way, the Chinese pepper these pithy expressions throughout any given conversation.

Here are a few **chéngyǔ** you frequently hear in Chinese:

- ✓ **Àn bù jiù bān.** (*ahn boo jyoe bahn*; To take one step at a time.)
- ✓ **Huǒ shàng jiā yóu.** (*hwaw shahng jyah yo*; To add fuel to the fire; to aggravate the problem.)

- ✓ **Hú shuō bā dào.** (*hoo shwaw bah daow; literally: to talk nonsense in eight directions.*) To talk nonsense.
- ✓ **Mò míng qí miào.** (*maw meeng chee meow; literally: No one can explain the wonder and mystery of it all.*) This saying describes anything that's tough to figure out, including unusual behavior.
- ✓ **Quán xīn quán yì.** (*chwan sheen chwan ee; literally: entire heart, entire mind.*) Wholeheartedly.
- ✓ **Rù xiāng suí sú.** (*roo shyahng sway soo; When in Rome, do as the Romans do.*)
- ✓ **Yì jǔ liǔng dé.** (*ee jyew lyahng duh; To kill two birds with one stone.*)
- ✓ **Yì mó yì yàng.** (*ee maw ee yahng; Exactly alike.*)
- ✓ **Yě shēn zuò zé.** (*ee shun dzwaw dzuh; To set a good example.*)
- ✓ **Yì zhēn jiàn xiǎ.** (*ee jun jyan shyeh; To hit the nail on the head.*)

Another fact you quickly become aware of when you start speaking with **chéngyǔ** is that the expressions are sometimes full of references to animals. Here are some of those:

- ✓ **gǒu zhàng rén shì** (*go jahng run shir; literally: the dog acts fierce when his master is present; to take advantage of one's connections with powerful people*)
- ✓ **guà yáng tóu mài gǒu ròu** (*gwah yahng toe my go roe; literally: to display a lamb's head but sell dog meat; to cheat others with false claims*)
- ✓ **dǎ cǎo jǐng shé** (*dah tsaow jeeng shuh; literally: to beat the grass to frighten the snake; to give a warning*)
- ✓ **duì niú tán qín** (*dway nyo tahn cheen; literally: to play music to a cow; to cast pearls before swine*)

- ✓ **xuán yá lè mǎ** (*shywan yah luh mah*; literally: to rein in the horse before it goes over the edge; to halt)
- ✓ **huà shé tiān zú** (*hwah shuh tyan dzoo*; literally: to paint a snake and add legs; to gild the lily; to do something superfluous)
- ✓ **hǔ tóu shé wěi** (*hoo toe shuh way*; literally: with the head of a tiger but the tail of a snake; to start strong but end poorly)
- ✓ **chē shuǐ mǎ lóng** (*chuh shway mah loong*; literally: cars flowing like water and horses creating a solid line looking like a dragon; heavy traffic)

Mastering Basic Phrases

If you make it a habit to use the following short Chinese phrases whenever you get the chance, you can master them in no time:

- ✓ **Nǐ hǎo!** (*nee how*; Hi; How are you?)
- ✓ **Xièxiè.** (*shyeh shyeh*; Thank you.)
- ✓ **Bú kèqì.** (*boo kuh chee*; You're welcome; Don't mention it.)
- ✓ **Méi shì.** (*may shir*; It's nothing; Don't mention it.)
- ✓ **Hǎo jíle.** (*how jee luh*; Great; Fantastic.)
- ✓ **Duì le.** (*dway luh*; That's right.)
- ✓ **Gōngxǐ gōngxǐ!** (*goong she goong she*; Congratulations!)
- ✓ **Duìbuqǐ.** (*dway boo chee*; Excuse me.)
- ✓ **Suàn le.** (*swan luh*; Forget it; Never mind.)
- ✓ **Méiyǒu guānxi.** (*mayo gwan she*; It doesn't matter.)
- ✓ **Děng yíxià.** (*dung ee shyah*; Wait a minute.)



Communicating with body language

Ever think you know what certain couples are saying or thinking just by observing their gestures and body language? Well, people can make the same observations in China. Although the gestures are different, they contain important clues as to social status between people, their emotions, and so on. Observe Chinese people wherever you can to see if you notice any of the following gestures:

- ✓ **Pointing to one's own nose.** You may find this hard to believe, but Chinese people often point to their own noses, often touching them, when they refer to themselves by saying the word "**wō**" (*waw*; I). The Chinese are probably just as curious as to why Westerners point to their hearts.
- ✓ **Nodding and bowing slightly.** When greeting older people, professors, or others in positions of power or prestige, people lower their heads slightly to acknowledge them and show respect. Unlike the Japanese, who bow deeply, the Chinese basically bow with their heads in a slight fashion.
- ✓ **Shaking hands.** People of vastly different status generally don't give each other a handshake, but it's common among friends and business colleagues.
- ✓ **Bowing with hands clasped.** If you see hand clasping and bowing going on at the same time, you know the participants have something to celebrate. It indicates conveying congratulations or greeting others during special festival occasions. Their hands are held at chest level and their heads are slightly bowed (and they often have big smiles on their faces).