

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Exploring Chinese dialects
- » Taking a look at the pinyin system
- » Getting a handle on basic Chinese sounds
- » Understanding basic Chinese idioms, phrases, and gestures

Chapter 1

Chinese in a Nutshell: The Spoken Word

Time to get your feet wet with the basics of Chinese. This chapter gives you 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 Mandarin Chinese. You also find out about the kind of Chinese characters used to write in Taiwan (traditional) versus the kind of characters written in the People's Republic of China (simplified). (Spoiler alert: To get a jump-start on China's thousand-year-old writing system, check out Chapter 2.) After you have the basics down, I 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! The best thing you can do when learning a foreign language is to not worry about making mistakes the minute you open your mouth. Practice speaking Chinese first to your dog or cat, and then work your way up to a couple of goldfish or a niece or nephew under the age of 10. When you finally get the nerve to rattle off a few phrases to your local Chinatown grocer, you'll know you've made it. And when you visit China for the first time, you discover how incredibly appreciative the Chinese are of anyone who even remotely attempts to speak their language. All the hours you spent yakking away with the family pet start to pay off, and you'll be rewarded greatly. Still have doubts? You'll be amazed at how much you can say after snooping through *Chinese For Dummies*, 3rd Edition.



REMEMBER

Encountering the Chinese culture is just as important as exploring the Chinese language. In fact, you can't quite master the language without absorbing a little of the culture by osmosis. Just making the effort to speak Chinese is an act of positive diplomacy. Don't worry about how you sound when you open your mouth — you're contributing to international friendship no matter what comes out.

Grasping Chinese Dialects

Give yourself a big pat on the back right now. Yup, right now — before you even begin to utter one iota of Chinese. If you don't do it now, you may be too shocked later on when it sinks in that you've taken on a language that has hundreds (yes, hundreds) of dialects — each one mutually incomprehensible to speakers of the other ones. Practically every major town, and certainly every province, in China has its own regional dialect that folks grow up learning. Of the seven major dialects (outlined in Table 1-1), Shanghainese, Taiwanese, and Cantonese are the ones you may have heard of before.

And then you have Mandarin, dialect of the masses. Mandarin Chinese is spoken by more people on earth than any other language today. Pretty much a quarter of humanity uses it, given China's immense population. So just why was this particular dialect chosen to become the official dialect taught in all schools throughout China, regardless of whatever additional dialects people speak at home or in their communities?



CULTURAL WISDOM

With only four tones, **Guānhuà** 官话 (官話) (Gwan-hwah) (*Mandarin* [Literally: *the language of the officials*, who were also known as Mandarins]) has served as the hybrid language of China since the 15th century because this dialect was based on the educated speech of the region around Beijing. Instead of referring to it as **Guānhuà**, mainlanders in China now call it **Pǔtōnghuà** 普通话 (普通話) (Poo-toong-hwah) (Literally: *the common language*). People in Taiwan, in Hong Kong, and in overseas Chinese communities call it **Guóyǔ** 國語 (國語) (Gwaw-yew) (Literally: *the national language*). You may also hear it referred to as **Zhōngwén** 中文 (Joong-wun) (*the language of the Chinese people*) and **Hànyǔ** 漢語 (漢語) (Hahn-yew) (*the language of the Han people*), because the Chinese have often referred to themselves as descendants of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), one of the golden eras of Chinese history. Because Chinese is the language of ethnic Chinese and China's minority groups, the more all-encompassing term **Zhōngwén** is preferred.



TIP

The term **Pǔtōnghuà** is used to refer to Mandarin in the People's Republic of China, and the term **Guóyǔ** is the term used for Mandarin in Taiwan. You can simply say **Hànyǔ** anywhere.

TABLE 1-1 Major Chinese Dialects

Dialect	Pronunciation	Region Where Spoken
Pǔtōnghuà/Guóyǔ (Mandarin) 普通话 (普通話)/ 國語(國語)	Poo-toong-hwah/ Gwaw-yew	North of the Yangzi River, but is taught in schools everywhere; official language of the People's Republic of China and is spoken all over Taiwan
Wú 吳 (吳)	Woo	Shanghai, southeastern Anhui, and much of Zhejiang
Xiāng 湘	Shyahng	Hunan
Gàn 贛 (贛)	Gahn	Jiangxi, southern Anhui, and southeastern Hubei
Kèjiā (Hakka) 客家	Kuh-jyah	Scattered parts of eastern and southwestern Guangxi and in northern Guangdong (Canton)
Yuè (Cantonese) 粵 (粵)	Yweh	Southeastern Guangxi, Guangdong (Canton), and Hong Kong
Mǐn (Taiwanese) 閩 (閩)	Meen	Fujian, southern Zhejiang, northeastern Guangdong, Hainan, and Taiwan

Pīnyīn Spelling: Beijing, Not Peking

To spell the way it sounds . . . that's the literal meaning of **pīnyīn** 拼音. For decades, Chinese had been *transliterated* (written/spelled with the characters of other languages' alphabets) in any number of ways. Finally, in 1979, the People's Republic of China (PRC) 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**.

You should 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?** 几块钱? (幾塊錢)? (Jee kwye chyan?) means *How much money?*
- » **Q:** Sounds like the **ch** in *cheek*. In Chinese, you never see it followed by a **u** like it is in English, but an **i** always follows it, possibly before another vowel or a consonant. **Qīngdǎo** 青島 (青島) (Cheeng-daow) beer used to be spelled **Ch'ing tao** or **Tsingtao**.
- » **X:** Sounds like the **sh** in *she*. It's the third letter that's often followed by an **i**. One famous Chinese leader, **Dèng Xiǎopíng** 鄧小平 (鄧小平) (Dung Shyaow-peeng), boasted this letter in his name.

- » **Zh:** Unlike **j**, which often precedes a vowel to make it sound like you're opening your mouth, **zh** is followed by vowels that make it sound like your mouth is a bit more closed like you're about to play the flute — it sounds like the *ger* in *German*. Take **Zhōu Ēnlái** 周恩来 (周恩来) (Joe Un-lye), the great statesman of 20th-century China, for example. When you say his name, it should sound like Joe Un-lye.
- » **Z:** Sounds like a **dz**. You see it in the name of the PRC's first leader, **Máo Zédōng** 毛泽东 (毛澤東) (Maow Dzuh-doong), which used to be spelled **Mao Tse-tung**.
- » **C:** Pronounced like **ts** in such words as **cài** 菜 (tsye) (*food*) or **cèsuǒ** 厕所 (廁所) (tsuh-swaw) (*bathroom*).

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 can? But the longer you procrastinate about becoming familiar with the basic elements of Chinese words, the greater your fear of this unique language may become. After you begin to practice the sounds (and eventually the tones) out loud, you may wonder if you'll ever come close to sounding like Bruce Lee in a **gōngfū** 功夫 (goong-foo) (*kung-fu*) movie or even like your local Chinatown grocer. Hearing Chinese spoken at a normal speed is definitely intimidating at the beginning, so you should enjoy taking plenty of baby steps and reveling in the praise from waiters who appreciate all your effort the next time you frequent a Chinese restaurant.



GRAMMAR
CHAT

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 rule 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** 妈 (媽) 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**, 马 (馬) you say the word *horse*. So be careful not to call your mother a horse when you practice the initials, finals, and tones. The following sections break up the three parts and give each their due.



REMEMBER

Before you can participate in sports or play games, you must become familiar with all the rules. The same goes for practicing a new language. Do your best to understand the basic rules of pronunciation, and keep practicing over and over to begin feeling comfortable speaking Chinese.

Starting off with initials

In Chinese, initials always consist of consonants. Table 1-2 lists the initials you encounter in the Chinese language. (*Note:* You can also hear these sounds by going online to www.dummies.com/go/chinese.)

TABLE 1-2

Chinese Initials

Chinese Letter	Sound	English Example
b	b	<i>but</i>
p	p	<i>paw</i>
m	m	<i>more</i>
f	f	<i>four</i>
d	d	<i>done</i>
t	t	<i>ton</i>
n	n	<i>null</i>
l	l	<i>lull</i>
g	g	<i>gull</i>
k	k	<i>come</i>
h	h	<i>hunt</i>
j	g	<i>gee</i>
q	ch	<i>cheat</i>
x	sh	<i>she</i>
z	dz	ds in <i>suds</i>
c	ts	ts in <i>huts</i>
s	s	<i>sun</i>
zh	jir	<i>germ</i>
ch	chir	<i>churn</i>
sh	sh	<i>shirt</i>
r	ir	er in <i>bigger</i>
w	w	<i>won</i>
y	y	<i>yup</i>



REMEMBER

The initials **-n** and **-r** in Table 1-2 can also appear as part of finals, so don't be surprised if you see them in Table 1-3, where I list finals.

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 1-3 lists the vowels and some possible combinations, which comprise all the finals in Chinese.

TABLE 1-3

Chinese Finals

Chinese Vowel	Sound	English Example
a	ah	<i>hot</i>
ai	i	<i>eye</i>
ao	ow	<i>chow</i>
an	ahn	<i>on</i>
ang	ahng	<i>thong</i>
o	aw	<i>straw</i>
ong	oong	<i>too + ng</i>
ou	oh	<i>oh</i>
e	uh	<i>bush</i>
ei	ay	<i>way</i>
en	un	<i>fun</i>
eng	ung	<i>tongue</i>
er	ar	<i>are</i>
i	ee	<i>tea</i>
ia	ya	<i>yack</i>
iao	yaow	<i>meow</i>
ie	yeh	<i>yet</i>
iu	yo	<i>Leo</i>

Chinese Vowel	Sound	English Example
ian	yan	<i>Cheyenne</i>
iang	yahng	<i>yang (as in yin–yang)</i>
in	een	<i>seen</i>
ing	eeng	<i>going</i>
iong	yoong	<i>you + ng</i>
u	oo	<i>too</i>
ua	wa	<i>suave</i>
uo	waw	<i>war</i>
ui	way	<i>way</i>
uai	why	<i>why</i>
uan	wan	<i>want</i>
un	one	<i>one</i>
uang	wahng	<i>wan + ng</i>
ueng	wung	<i>one + ng</i>
ü	yew	<i>ewe</i>
üe	yweh	<i>you + eh</i>
üan	ywan	<i>you + wan</i>
ün	yewn	<i>you + n</i>

Perfect pitch: Presenting . . . the four tones!

Mee meeeee (cough cough)! Pardon me. I'm getting carried away with warming up before I get into the four tones. Just think of the tones this way: They can be your best friends when it comes to being understood in Chinese, and they're the hip part of this ancient language.

If you combine all the possible initial sounds of Chinese with all the possible permutations of the final sounds, you come up with only about 400 sound combinations — not nearly enough to express all the ideas in your head. If you add the four basic tones of Mandarin to the mix, the number of possible permutations increases fourfold. Tones are also a great way to reduce the number of homophones in Chinese. Even so, any given syllable with a specific tone can often

have more than one meaning. Sometimes, the only way to decipher the intended meaning is to see the written word.

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**. (Imagine saying “Ta Da-a-a-ah!” and you’ve got the first tone.)
- » **Second tone:** Rising. The second tone sounds like you’re asking a question. (Think: “Huh?”) 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. It appears like this above the letter *a*: **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 above the letter *a*: **ǎ**. (Imagine someone being incredulous at something, saying “Say *whaaat?*”)
- » **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**. (This sounds more like the rather blasé, “Oh,” once you’ve understood something — like the tone.)

I know this tone business (especially the nuances in the following sections) all sounds very complicated, but when you get the hang of tones, pronunciation becomes second nature. Just keep listening to the online audio files that accompany this book. These concepts will sink in quicker than you expect.

One third tone after another

Here’s something interesting about tones: When you have to say one 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**. 她很好. (Tah hun how.) (*She’s very well.*), you may not realize that both **hěn** 很 and **hǎo** 好 individually are third-tone syllables. It sounds like **hén** 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 pronounce only 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 say it only when you attach it to grammatical particles or the second character of repetitive syllables, such as **bàba** 爸爸 (bah-bah) (*father*) or **māma** 妈妈 (媽媽) (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** 一 (ee) (*one*) and **bù** 不 (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, **yī** instantly turns into a fourth tone, such as in **yì zhāng zhǐ** 一张纸 (一張紙) (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** 一样 (一樣) (ee-yahng) (*the same*).

Adding Idioms and Popular Expressions to Your Repertoire

The Chinese language has thousands of idiomatic expressions known as **chéngyǔ** 成语 (成語) (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 consist 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** 按部就班 (ahn boo jyoe bahn) (*to take one step at a time*)
- » **hú shuō bā dào** 胡说八道 (胡說八道) (hoo shwaw bah daow) (*to talk nonsense* [Literally: *to talk nonsense in eight directions*])
- » **huǒ shàng jiā yóu** 火上加油 (hwaw shahng jyah yo) (*to add fuel to the fire/to aggravate the problem*)

- » **mò míng qí miào.** 莫名其妙. (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** 全心全意 (chwan sheen chwan ee) (*wholeheartedly* [Literally: *entire heart, entire mind*])
- » **rù xiāng suí sú.** 入乡随俗. (入鄉隨俗.) (Roo shyahng sway soo.) (*When in Rome, do as the Romans do.*)
- » **yì jǔ liǎng dé** 一舉兩得 (一舉兩得) (ee jyew lyahng duh) (*to kill two birds with one stone*)
- » **yì mó yí yàng** 一模一样 (一模一樣) (ee maw ee yahng) (*exactly alike*)
- » **yǐ shēn zuò zé** 以身作则 (以身作則) (ee shun dzwaw dzuh) (*to set a good example*)
- » **yì zhēn jiàn xiě** 一針見血 (一針見血) (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:

- » **chē shuǐ mǎ lóng** 车水马龙 (車水馬龍) (chuh shway mah loong) (*heavy traffic* [Literally: *cars flowing like water and horses, creating a solid line looking like a dragon*])
- » **dǎ cǎo jīng shé** 打草惊蛇 (打草驚蛇) (dah tsaow jeeng shuh) (*to give a warning* [Literally: *to beat the grass to frighten the snake*])
- » **duì niú tán qín** 对牛弹琴 (對牛彈琴) (dway nyo tahn cheen) (*to cast pearls before swine* [Literally: *to play music to a cow*])
- » **gǒu zhàng rén shì.** 狗仗人勢. (狗仗人勢.) (go jahng run shir.) (*to take advantage of one's connections with powerful people* [Literally: *The dog acts fierce when his master is present.*])
- » **guà yáng tóu mài gǒu ròu** 挂羊头卖狗肉 (掛羊頭賣狗肉) (gwah yahng toe my go roe) (*to cheat others with false claims* [Literally: *to display a lamb's head but sell dog meat*])
- » **huà shé tiān zú** 画蛇添足 (畫蛇添足) (hwah shuh tyan dzoo) (*to gild the lily/to do something superfluous* [Literally: *to paint a snake and add legs*])
- » **hǔ tóu shé wěi** 虎头蛇尾 (虎頭蛇尾) (hoo toe shuh way) (*to start strong but end poorly* [Literally: *with the head of a tiger but the tail of a snake*])
- » **xuán yá lè mǎ** 悬崖勒马 (懸崖勒馬) (shywan yah luh mah) (*to halt* [Literally: *to rein in the horse before it goes over the edge*])

FUN & GAMES

Listen to the online audio file to see whether you can imitate the following words, which are distinguished only by their tones. (Be on the lookout: Any given sound with the same accompanying tone may have several other meanings, distinguishable only by context or by seeing the appropriate written character.) Good luck!

- » **mā** 妈 (媽) (*mother*)
- » **má** 麻 (*hemp*)
- » **mǎ** 马 (馬) (*horse*)
- » **mà** 骂 (罵) (*to scold*)
- » **fēi** 飞 (飛) (*to fly*)
- » **féi** 肥 (*fat*)
- » **fěi** 匪 (*bandit*)
- » **fèi** 肺 (*lungs*)

Connect the tone on the left with the word in English on the right that is said with virtually the same tone.

ā	Oh.
á	Ta-dah!
ǎ	Huh?
à	Say what?

