

Say *WHAT?*

Believe it or not, Chinese isn't really the tongue-twisting, mysterious, chicken-scratch language most Americans think it is. It's actually a rich, musical language full of delicate intricacies that English – particularly American English – lacks. It's a language that predates English by thousands of years, both in its spoken and written forms.

China hasn't always looked the way it does now. Bounded by an ocean on the east, mountains to the south, and desert to the north and west, it was able to stay relatively isolated while Magellan and Columbus were sailing around discovering new lands. Within its own boundaries, it has gone through centuries of political and cultural upheaval through dozens of dynastic changes. Since Qin Shi Huang Di unified the country in 221 BC, different sections of China have broken off and rejoined, resulting in a number of localized groups and customs.

This structure is one reason why Chinese has so many dialects. The most familiar to Americans are Mandarin and Cantonese. Mandarin is the “standard” language of China and is spoken in its most pure forms in the northeast of China, near Beijing. Cantonese is taken from another name for Guangzhou, “Canton.” It is spoken mainly in the south of China, in Guangdong and Hong Kong. Besides these two dialects, unintelligible to each other, there are hundreds of other dialects found in other parts of China. In some areas, the dialect varies from village to village! Here in the US, a New Yorker may notice a Texan's drawl, and a fast-talking southern Californian might wonder at a Minnesotan's “Yeah, you betcha.” These are just differences in pronunciation. We even understand English speakers from Ireland or Australia! In China, a Mandarin and Cantonese speaker share only a few common words, and speakers of different dialects may be completely unable to communicate.

Fortunately, the Chinese government has made a push for Mandarin to become the standard language of the country. This means all Chinese children are taught Mandarin in schools, and even foreigners are learning standard Mandarin. Though families may speak a local dialect at home, most Chinese can now speak at least some basic Mandarin. Many Chinese children grow up fluent in both Mandarin and their local dialect!

Ever wonder how Chinese children learn their native language? Nowadays, Chinese speakers use a system of phonetics called “pinyin.” Literally, this means “spell sound,” and it's a way of writing Chinese sounds in our Western alphabet. Using pinyin, “I love you” becomes “Wo ai ni.” It's quite similar to the way Americans pronounce letters, with a few exceptions. If you see a Chinese name that begins with a “q,” that's a “ch” sound. Think about it – you've seen pinyin before! “Feng shui,” “yin & yang,” and “tai ji” are all examples of Chinese words, spelled in pinyin, used in our language. Chinese children learn this system too, sometimes even before they learn to write a single character.

Each Chinese pinyin word may have dozens of characters that use the same sound. It's not all guesswork, though – individual sounds are further broken up into “tones.” There are four separate tones, or ways of pronouncing syllables, in Chinese. The first tone is a high, monotone syllable. The second tone rises, like when you are looking for someone and calling his or her name. The third tone drops low and comes back up, and the fourth tone drops, like when you say a bad word! They're hard to notice at first, but if you listen to enough Chinese, you'll find that's where the language gets its sing-song quality. They take some practice, but give it a try!

If a syllable has four tones, each tone may still have a dozen or more characters attached to it. That's where English fails us! For native Chinese speakers, context of a sentence may be all that's needed to know which character is the right one. But for Chinese learners, it takes some work! Consider two words: "mai" and "ma." "Mai," pronounced, "my," means "buy" with one tone and "sell" with another. (Who made that up?) "Ma" means "mom" and "horse" when pronounced differently. A joke among students of Chinese is that if you went to the market to "mai ma," buy a horse, you might end up "mai ma," selling your mother! Watch out!

With all the confusion of tones and different dialects, it's nice to know that one thing – the written language – is essentially the same throughout China. Centuries before the first printing press appeared in the western world, the Chinese were using a system of pictographs. Basic literal words, like sun, moon, and mountain, started out looking like the things they represented, and they haven't changed much!

As the language developed, the characters became more stylized, like the ones we know today. Some don't look anything like what they mean, like the word for house. But consider the word for "dormitory." It's composed of three pieces: 100 people under one roof! How about the word for good fortune or blessings? The left side of the character means something divine or heavenly. On the right side, there are three pieces. The top line means one. The second piece actually means mouth, but it is also used to represent a person or family, like when we say "three mouths to feed." The bottom part is a field. Get the riddle? One family who has their own field to work and harvest is blessed with good fortune!

The characters themselves are composed of several different parts. First, there's the "radical." This is a special part of the word that gives the reader a basic guess as to the meaning of the word. For example, words that have to do with water, like ocean or pond, will have three little lines to the left of the word. Other parts of the character will either give you more guesses as to the meaning, like the word for dormitory or good fortune, or will give you a hint to the pronunciation. Words that are pronounced the same might share another little piece of the character.

In the 1950's, somebody had the great idea that Chinese characters were a little too complicated, so a system of "simplified" characters appeared. Older, more complicated traditional characters were stripped to their roots, and the simplified system became standard. Traditional characters are still seen in Taiwan and Cantonese-speaking areas, but many Chinese newspapers are now written in simplified characters. To be able to read one of these newspapers, you need to know about 3,000 – 4,000 characters. That's a far cry from the 50,000 or so that actually exist!

Ten points if you know how the Chinese look something up in the dictionary or type on a keyboard! To look up an unknown word, you first find the radical, that basic piece of the word. There are only about 200 of them, and they're organized by the number of lines it takes to make up the radical. Then you count the number of lines, or strokes, in the rest of the word. All the characters that contain the same radical are listed together by their number of strokes, and you scan for the word you want. When you see it, the word will be listed in pinyin next to the character! Then you use your second-grade alphabetizing skills to look it up, just like you would an English word. To type, the Chinese use a special program that takes words typed in pinyin and displays a box of characters that have that sound. The user just selects which character he wants. It's actually faster than you'd think!

Now that you're an "expert," go for it! Take a Chinese class and dazzle them with your knowledge of Chinese!