

# Chinese Language and Pronunciation

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The Chinese language, like most languages, is both spoken and written. The spoken language includes seven main dialects, including Mandarin and Cantonese, as well as numerous sub-dialects. The differences can sometimes make oral communication challenging. All Chinese dialects, however, have traditionally shared the same writing systems, which developed from symbols—or characters—that represented objects and concepts. Over time, these characters were simplified in form and often combined to stand for sounds as well as words and concepts. As Westerners began to interact with China, they needed a system for representing spoken Chinese in the Western alphabet. The Wade-Giles system, developed by two British scholars, was used for most of the 20th century. In the 1950s, the Chinese government sponsored the development of a new representation system called pinyin, which means “spelled out sounds.” In pinyin, words are spelled as they are pronounced in the official language of the People’s Republic of China, the dialect of Mandarin spoken in Beijing.

The majority of consonants in the pinyin system are pronounced as they are in standard English.

Below are a few exceptions:

c is pronounced ts (as in “hats”)

q is pronounced ch (as in “chirp”)

x is pronounced sh (as in “sharp”)

z is pronounced ds (as in “bands”)

zh is pronounced j (as in “Joe”)

Pronunciation of some pinyin vowel sounds:

a      ah

e      uh

i      ee, or ih (when preceded by c, s, sh, z)

o      awe

u      oo

ai      eye

ei      ay

ao      ow

ou      o

ui      way

uai      why

ia      yah

ian      yen

ie      yeh