



# THE CHINESE OUTPOST



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## Learn Chinese: Introduction to Mandarin

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## Mandarin Chinese Initials and Finals

In speech, Chinese words are created using just 21 beginning sounds called initials, and 37 ending sounds called finals. Initials and finals, of course, combine to create the basic sounds of Chinese.

For example, consider Beijing:

- **bei**: *b* is an initial, and *ei* is a final.
- **jing**: *j* is an initial, and *ing* is a final.

Bear in mind, however, that not all combinations of initials and finals are possible. As well, some finals may stand alone without an initial, such as an and ai. In many of these cases, pinyin rules will add "placeholder" initial consonants, so that "un" becomes "yun," and "u" becomes "wu." Strictly speaking, however, "y" and "w" are not initials.



**NOTE**

Occasionally when someone hears a Chinese speaker say the city name "Beijing," they ask why it doesn't sound like the news anchors say it. That's because the media in the English-speaking world typically gets it wrong (along with most other Asian place and proper names).

The sound "jing" does not begin like the French sound in *Je*, or in the name *Zsa Zsa*.

The 'ji-' in "jing" is closer to "Gee," as in, "Gee, these are major networks with lots of money. You'd think they could be bothered to get it right."

Here are some more reference pages you might like to save: the [complete tables](#) of Mandarin initials and finals.

If you don't have time for the complete tables of Mandarin initials and finals right now, the following table gives you some examples using just six of each.

	a	ei	ong	ia	iong	uan
b	ba	bei				
d	da	dei	dong			
zh	zha		zhong			zhuan
r			rong			ruan
j				jia	jiong	
g	ga	gei	gong			guan

## The Tones of Mandarin Chinese

"Chinese is a tonal language."

This sentence has confounded millions of you, no doubt. To clarify, we don't mean that pronouncing the same word, or character, in different tones affects its meaning.

Instead, we mean that the tone for each Chinese character is, for lack of a better word, assigned.

**NOTE**

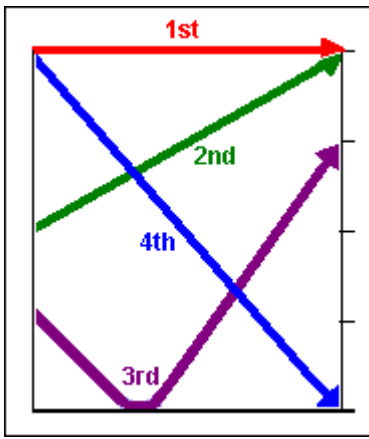
Everyone seems to know this one: Yes, just by saying "ma" in different tones, you can ask, "Did mother scold the horse?"

媽罵馬嗎?  
(mā mà mǎ ma?)

**NOTE**

For a selection of sound samples, visit the [Chinese Pronunciation Guide](#), which is offered by Harvard University's Chinese Language Program.





Mandarin has four tones--five if you count the "neutral" tone--and as you'll see below, pronouncing the tone just right is very important.

Written characters don't reveal their initials and finals, nor do they indicate which tones they are to be pronounced in. Tones also have nothing to do with parts of speech or any other variable. Each character's "assigned" tone is simply learned when you study or "acquire" Chinese.

The four tones are usually depicted graphically with the chart to the left, to show "where" each one occurs in tonal space.

The following table illustrates tone markings above the sound ma and describes how each tone is vocalized:

Tone	Mark	Description
1st	mā	High and level.
2nd	má	Starts medium in tone, then rises to the top.
3rd	mǎ	Starts low, dips to the bottom, then rises toward the top.
4th	mà	Starts at the top, then falls sharp and strong to the bottom.
neutral	ma	Flat, with no emphasis.

The four tone markings used in Pinyin were borrowed from the Yale system.

The Wade-Giles system places a 1, 2, 3, or 4 after each syllable to indicate its tone.

If you use the wrong tones, your listeners may not be able to understand you. Those of us who studied Chinese in Chinese-speaking regions remember quite well the frustration of not being understood early on simply because our tones were a little off.

These misunderstandings are possible because some terms with unrelated meanings may have the same initial and final combinations, but different tones.

For instance, Gong Li, with third and fourth tones, is the name of the star of "Raise the Red Lantern" and other contemporary Chinese films. gong li, however, with first and third tones, means kilometer.

The actress:  
鞏利 (gǒng lì)  
A kilometer:  
公里 (gōng lǐ)

If you were to mix up the tones of these two items, native speakers would likely figure out what you mean, but no doubt be amused to hear you say, "My favorite Chinese actress is kilometer."

Well, at least they were amused when I said that.

It gets even more challenging. Many terms with completely unrelated meanings have the same initial sounds, final sounds and assigned tones. In other words, two words that are pronounced the same may have meanings as different as night and day. Or at least, in the case of míng, as different as dark (冥) and bright (明).



If this seems too overwhelming, just remember the difficulties speakers of other languages have early on with the English homonyms to, too, and two.

Or there, their, and they're.

Or First Lady, Senator, and President, as some see it.

Luckily, these sorts of stumbling blocks are exceptions, not rules. Your real challenge will come when it's time to start creating sentences.

At first, you can expect remembering which tone goes with which word as you speak to feel like a verbal roller coaster. People studying Mandarin Chinese as a second language have been seen on occasion to "draw" the proper tones in front of them with their index fingers as they speak, or even represent them with vigorous nods of the chin. Not to worry. These tics pass quickly enough, and over time getting the tones right will become second nature.

#### **NOTE**

When you get to Advanced Mandarin Conversation, or overhear native Chinese speakers together, you'll discover that the more fluent and informal people become, the less distinct their tones become. At that stage, context becomes very important. If two people are talking about actresses, one might say "gong li" with almost no decipherable tones - quite different from using the wrong tones - but the other will know he means the actress.

Don't try to imitate this conversational ability too soon. It will happen naturally when the time comes. At first, just master those tones! You never know when you'll be called on to give a formal speech in front of the People's Congress!

## **Tone Shifts in Mandarin Chinese**

In some cases, characters aren't pronounced with their "native" tones (the tones assigned to them). Here are three cases where tones experience shifts.

### ***Third Tone Shift #1***

In spoken Mandarin, third tone characters are actually seldom pronounced in the third tone. Unless they occur alone, or come at the very end of a sentence, they're subject to a tone shift rule.

The first "shift" occurs when two or more third tone characters occur consecutively. What happens is this:

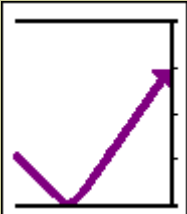
When two or more third tone characters occur in a row, the last of these remains a third tone, while the one(s) before it are pronounced in, or shift to, the second tone. In this illustration, the characters that experience tone shifts are colored red to help you pick them out. Notice that the final third tone in each series remains a third tone.

Native Tones	Pronounced Tones
<p>我有一張桌子。</p> <p>Wǒ yǒu yì zhāng zhuō zi.</p> <p>I have one table.</p>	<p>我有一張桌子。</p> <p>Wó yǒu yì zhāng zhuō zi.</p> <p>I have one table.</p>
<p>你有五本書。</p> <p>nǐ yǒu wǔ běn shū.</p> <p>You have five books.</p>	<p>你有五本書。</p> <p>ní yóu wú běn shū.</p> <p>You have five books.</p>

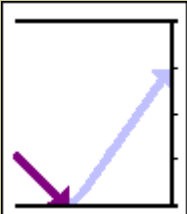
As it happens, the final third tones in both these examples would be pronounced as "partial" third tones. Let's discuss that next.

### Third Tone Shift #2

This next shift rule applies when any of the other tones (first, second, fourth, or neutral) comes after a third tone. In this case the third tone doesn't actually shift to another tone, but rather mutates to a "partial third" tone, which means that it begins low and dips to the bottom, but then doesn't rise back to the top. Compare it here to the full third tone:



A "full" third tone starts low, dips to the bottom, then rises toward the top.



A "partial" third tone starts low, dips to the bottom, but does not rise toward the top.

### Tone Change of 不(bù)

The character 不(bù), which means no or not, is normally a fourth tone character, but when it comes before another fourth tone character, it shifts to the second tone.

Therefore, instead of saying bù shì and bù yào, you would say bú shì and bú yào. You'll see a reminder of this in the [Grammar](#) section.

These are principles that will slow down your speech at first, as you back up to apply the shifts to words you just spoke incorrectly, but just give them time. They too will eventually become second nature.

#### NOTE

In the rest of this site, we'll continue to present native tones. Just remember to apply the tone shifts in speech when you come to them.

# Angle 1: Basic Strokes of Chinese Characters

A good first step in making Chinese characters less intimidating is identifying their most basic parts. A number of unique, identifiable strokes (individual marks of the brush or pen) are used to write Chinese. The chart below shows you the eleven most common strokes, giving the name and direction in which each should be drawn. In the examples, they are colored red (and very big!) to help you pick them out.

Stroke	Direction	Name	In Context
丶	↘	diǎn	你 字 寫
一	→	héng	言 天 甚
丨	↓	shù	到 田 甚
丿	↙	piě	你 禾 字
㇇	↘	nà	天 禾 變
㇇	↗	tí	漢 我 挑
㇇	↘	hénggōu	字 愛 電
丨	↙	shùgōu	小 到 你
㇇	↘	xiégōu	我 戴 戈
㇇	↘	héngzhé	回 國 要
㇇	↘	shùzhé	忙 甚 緣

## NOTE

Did you know that the name of China's capital, Beijing, or 北京(běi jīng), means "North Capital?" It's true. And the Chinese city Nanjing, or 南京(nán jīng), means "South Capital."

東京(dōng jīng), or "East Capital," is actually in Japan. Most people know it by its Japanese pronunciation: "Tokyo."

And as for "West Capital," I don't believe there is a city called Xijing, or 西京(xī jīng). But I think we need one. Therefore, I would like to nominate Seattle for a name change.

Seattle is commonly translated as 西雅圖(xī yǎ tú), just to get something that sounds like the name "Seattle," though 西雅圖(xī yǎ tú) literally means "West Refined Picture," or maybe "West Elegant Graph."

I don't think this literal meaning is what the translators had in mind, but I rather like it: "West Refined Picture." Catchy!

## Angle 2: Stroke Order for Chinese Characters

When you were learning to write your name, you were probably taught to write the letters in a certain order and direction. That's because it is more efficient to write western languages from left to right. For similar reasons, the strokes for each Chinese character are to be drawn in a certain defined order.

At first you may need help from a teacher, book, or other learning aid to determine the stroke order for characters you encounter. The more characters you become familiar with, however, the easier it becomes to see which principle applies to a given character.

### NOTE

The best resource I have found on the web for illustrating stroke order and direction for individual characters is located [here](#). You can even [download](#) this animation package presented by the University of Southern California for viewing on your own computer.

You'll find another page showing stroke order animations for various characters on Dr. Tianwei Xie's UC Davis site [here](#).

In short, learning these following seven principles of stroke order will ultimately save you from having to memorize rules character by character.

#### Top to Bottom

丨 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂

#### Left to Right

丿 彳 彳 彳 彳 彳 彳 彳 彳 彳 彳 彳

#### Top Left to Bottom Right

丶 丶 丶 丶 丶 丶 丶 丶 丶 丶 丶 丶

#### Outside to Inside

丨 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂 冂

#### Horizontal before Vertical

一 十

#### Left Slants before Right Slants

丿 又

#### Center before Two Sides

丨 丩 小



## Angle 3: Number of Strokes in Chinese Characters

The number of strokes used to make each character is important, especially when it comes to looking them up in a dictionary, as you'll read about in Angle 6. Characters themselves vary in number of strokes from one to thirty. The following illustration shows a random example for each number of strokes. See if you can count them all.

#	pinyin	char	meaning
1	yī	一	one
2	rén	人	person
3	xiǎo	小	small
4	shǒu	手	hand (n)
5	yù	玉	jade
6	yī	衣	clothing
7	wǒ	我	I
8	xìng	幸	good fortune
9	měi	美	beautiful
10	xiào	笑	smile; laugh
11	bǐ	筆	pen (n)
12	bào	報	announce; periodical
13	ǎi	矮	short
14	wèn	問	ask
15	mài	賣	sell
16	biǎo	錶	watch (wrist)
17	xiè	謝	thank
18	tí	題	topic; inscribe
19	nán	難	difficult
20	zhōng	鐘	clock (n)
21	tiě	鐵	iron (the metal)
22	huān	歡	joyfully
23	tǐ	體	body
24	ràng	讓	let; allow
25	mán	蠻	rough (adj); quite
26	wān	灣	bay, gulf
27	zuàn	鑽	drill (v)
28	yīng	鸚	parrot (n)
29	guàn	鶴	stork (n)
30	yù	籲	beseech (v)



**NOTE**

Have you ever wondered how Chinese characters first came into being as a writing form, or who wrote the first Chinese character?

Sorry, probably no one has the definitive answers to those questions, but [here's a page](#) that comes pretty close.

## Angle 4: Construction Principles of Chinese Characters


**NOTE**

It starts to get pretty deep here, actually. You might want to take a tea break and a quick stroll around the neighborhood before continuing.

In Angle 2, we learned the principles governing the stroke order for Chinese characters. Another way of defining characters involves "principles of construction." In this scheme, there are six types of characters, with each type finding its meaning based on one of the following principles.

### Principle 1 - The Picture Character

Picture characters are simply meant to look like the things they represent. As we mentioned before, though, many pictograms evolved over time so that the resemblance is less than obvious.

木	(mù) means <i>tree</i> (Do you see the vertical tree trunk with branches and leaves hanging off it?)
門	(mén) means <i>door</i> (Picture the swinging doors in an old western saloon.)
馬	(mǎ) means <i>horse</i> (Look for the four legs and a tail underneath the big body. I don't know where its head is.)
手	(shǒu) means <i>hand</i> (The hand is palm up. The horizontal lines resemble fingers, with the thumb on top. That's the pinky curling up at the bottom.)
目	(mù) means <i>eye</i> (That's the pupil in the middle. When it's part of some characters, it turns sideways, like this):
	

**NOTE**

Chinese characters are often combined to create larger, more complex characters. This means that learning 2,000 characters in order to be "literate" doesn't mean learning 2,000 unrelated forms. Instead, you will learn a smaller number of basic, independent forms, then move on to more complicated characters that contain more than one basic character.

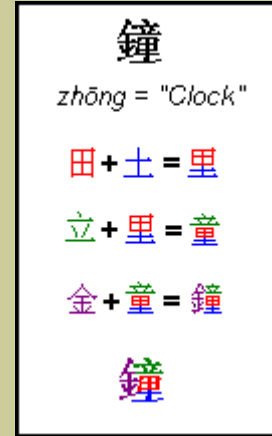
The example to the right uses colors to highlight the various "smaller" characters which combine to create the character for "clock."

Note that each of these smaller parts already means something else when standing alone.

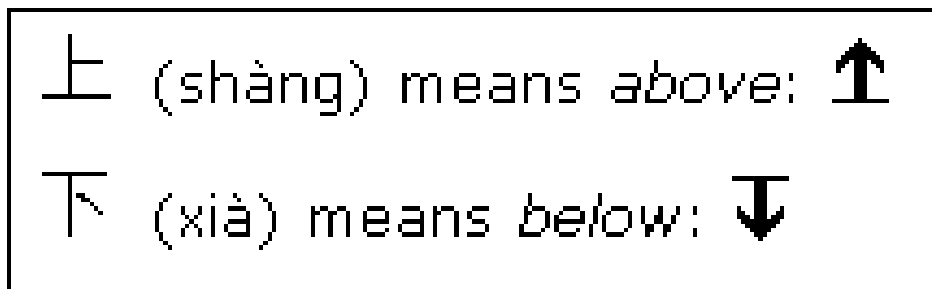
**One of my favorites:**

This means "tree": 木 (mù). Two trees together means "forest": 林(lín).

A third tree on top means "full of trees": 森(sēn)

**Principle 2 - The Symbol Character**

Symbol characters symbolize (what else!?) an idea or concept. Below, in the character meaning *above*, the vertical line and small stroke are above the horizontal line. In the character meaning *below*, they are underneath.

**Principle 3 - The Borrowed Sound Character**

Also called Sound-Loan characters, these borrow the same written form and sound of another character, but have unrelated meanings.

里 (lǐ) originally just meant *village*, but along the line, someone got the bright idea to use it for a certain unit of distance as well. In this case a 里 is about 1/3 of an English mile, or about 500 meters. Maybe that's about how far apart villages tended to be in the old days?

## Angle 5: Construction Principles of Chinese Characters, continued

### Principle 4 - The Sound-plus-Meaning Compound Character

Two characters join to create a new one. One character influences the sound of the word; the other influences its meaning. Again, over time, some of these sound influences have blurred a bit, but they're usually pretty close. Most characters in use today are these sound-plus-meaning compounds, or "pictophonics."

金 means **Gold** and is pronounced *jīn*

菱 means thin **and is pronounced** *jiān*

金 + 菱 = 錢

錢 means **money** (similar to gold)  
**and is pronounced** *qián* (similar to *jiān*)

### Principle 5 - The Meaning-plus-Meaning Compound Character

Here the interaction of the meanings of two characters combined produces the meaning of the new character.

木 (mù) means *tree*

木 + 木 = 林 (lín) means *forest*

*Interpretation:* Put some trees together and voila! A forest!

羊 (yáng) means *sheep*

大 (dà) means *big*

羊 + 大 = 美 (měi) means *beautiful*

*Interpretation:* In traditional times, it was certainly good fortune to have a big sheep, so of course it was a beautiful thing.

宀 (miān) is a radical and means *roof*

女 (nǚ) means *woman*

宀 + 女 = 安 (ān) means *peace*

*Interpretation:* In ancient Chinese tradition, a woman was considered to be most fulfilled, and therefore "at peace," when she "had a roof over her head," in this case meaning a home and a family. Not too many single, career-minded women in ancient China, let's say.

## Principle 6 - The Reclarified Compound Character

When one written form had come to represent various meanings or spoken words, scholars would sometimes "reclarify" one of the meanings by adding some new part to show they meant one thing by writing the character and not another.

經 (jīng) means *warp of fabric* and has been reclarified with 糸 (sī), which means *silk*: 經

廷 (tíng) had come to mean both an *Emperor's Court* and a *commoner's courtyard*.

广 (yán) means *lean to*, representing a roof and walls, and was added to clarify when the character referred to the Emperor's Court: 庭. Plain old tíng (廷) still signifies the courtyard in a commoner's house.

### NOTE

In the "clock" and "tree/forest/full of trees" examples, you may have noticed that as characters are added together, each one has to take up less space than if it were standing alone. This is because each Chinese character, no matter how many sub-elements it contains, must take up about the same amount of space as any other character.

In other words, each one must be written in a box that is no larger and no smaller than boxes for other characters.

Notice again how the character for "field," 田(tián), shrinks as it is added together with other elements in new characters, so that each character "fits in the box."



## Angle 5: Traditional vs. Simplified Chinese Characters

In the 1950s, the government of Mainland China "simplified" the written forms of many "traditional" characters in order to make learning to read and write the language easier for its then largely illiterate population.

### NOTE

Traditional characters are called 繁體字(fàn tǐ zì). Simplified ones are known as 簡體字(jiǎn tǐ zì). 字"zì" itself means "character" or "writing," and written Chinese is called 漢字(hàn zì). Since 漢(hàn) is the ethnic majority of China, 漢字(hàn zì) is literally "Writing of the Han People." Note that the Japanese pronunciation of 漢字(hàn zì) is *kanji*.

Simplified characters may or may not be less pleasant to look at; however, the simplification project did succeed in making a more literate society. Whatever your opinion of outcome, this historical fact means we now have in print and on the Internet two sets of Chinese characters to deal with.

Limiting yourself to just one set can be too, well, limiting. Just as you should become familiar with more than one system for romanizing Chinese pronunciation, learning both traditional and simplified characters will open up that many more resources for you. A good plan might be learning to read both sets, while focusing your writing efforts on just one at first.

**NOTE**

Characters have been simplifying, evolving, or de-evolving as long as there have been characters. Korea and Japan adopted Chinese characters along the way, and some of the older forms they borrowed and still use have long since disappeared from use in China and Taiwan.

Keep in mind too that not every character has been simplified, only some of the more complicated forms. Plus, this simplification of characters did follow some logical principles. Therefore, learning simplified characters alongside their traditional counterparts is not too difficult. For comparison, here is a list of examples. Traditional forms are on the left, followed by their simplified forms, pinyin pronunciation, and English equivalents.

號	号	(hào)	number
門	门	(mén)	door
業	业	(yè)	industry
學	学	(xué)	study
來	来	(lái)	come
寫	写	(xiě)	write
馬	马	(mǎ)	horse
話	话	(huà)	speech
紙	纸	(zhǐ)	paper
見	见	(jiàn)	see

With the exception of the simplified character examples shown here, traditional characters are used throughout the rest of this site for two reasons.

First, Mainland China interacts more all the time with other Chinese-speaking regions where only traditional forms are used. As a result, Mainland Chinese professionals are increasingly willing and able to work with traditional characters, or fàn tǐ zì.

Second, they just look a heckuvalot nicer, don't they?

**NOTE**

A note on learning traditional and simplified characters together: In certain border areas of Mainland China, people can pick up television signals from other Chinese-speaking regions, where all programs have traditional character subtitling. In these areas, people have learned to recognize, and sometimes to write, 繁體字 (fàn tǐ zì).

Yes, there are official censor signal-blocking waves in place, but these mostly provide good small business opportunities for those who can hotwire TV sets to bypass them. If Mainland China ever wonders how it could switch back to traditional characters, there's my suggestion: Start with the TV.

## Angle 6: Chinese Character Radicals and Dictionaries

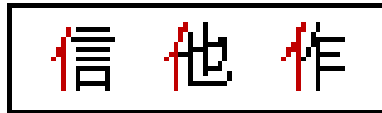
With some basic understanding of Chinese characters under your belt, let's now get a little more technical by talking about radicals. But please, no Abbey Hoffman jokes.

Radicals are the 214 character elements (189 in the simplified system) around which the Chinese writing system is organized. Some of these elements can stand alone as individual characters; others function only when combined with additional character elements.

The important point, however, is that every Chinese character either is a radical or contains a radical. This makes using radicals the most sensible basis for organizing entries in a Chinese dictionary ... which is how it's done.

### Using a Chinese-English Dictionary

To look up the meaning of a character in a Chinese-English dictionary, you must first know which element in it is the radical. At first this may require some guesswork. Most radicals appear on the left side of the character, but you may also find them on the top, on the bottom, or in the middle. Looking at the following characters, though, a person who is literate in Chinese will know that 亻(rén) is the radical in each.



Suppose you see the character "信" for the first time and want to look up its meaning and pronunciation. Here's what you do:

1. First, go to the front of the dictionary where you'll find a table listing all radicals in groups by the number of strokes in each. That is, all the one-stroke radicals are listed first, then the two-stroke radicals, and so on. Since 亻(rén) contains two strokes, look in the two-stroke section to find that has been assigned number 19.
2. Next, go to a table immediately following the first, find the section labeled "#19" and there find a complete list of characters containing the radical 亻(rén). Scan the list for "信" and see beside it xìn.
3. Now use the half of the dictionary organized according to pinyin spelling to look up. Find the right entry by making sure the character "信" is beside it, and read that 信(xìn) means letter, the kind you send by mail.

The process has a few steps, but looking up the meaning of a new Chinese character is not as difficult as you might guess.

## Angle 7: Chinese Character "Styles" and Handwriting Samples

It may seem too obvious to point out, but a Chinese character doesn't look exactly the same in every context. As with most other languages, there are variations in character fonts for print and online publication, differences in the way individuals write characters, and differences in how characters have been written over time.

Let's look at some examples in all the following stylistic categories, using in most examples the sentence "我去北京," (wǒ qù běi jīng), which means "I am going to Beijing."

### NOTE

Many thanks to everyone who made this page possible by providing us with handwriting samples!



## Fonts in Print

You know already that Western languages have a variety of fonts for print, such as:

I am going to Beijing. I am going to Beijing.  
*I am going to Beijing.* I AM GOING TO BEIJING.

Did you know the same is true in Chinese? Just as we wouldn't want everything to appear in Times New Roman, so too does Chinese have many fonts available for paper and online publications. Here are just a few examples:

我去北京 我去北京  
我去北京 我去北京  
我去北京 我去北京

### NOTE

These four characters are the same in both "traditional" and "simplified" characters sets.

## Calligraphy


If I said that the History of European Painting represents "the art of depicting people, places, and things in color on wood and canvas," you would think that my definition is so simple that it's useless. That's pretty much the same, though, as saying that Chinese Calligraphy is "the art of writing poems, proverbs, and decrees on panels with fancy black characters."

In other words, Chinese calligraphy is a subject so deep and broad that it requires its own complete overview for a proper introduction.

Fortunately, we have one available on the web, courtesy of Dr. Ming L. Pei, on his site China The Beautiful. You might start with his essay "[Appreciation of the Art of Chinese Calligraphy](#)," which is part of "[The Calligraphy of The Masters](#)." Once you have digested the material on Dr. Pei's site, and on the calligraphy sites he links to, you'll be on your way to fathoming how vast an ocean lies beneath the title "Chinese Calligraphy."

For a token sample here, just to show you one possibility of how characters look through a calligrapher's eyes, below is a panel from a set of paintings hanging in my home, with the "standard" appearance of the four large characters presented on the right for comparison.



Original Calligraphy	Standard Characters
	<p>磨 穿 鐵 硯</p>

These characters literally mean, top to bottom, "polish through iron ink stone," and are an admonition to be diligent and persistent in order to achieve success. In ancient times, one who "polished the ink stone" was a scholar, wetting his ink stone and dipping his brush in it, probably preparing for the Imperial Exam. Passing the exam with high marks was the way to begin achieving something in Imperial China.

If you studied and wrote so much that you could wear through an ink stone even if it were made of iron, then you were working diligently enough. Good advice even today.

### Handwriting


Have you wondered how everyday handwriting looks in Chinese, how people write when they're doing their homework, writing a letter to a friend, or jotting down a shopping list?

And would you have guessed that Chinese has both script and cursive writing styles too? They're called 楷書(kǎi shū) for standard calligraphy style and 草書(cǎo shū) for cursive calligraphy style.

I asked some friends and relatives whose first language is Chinese to write 我去北京 in standard and cursive styles for us. Here are the results, along with their genders and approximate ages to make it a little more interesting.

Let's look at samples written by girls and women first.

#### Handwriting Samples: Girls and Women

Standard Style ( 楷書)	Cursive Style ( 草書)	Age
我去北京		10-14
我去北京		20's
我去北京		30's
我去北京		50's
我去北京		60's
我去北京		60's



With English or your native language, can you tell if handwriting is from a woman or a man? Do you think there will be any major differences between how men and women write in Chinese? Here's your chance to find out?

### Handwriting Samples: Boys and Men

Standard Style ( 楷書)	Cursive Style ( 草書)	Age
我去北京	我去北京	20's
我去北京	我去北京	30's
我去北京	我去北京	30's
我去北京	我去北京	30's
我去北京	我去北京	40's
我去北京	我去北京	40's
我去北京	我去北京	50's

### Stylistic Evolution

Finally, as Diana Lavarini & Anna Del Franco point out on their site [Sinophilia](http://www.sinophilia.org), characters have been undergoing a sort of stylistic evolution for centuries. Diana and Anna have provided the illustration below to prove it using one character from 我去北京, the 去 (qù), which means go.

The original pictograph, they point out, showed a man going out of his cave. Note that modern characters most resemble the fifth example below, the Exemplar style.



Left to right, these examples are:

1. Carving found on an Oracular Bone
2. An Inscription found on Bronze work
3. Small Seal Style
4. Administrative Style
5. Exemplar Style
6. Cursive Style (草書 cǎo shū)

You can visit Diana and Anna's site at <http://www.sinophilia.org> for a more complete Chinese [writing tutorial](#), plus a bounty of other information related to China.

#### NOTE

Many thanks to everyone who made this page possible by providing us with handwriting samples!

# Chinese Grammar

With other language studies, even "concise" overviews of grammar have always seemed pretty long to me.

Therefore, rather than putting you to sleep by trying to cover everything, let's just give you a head start on some elements of Chinese grammar that you will come to early in your study of the language, easy things like this:

- [Verbs and Word Order](#)
- [Expressing "Tense" in Chinese](#)
- [Particles](#)
- [Measure Words](#)
- [Question Formats](#)

## NOTE

Visitors to *The Chinese Outpost* often write to ask for recommendations on resources for studying Chinese Grammar. Here's what we tell them all: Get ahold of grammar books by Yip Po-Ching. These are the most thorough we have found.

## Mandarin Chinese Verbs and Word Order

Once you begin studying Chinese grammar, you'll notice that verbs are not inflected in Chinese. In Spanish class you may have practiced "*Yo tengo / Tu tienes / Él tiene / Nos tenemos*" and so on, or "*Ich habe / Du hast / Er hat / Wir haben*" in German.

In Chinese, however, only one form of each verb exists. While this makes memorizing "conjugation tables" unnecessary, it does mean that word order is very important in Chinese sentences. Word order is often the only indication in Chinese to tell, so to speak, who is doing what to whom.

In normal Chinese declarative sentences, word order is the same as that of normal English declarative sentences, subject - verb - object, as this example shows:

I <u>drink</u> tea. 我 <u>喝</u> 茶。 wǒ <u>hē</u> chá	She <u>drinks</u> tea. 她 <u>喝</u> 茶。 tā <u>hē</u> chá
You <u>drink</u> tea. 你 <u>喝</u> 茶。 nǐ <u>hē</u> chá	We <u>drink</u> tea. 我們 <u>喝</u> 茶。* wǒ mén <u>hē</u> chá

## NOTE

Chinese personal pronouns are made plural by adding the suffix 們(mén).

"I" = 我. "We" = 我們

That's easy enough, but what might seem strange at first is the absence in Chinese of "helping" words we have in English, such as the 'to' of infinitive verbs ("I want to go.") and articles 'a', 'an', and 'the'.

Before we get too confused with that idea, look at a couple more examples.

我看電視 wǒ kàn diàn shì I watch TV. I am watching TV.
---

Notice that both "I watch TV" and "I am watching TV" are translated as 我看電視. Chinese also uses no helping verbs like 'am' and therefore doesn't differentiate grammatically between 'watch' and 'am watching'.

To complete this illustration, let's build on this example until we have a full compound sentence. Spend some time with this one, and notice that the word order of Chinese parallels that of English at each step.

我看電視。 wǒ kàn diàn shì. I watch TV.
我喜歡看電視。 wǒ xǐ huān kàn diàn shì. I like (to) watch TV.
我不喜歡看電視。 wǒ bù xǐ huān kàn diàn shì. I (do) not like (to) watch TV.
我不喜歡看電視，可是我喜歡聽音樂。 wǒ bù xǐ huān kàn diàn shì, kě shì wǒ xǐ huān tīng yīn yuè. I (do) not like (to) watch TV, but I like (to) listen (to) music.

This doesn't mean, however, that every Chinese sentence will have the same structure as its direct English translation. We're only saying that a great many do.

Got it? Good.

## Verbal Aspect: Expressing "Tense" in Mandarin Chinese Grammar

When you were reading about verbs just now, I heard you ask, "Then how can we express past and future tense in Chinese, whether something will happen tomorrow, is happening now, or happened yesterday?"

Excellent question! I knew you were a sharp one. And let's call this element of Chinese grammar the "verbal aspect" instead of "tense" here, just to be precise.

To answer your question in broad terms, let's pretend for a moment that English verbs have only one form each, with no inflections or aspects or tenses whatsoever.

For example, say we have the verb 'go' but no such thing as ~~went~~, ~~gone~~, ~~am going~~, ~~will go~~, and etc. Nothing but 'go'.

- I go to Beijing.
- She goes to Beijing.
- We go to Beijing.

How would we try to express tense and time in English under these circumstances? Probably like this, which is one way Chinese does it:

- Tomorrow I go to Beijing.
- Right now she goes to Beijing.

Adverbs! Instead of inflecting verbs, the Chinese language relies heavily on the use of adverbs to communicate what English and many other languages do with different verb tenses. And looking at the literal translations in the following examples, you realize that English could probably also get by without verb inflections in a pinch:

明天我去北京。 míng tiān wǒ qù běi jīng. Tomorrow I go Beijing.
現在她去北京。 xiàn zài tā qù běi jīng. Right now she go Beijing.

There are other ways of expressing tense - I mean, verbal aspect - in Chinese, such as with "aspectual particles." These can help us differentiate, for example, between "I went to Beijing (yesterday)" and "I have been to Beijing (before)." We'll look at these examples next.

## Mandarin Chinese Particles & Modals

"Particles." Sounds like it could be Quantum Physics, I know, but it's not. It's still Grammar. Sorry.

In addition to using adverbs, many of the linguistic operations which English performs by changing the form of the verb, or by using possessive pronouns, are accomplished in Chinese by adding a particle to the sentence. Particles typically occur in the neutral tone. The following examples introduce us to three different kinds of particles: structural, interrogative, and aspectual.

## Indicate possession

One of the particles used most is 的(de). Added to a noun or pronoun, this structural particle performs the same function as the English possessive "apostrophe s" ('s), or creates the equivalent of possessive pronouns, like his, her, their, and so on.

<p>這是<u>王</u>先生的哥哥。</p> <p>zhè shì <u>Wáng</u> xiān shēng <b>de</b> gē gē.</p> <p>This is Mr. <u>Wang</u>'s elder brother.</p>
<p>你的朋友很高。</p> <p>Nǐ <b>de</b> péng yǒu hěn gāo.</p> <p>Your friend (is) very tall.</p>
<p>那個是昨天的早飯。</p> <p>nèi gè shì zuó tiān <b>de</b> zǎo fàn.</p> <p>That is yesterday's breakfast.</p>

## Create a question

Adding the interrogative particle 嗎(ma) to the end of a declarative statement turns the sentence into a question.

Statement	Question with 嗎 (ma)
<p>你是美國人。</p> <p>nǐ shì měi guó rén.</p> <p>You are (an) American.</p>	<p>你是美國人嗎？</p> <p>nǐ shì měi guó rén ma?</p> <p>Are you (an) American?</p>
<p>今天是星期五。</p> <p>jīn tiān shì xīng qī wǔ.</p> <p>Today is Friday.</p>	<p>今天是星期五嗎？</p> <p>jīn tiān shì xīng qī wǔ ma?</p> <p>Is today Friday?</p>

## Indicate Verbal Aspect

Here the particles are aspectual particles, which we looked at on the previous page. These often serve to communicate some subtle differences in meaning. A couple good examples to compare are 了(le) and 過(guò), as they both indicate that something happened in the past.

Let's stick with our "I go Beijing" example, 我去北京, and look at some contexts in which we might use 了(le) and 過(guò) to answer different kinds of questions:

了 (le)	過 (guò)
<p>我去<b>了</b>北京。 wǒ qù <b>le</b> běi jīng. This one means "I went to Beijing" and might be used to answer these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What did you do last Friday?</i></li> <li>• <i>It's 3:00 already! You didn't go to Beijing yet, did you?!</i></li> </ul> <p>Here the <b>了</b> (le) is emphasizing the verb. The <i>going</i> itself is the important idea. "I <u>went</u>."</p>	<p>我去<b>過</b>北京。 wǒ qù guò běi jīng. This one means "I have been to Beijing" and might be used to answer these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Have you visited Beijing?</i></li> <li>• <i>What was the first Chinese city you visited?</i></li> </ul> <p><b>過</b> (guò) in this case emphasizes the fact of having been in Beijing and is not concerned with the <i>going</i> to get there. "I've <u>been to</u> Beijing. I've <u>been in</u> Beijing. I've <u>visited</u> Beijing."</p>
<p>我去北京<b>了</b>。 wǒ qù běi jīng <b>le</b>. This one also means "I went to Beijing," but it might be used to answer these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What happened last Friday?</i></li> <li>• <i>What did you do when you were bored?</i></li> </ul> <p>In these cases, the idea being emphasized isn't the <i>going</i>, the travel itself, but the whole notion of <i>going to Beijing</i>. "I <u>went to Beijing</u>."</p>	<p>Here's the scary part. All the following examples are also possible in Chinese:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 我去北京<b>過</b>。</li> <li>• 我去<b>過</b>北京<b>了</b>。</li> <li>• 我去<b>過了</b>北京。</li> </ul> <p>But don't fret it. Asking groups of my Chinese friends and relatives about the differences among these always sparks unresolved debates. Some say these can be used interchangeably; some insist they cannot. At this point, it all becomes <i>advanced</i> grammar, perhaps suited for Chinese language PhD studies.</p>

## Mandarin Chinese Measure Words

In English, we often count in units, for example:

- One pair of socks
- Two rounds of ammunition
- Three cases of wine
- Four bunches of bananas

The Chinese language also uses words like "pair" and "case" when counting one or more instance of an object. In Chinese, though, these measure or "counting" words must be used every time objects are being counted, whether just one pencil or 1.5 billion people.



Different measure words are used for different kinds of objects. For instance, large flat objects are counted with 張(zhāng); long round objects use 枝(zhī). Each measure word comes between the number of objects and the name of the object.

Here are a few sentences showing counting words in action. The counting words and their pinyin translations are colored red to help you pick them out. Otherwise, the word order of the Chinese and English sentences are once again parallel.

我有一張桌子。 Wǒ yǒu yī zhāng zhūo zǐ. I have one table.
他有三支鉛筆。 Tā yǒu sān zhī qiān bǐ. He has three pencils.
你有五本書。 nǐ yǒu wǔ běn shū. You have five books.

**NOTE**

Notice that when we translate these sentences to English, we do not include the measure words. For example, it is "I have five books," not "I have five units of book."

The most commonly used measure word is 個(gè). This also just happens to be the one normally used to count people, except when being extra polite, then we use 位(wèi). You might remember the difference between 個(gè) and 位(wèi) as the difference between 'women' and 'ladies', between 'men' and 'gentlemen', and between 'customer' and 'guest'.

三個男人看書。 sān gè nán rén kàn shū. Three <u>men</u> are reading books.
三位男人看書。 sān wèi nán rén kàn shū. Three <u>gentlemen</u> are reading books.

Now please don't tell your Chinese language teacher that I'm the one who told you this, but if you're out and about where Chinese is the native language and you can't remember or don't know the proper measure word for some kind of item, you will probably be understood if you use 個(gè) instead. Just don't make a permanent habit of it. Do this only until you have learned the correct measure word.

If you're lucky, the person you're talking to might politely correct you and, consequently, teach you the proper counting word. That's how I learned many of them, from shopkeepers and waitresses working near [Fuzhou University](#) in China's Fujian Province.

# Mandarin Chinese Question Formats

Using the particle 嗎(ma) is not the only way to create a question. Two other common formats involve interrogatives (who, what, where, why, when, and how) and the "verb-not-verb" construction.

## Interrogatives

Following are examples of some common interrogatives.

Interrogative	Example
誰 shuí Who?	誰想回家？ shuí xiǎng huí jiā? Who wants (to) return home?
什麼 shé me What?	這是什麼？ zhè shì shé me? What is this?
哪裡 nǎ lǐ Where?	圖書館在哪裡？ tú shū guǎn zài nǎ lǐ? Where is the library?
甚麼時候 shén me shí hòu When?	你甚麼時候去北京？ nǐ shén me shí hòu qù běi jīng? When (do) you go (to) Beijing?
為甚麼 wèi shén me Why?	她為甚麼回學校？ tā wèi shén me huí xué xiào? Why (does) she return (to) school?
怎麼 zěn me How?	你怎麼賺錢？ nǐ zěn me zhuàn qián? How (do) you earn money?

## The "Verb-not-Verb" Construction

In this format, a verb is followed by 不(bù) or 沒(méi)--which mean no, not, or don't--and then the verb is repeated. These examples will show you how the construction works.

## “Do you want to watch a movie?”

要 (yào) = want (to)

要不要 (yào bù yào) = want/not want (to)

你要不要看電影?

nǐ yào bù yào kàn diàn yǐng.

You want/not want watch movie?

## “Is she a teacher?”

是 (shì) = is, am, are, etc.

是不是 (shì bù shì) = is/not is

她是不是老師?

tā shì bù shì lǎo shī?

She is/not is teacher?

## “Does the library have magazines?”

有 (yǒu) = have

有沒有 (yǒu méi yǒu) = have/not have

圖書館有沒有雜誌?

tú shū guǎn yǒu méi yǒu zá zhì?

Library have/not have magazine(s)?

### NOTE

Here's come those tone shifts again. Normally, 不(bù) is pronounced in the fourth tone, but before another instance of the fourth tone, it shifts to the second. In the "Do you want to watch a movie?" example above, it would be pronounced like "yào bú yào.". Be aware too that in some cases, 有(yǒu) is better translated as "are." Other times, "are" will be better translated as 是(shì). I'll let your Chinese teachers explain the difference to you. I don't want to do all their work for them.

## G'day, Eh?

When 是不是 is added as a tag to the end of an already completed sentence, it functions much as the English "right?" or "isn't it?" - and perhaps the Canadian "eh?" Seriously. I'm not joking.... All right, all right, maybe it's just a little joke.

是不是 can be tagged to a sentence which contains any other verb in the main clause.

He went to Beijing, didn't he?

他去北京了, 是不是?

tā qù běi jīng le, shì bú shì?

You like to listen to music, don't you?

你喜歡聽音樂, 是不是?

nǐ xǐ huān tīng yīn yuè, shì bú shì?

Beauty, eh?

好漂亮, 是不是?

hǎo piào liàng, shì bú shì?



### NOTE

Well, we'd better stop here before this becomes more than just a brief look at grammar, even though there are many other interesting lessons on Chinese we haven't covered yet. These should be enough to get you started, though.

Have a great time learning Chinese, and thanks for visiting *The Chinese Outpost*!

# Mandarin Chinese Initial and Finals: Table 1

These tables show you which pairings of initials and finals are possible and, by omission, which are not. The initial **b**, for instance, may be paired with **a**, but not with **e**, since **ba** is a sound in Mandarin Chinese, while **be** is not. By the way, don't let the great number of sounds you see represented here alarm you. The majority of these are seldom used.

Table 1: Chinese **initials** (left) and **finals a through ong** (top).

	a	o	e	-i*	er	ai	ei	ao	ou	an	en	ang	eng	ong
b	ba	bo				bai	bei	bao		ban	ben	bang	beng	
p	pa	po				pai	pei	poa	pou	pan	pen	pang	peng	
m	ma	mo	me			mai	mei	mao	mou	man	men	mang	meng	
f	fa	fo					fei		fou	fan	fen	fang	feng	
d	da		de			dai	dei	dao	dou	dan	den	dang	deng	dong
t	ta		te			tai		tao	tou	tan		tang	teng	tong
n	na		ne			nai	nei		nou	nan	nen	nang	neng	nong
l	la		le			lai	lei	nao	lou	lan		lang	leng	long
z	za		ze	zi		zai	zei	zao	zou	zan	zen	zang	zeng	zong
c	ca		ce	ci		cai		cao	cou	can	cen	cang	ceng	cong
s	sa		se	si		sai		sao	sou	san	sen	sang	seng	song
zh	zha		zhe	zhi		zhai	zhei	zhao	zou	zan	zen	zhang	zheng	zhong
ch	cha		che	chi		chai		chao	chou	chan	chen	chang	cheng	chong
sh	sha		she	shi		shai	shei	shao	shou	shan	shen	shang	sheng	
r			re	ri				rao	rou	ran	ren	rang	reng	rong
j														
q														
x														
g	ga		ge			gai	gei	gao	gou	gan	gen	gang	geng	gong
k	ka		ke			kai	kei	kao	kou	kan	ken	kang	keng	kong
h	ha		he			hai	hei	hao	hou	han	hen	hang	heng	hong
.	a	o	e		er	ai	ei	ao	ou	an	en	ang	eng	

## NOTE

Note that the bottom row without initials signifies Chinese sounds consisting of finals only without preceding initial consonants. The final *-i* should not be confused with *i* appearing in Table 2. These two finals are pronounced differently and match with different initials.

# Mandarin Chinese Initial and Finals: Table 2

Table 2: Chinese **initials** (left) and **finals** *i* through *iong* (top).

	<b>i</b>	<b>ia</b>	<b>iao</b>	<b>ie</b>	<b>iou</b>	<b>ian</b>	<b>in</b>	<b>iang</b>	<b>ing</b>	<b>iong</b>
<b>b</b>	bi		biao	bie		bian	bin		bing	
<b>p</b>	pi		piao	pie		pian	pin		ping	
<b>m</b>	mi		miao	mie	miu	mian	min		ming	
<b>f</b>										
<b>d</b>	di		daio	die	diu	dian			ding	
<b>t</b>	ti		tiao	tie		tian			ting	
<b>n</b>	ni		niao	nie	niu	nian	nin	niang	ning	
<b>l</b>	li	lia	liao	lie	liu	lian	lin	liang	ling	
<b>z</b>										
<b>c</b>										
<b>s</b>										
<b>zh</b>										
<b>sh</b>										
<b>ch</b>										
<b>r</b>										
<b>j</b>	ji	jia	jiao	jie	jiu	jian	jin	jiang	jing	jiong
<b>q</b>	qi	qia	qiao	qie	qiu	qian	qin	qiang	qing	qiong
<b>x</b>	xi	xia	xiao	xie	xiu	xian	xin	xiang	xing	xiong
<b>g</b>										
<b>k</b>										
<b>h</b>										
	yi	ya	yao	ye	you	yan	yin	yang	ying	yong

### NOTE

Note that Table 2 finals, when not preceded by an initial, change the *i* to *y*.

\*The final *i* should not be confused with *-i* appearing in Table 1. These two finals are pronounced differently and match with different initials.



# Mandarin Chinese Initial and Finals: Table 3

**Table 3:** Chinese **initials** (left) and **finals** **u** through **ueng** (top).

	u	ua	uo	uai	uei	uan	uen	uang	ueng
<b>b</b>	bu								
<b>p</b>	pu								
<b>m</b>	mu								
<b>f</b>	fu								
<b>d</b>	du		duo		dui	duan	dun		
<b>t</b>	tu		tuo		tui	tuan	tun		
<b>n</b>	nu		nuo			nuan			
<b>l</b>	li		luo			luan	lun		
<b>z</b>	zu		zuo		zui	zuan	zun		
<b>c</b>	cu		cuo		cui	cuan	cun		
<b>s</b>	su		suo		sui	suan	sun		
<b>zh</b>	zhu	zhua	zhuo	zhuai	zhui	zhuan	zhun	zhuang	
<b>ch</b>	chu	chua	chuo	chuai	chui	chuan	chun	chuang	
<b>sh</b>	shu	shua	shuo	shuai	shui	shuan	shun	shuang	
<b>r</b>	ru	rua	ruo		rui	ruan	run		
<b>j</b>									
<b>q</b>									
<b>x</b>									
<b>g</b>	gu	gua	guo	guai	gui	guan	gun	guang	
<b>k</b>	ku	kua	kuo	kuai	kui	kuan	kun	kuang	
<b>h</b>	hu	hua	huo	huai	hui	huan	hun	huang	
	wu	wa	wo	wai	wai	wan	wen	wang	weng

**NOTE**

Note that Table 3 finals, when not preceded by an initial, change the **u** to **w**. Also, when the final **uen** takes an initial, the **e** is dropped.





# Mandarin Chinese Initial and Finals: Table 4

Table 4: Chinese **initials** (left) and **finals** **ü** through **ün** (top).

	ü	üe	üan	ün
<b>b</b>				
<b>p</b>				
<b>m</b>				
<b>f</b>				
<b>d</b>				
<b>t</b>				
<b>n</b>	nü	nüe		
<b>l</b>	lü	lüe		
<b>z</b>				
<b>c</b>				
<b>s</b>				
<b>zh</b>				
<b>ch</b>				
<b>sh</b>				
<b>r</b>				
<b>j</b>	ju	jue	juan	jun
<b>q</b>	qu	que	quan	qun
<b>x</b>	xu	zue	xuan	xun
<b>g</b>				
<b>k</b>				
<b>h</b>				
	yu	yue	yuan	yun

**NOTE**

Note that Table 4 finals, when not preceded by an initial, change the **üe** to **y**, though the vowel sound does not change.

