

The Chinese Language Demystified

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By

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

China, a country of appealing mysteries.

The Chinese nation, a nation intermittently strong and weak, honorable and infamous, awake and asleep, with a history of five millennia at the shortest, though probably longer, has experienced the highest stages of ancient civilization in the most prosperous dynasties of the world, and made indelible contributions to the advance of human societies. As the world's biggest nation, the Chinese people account for approximately a quarter of the whole population on Earth.

As a standing member of the UN Security Council, China exerts enormous influence on international affairs. Economically speaking, it is the world's largest consumer market and human resource reservoir, as well as the largest base of processing industries.

Over the recent three decades, China's opening up to the world has brought about an unprecedented level of contact with people from all other countries, resulting in great advancements in Chinese society and a drastic growth of its economy, which have drawn even greater attention from the world.

As was the case in the past when China was in its prime, again, the world finds it impossible to overlook China and its people.

However, for its many sufferings in pre-modern and modern history – social unrest and setbacks, natural disasters and social misfortunes – for a long time, China has remained relatively backward, listed as a “developing country” of the world. For the same reasons, the Chinese people and their civilization have been neglected in the developed countries, and to many people in the West, what is now known of China remains what it was 30 or 50 years ago.

In view of the above conditions, we hereby present to our readers these brand new Chinese Way books with the aim of helping those who are interested in all things Chinese to learn about the people and their social life, and ultimately to discover “the last hidden world” and the nation that is once more on the rise in the Orient, so as to more effectively communicate with Chinese people in all walks of life.

Within this series, there are five books, respectively on the language, folk culture, rites and rituals, traditional food, and traditional physical exercises of the Chinese people. Drawing upon vast resources from libraries and internet materials, these books are all written from the special perspectives of the writers themselves, and infused with their individual insights. What's more, the style of the language may also be interesting to Western English readers because the writers are all native Chinese themselves who teach English in higher institutions of education in China. This means that their English language may smack of some "Chinese flavor," somewhat different to that of the native English writers, but pleasantly readable nevertheless after minor revisions by native English speakers.

The Chinese Language Demystified by the undersigned chief-editor of this series begins with a general introduction of various "Chinese languages," languages of different Chinese ethnic groups as well as the majority Han people. The relation between Mandarin Chinese and Chinese dialects is also explained with fair clarity. Through reading the introduction, you will learn why Mandarin Chinese has become "the Common Language" (Putonghua) of the nation, how Chinese written characters evolved into the present form, and what differences exist between the classic and modern language, and between the formal written style and informal speech. In addition, the systems of Mandarin Chinese Pinyin and Tones are introduced in detail to serve as a threshold for exploring the contents of the book.

After the introduction are six chapters elaborating on the distinctive features of Mandarin Chinese, respectively in terms of its phonology, tones, morphology and syntax. In each chapter, typical and practically usable examples are provided, along with annotations of the tones and translations in order to help readers learn with ease. Finally, the book is rounded up with a seventh chapter summarizing the most prominent features to reinforce what the readers have read.

Chinese Rites and Rituals is co-authored by Ge Feng (冯鸽) and Zhengming Du (杜争鸣), professors of Chinese at the Northwest University and English at Soochow University respectively. The English translation has been done by Jieting Huang (黄洁婷) and Yinji Jiang (蒋茵洁), who are both English lecturers at Suzhou Vocational University. The book comprises an overall introduction of the Chinese ritual systems and the related social norms and customs. The first part begins with an elaboration of the central Chinese concept Li (礼), which carries a wide range of connotations including not only rites and rituals, but also what are

generally concerned as good manners, appropriate behavior and acceptable ceremonies for various social occasions.

The contents are divided into two parts, with the first part on traditional rites and rituals and the second on the modern practice. Actually, all possible aspects, which are appropriate for consideration under the general title of Li, are touched upon, from individual social conduct to state rules. With the understanding that Li is a matter of great importance in Chinese culture, we believe this book is of special value for those who wish to learn about the Chinese society and the Chinese way of thinking and life.

In *Chinese Food for Life Care*, authored by Hua Yang (杨嫫) and Wen Guo (郭雯), lecturers of English at the Soochow University of Science and Technology, readers are expected to learn about the traditional Chinese way of eating, and find their opinions as regards the choices of food in various situations. They will also familiarize themselves with a great variety of traditionally consumed Chinese food items, and learn to understand why some items are more popular than others in China, as well as why the Chinese people generally believe “food and medicine are of the same origin.” It is our hope that the detailed accounts of the properties of different food items will serve as useful references for making decisions on what one should choose to eat according to his or her own physical conditions.

Traditional Chinese Exercises is written by Jianmei Qu (曲建梅) and her daughter Xinqing Wang (王新清), respectively an associate professor of English at Yantai University and an MA student of English at Shandong University.

The book begins with a brief account of the basic knowledge of Chinese physical exercises and health care, a short history of the development of various methods of traditional physical exercises, such as Taijiquan and Qigong, the basic theories concerning their efficacy and mechanisms, and the methods generally adopted in practice. Then, in the following chapters, the concrete procedures of exercises are presented, all well illustrated with clear pictures to aid the practitioner. In addition, traditionally practiced supporting “minor exercises” including various methods of self-massage are also introduced at length. It is our belief that the explanations and illustrations not only make interesting reading, but also help in practice.

Traditional Chinese Folk Customs is written by Huawen Fang (方华文), my colleague at Soochow University. Its first draft translation was completed by Weihua Zhang (张伟华), associate professor of English at

Wuxi Institute of Arts and Technology. At the request of the writer and the publisher, I gladly sign my name as a co-translator after reading and revising the manuscript. This book projects to the readers a changing and kaleidoscopic view of Chinese social phenomena seen in different areas and ethnic communities, in both ancient times and the present. Although it is understandably difficult for the writers to account for how much or to what extent the old customs have lasted to date, we can well assume that quite a lot have, though possibly in somewhat changed forms. At any rate, they should have some ineluctable impact on the contemporary Chinese way of life. In addition, with the growing consciousness of the importance of protecting traditional culture, some wholesome folkways that had once fallen to the verge of extinction are now being recovered, while others are still often found in Chinese literary works even if they have fallen out of date. Thus, reading about them should be rewarding, and as I hope, it could also be enjoyable.

On the whole, the five titles in these Chinese Way books form a kind of knowledge pool for readers interested in Chinese society, the people, and their way of thinking and social behavior. I believe they will be of very practical use for those who are presently working in China, or considering a visit or some time staying there. For readers of Chinese literature, the contents should also be worth reading because they provide knowledge of the social and cultural background to aid understanding.

I feel obliged to acknowledge the help of many who have given me very good suggestions as regards the contents of the books. First, I am grateful to Professor Xiaoming Tian (田晓明), Vice President of Soochow University and an open-minded scholar in arts and education who has seen the meaningfulness of these books and urged me to carry on. Then, for making the plan more concrete and practical, I feel indebted to Mr. Jinhui Deng (邓锦辉) and Mr. Lei Zheng (郑磊), editors of China Intercontinental Press, for providing many insightful suggestions. Last but not the least, my gratitude goes to Mr. Mingming Chen (陈明明), vice-chairman of the Translators Association of China and an ex-ambassador of China to New Zealand and Sweden, for he has been a constant source of encouragement in any of my endeavors of translation and writing.

July 5th, 2015
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PREFACE

Hanyu, the language of the Chinese Han people, is imprinted with the spirit of the nation's civilization, culture, and five millennia of history. It is interwoven into the style of thinking and the lives of the people.

As a member of the Sino-Tibetan language family, Hanyu displays distinctive features of its own when brought into contrast with languages of other families.

A very unique tonal language and the only one of its type in the world's major languages, Hanyu, or what is tacitly taken to be "the Chinese language", bears distinct musical qualities with the melodious features in its four tones (or more in some dialects). Such musical qualities can be found in full expression in Chinese poetry.

The various written forms and changeful calligraphy of the language could rival paintings with their artistic richness and could match up with Chinese poetry perfectly as masterpiece treasures, displayed in many galleries and museums of the world. Among all the major forms of written human languages (as represented by all the official languages of the UN), Chinese is the only one featuring pictographic characters.

As a natural human language, Chinese (Mandarin) is used by the largest number of speakers as their mother tongue—approximately a quarter of the world's population. In addition, with China being a member of the UN Security Council, it plays a leading role in international affairs.

The Chinese language also finds wide application for its high communicational efficiency. In our information era, it stands along with English as one of the two most frequently appearing languages on the internet. Despite the complex strokes and slow speed in traditional forms of hand writing (which led China to adopt simplified Chinese written forms), oral expression of the language shows high efficiency, for each single syllable may be equivalent in function to a word in expressing some message. What's more, it has been proven that the speed of computer keyboard input of Chinese exceeds that of English, and for a sufficiently trained master hand, the speed can keep up approximately with the speed of natural speech.

Historically, Chinese had influenced many languages, with Japanese taking on the greatest influence. Besides the large amount of Chinese words (including words in Chinese dialects) in spoken Japanese, there are several thousand Chinese characters in its written vocabulary. In fact, the different kana signs of Japanese words are also largely evolved from various written forms of Chinese characters. Similar direct impacts can be seen in the development of Korean and Vietnamese, in which traces of Chinese can be easily detected in spite of the changes that have taken places through their language system reforms in the past decades.

Of course, considering the longstanding of cultural exchange between China and the West, and the language contact involved during the course of this, it is also no wonder that some loan words of Chinese origin can be found in some Indo-European languages like English, French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish.

For the above reasons, the world finds it impossible to overlook the Chinese language. In addition, in a context featuring ever-growing global economic integration and cultural plurality, along with China's economic development over the past three decades, an increasing number of people in the world have realized the significance of learning the Chinese language—a language of a quarter of the world's population—and are eager to master it for direct communication with the Chinese people. As a result, Chinese language education is now enjoying a tremendous boom across continents, developing with sustained momentum. Statistics collected by the responsible department of China's Ministry of Education show some significant facts: over 30 million people worldwide have attempted somehow to learned Chinese in the last decade; 100 countries with more than 2,500 universities and colleges offer Chinese courses; a rising number of elementary and high schools and various training institutions also teach Chinese. An estimate based on the growth in the past decade suggests that there may be over 100 million Chinese learners worldwide by 2015.

For many Westerners, however, the Chinese language system is an abstruse web of strange stokes. Written Chinese defies spelling and has little to do with its pronunciation; the nonexistence of inflexions, the shortage of indications of case, gender, singular/plural differences, the seemingly obscure grammatical structure and the lack of rigid formal logics all contribute to make it an almost formidable challenge for many people learning it as a foreign language. Therefore, it is quite understandable that many people and even some organizations have listed it as one of the world's most difficult languages.

This book on the Chinese language is an attempt to help readers keep pace with the time and tide of China's international development. I hope it will unveil the mystery of this seemingly esoteric language that is nevertheless used as the first language by the largest nation of the world. In the meantime, and based on the understanding that a language represents a way of seeing the world, I also expect that the contents will help readers learn about the Chinese people's innermost thought about the objective world.

The book begins with a general introduction of the essential notion of "the Chinese language(s)", and then sets about unveiling the mystery of Mandarin Chinese from Chapters Two to Six. In particular, the introduction provides some basic knowledge of the languages used in China or by the Chinese people, including Mandarin and non-Mandarin languages, Chinese dialects, their relations and user populations. Chapters Two and Three respectively present the fundamentals of the phonology and tonal systems. And through Chapters Four to Six, structure rules of words, phrases, and sentences are introduced. Finally, a final summary of the prominent features of the language is made in Chapter Seven, so that readers will find it easy to keep a firm grip on the knowledge that they have acquired so far through reading.

I hope, and of course believe, that reading this book will be an exciting and meaningful adventure.

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ANNOTATION ABBREVIATIONS

AD: adverb

AS: aspect particle (着, 了, 过)

CC: coordinating conjunction

CD: cardinal number

CS: subordinating conjunction

DEC: de as complementizer or a nominalizer (的)

DEG: de as a genitive marker and an associative marker (的)

DER: resultative de (得)

DEV: manner de (地)

FI: free interpretation

IJ: interjection

MW: measure word

OD: ordinal number

P: preposition

PN: pronoun

SFP: sentence-final particle (吗, 吧, 呢, 呀, 啊, 哪)

VA: predicative adjective

VE: existential and possessive verb

Verb: VV

WFW: word-for-word translation

CHAPTER ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

Languages of the Han Chinese and Chinese Ethnic Groups

Hanyu, or the language of the Han nationality, commonly known as Mandarin Chinese, is certainly the language that is generally used by the Chinese people. Its standard form is also called Putonghua, Guoyu, or Huayu, respectively in Mainland China, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. But it is not the only language used by all Chinese people. This is because China is a big country with 55 ethnic minorities, and most of them have their own languages. Chinese linguists generally agree that the total number of languages used by China's ethnic groups is over 80, with some ethnic groups using more than one language. Among these different languages, 30 have written forms. In terms of language genealogy, they are categorized into five different families: Sino-Tibetan, Altai, Austro-Asiatic, Austronesian and Indo-European.

Therefore, the phrase "Chinese Language" should in fact have a plural form. When used in the singular form, it only means the language originally belonging to the Han people (hence called Hanyu), which has been adopted as the common language used across ethnic boundaries. Among all the ethnic groups of China, some have adopted the Han people's language, with their own languages becoming extinct, such as the Hui and Manchurian people (respectively accounting for 9.8 million and 10.6 million of the population). Others use both Hanyu and their own languages.

The Chinese central government's language policy is to promote the use of Standard Chinese (or Standard Mandarin) as the national language. In the meantime, however, the policy also encourages the protection of ethnic languages. According to Article 8 of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language, "all the nationalities shall have the freedom to use and develop their own

spoken and written languages”. As a result, most preliminary and secondary schools in China’s ethnic minority areas practice bilingual education in both Mandarin Chinese and their own languages, with the former for public communication across ethnic boundaries and the latter for regional and community activities.

In spite of the great number of ethnic languages across the country, 91.59% of the Chinese population are Han people, while the ethnic population only accounts for 8.41% of the whole nation (according to the fifth Population Census of China in 2000). So it is evident that Hanyu has a prevailing influence in use. From the statistics of a survey on the language conditions in mainland China (not including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) carried out from 1999 to 2004, it can be seen that the percentage of people who can use Standard Mandarin (Putonghua) is 53.06%, while the percentage of people who can use a dialect of Hanyu is 86.38%. In contrast, only 5.46% of the population uses ethnic languages. This means that about a third of the whole ethnic population no longer have their own language. As for the remaining two thirds or so, a larger part can use Hanyu or a dialect of it along with an ethnic language.

For the above reasons, the word Hanyu is tacitly taken as the language of the Chinese people. Its standard form, as the national language of the People’s Republic of China, is called Putonghua (or Standard Mandarin). In fact, Putonghua is based only on the Beijing sub-dialect of the Northern Dialect (or Guanhua), though it is used nationally.

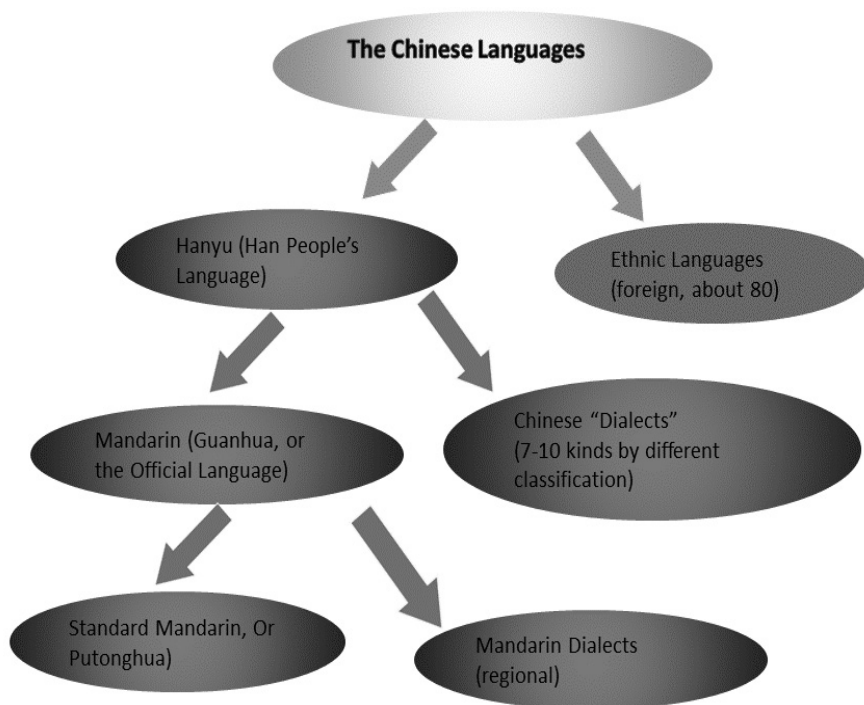
Mandarin, Putonghua and Chinese Dialects

In the Chinese word “Putonghua”, “Putong” means “common” or “general”, while “Hua” refers to the spoken language, speech or simply “tongue”. So Putonghua is taken as the generally adopted spoken Chinese language used across geographical and ethnic boundaries, as well as the common language spoken or understood among Chinese emigrants abroad. However, it neither necessarily substitutes for the various ethnic languages of the nation nor for the various dialects of the Chinese Han people which are used in different areas across the country.

The classification of the Chinese dialects spoken across the vast land of the country is actually a very complicated matter that remains controversial even today, with different periods in history having different standards and actual results of classification. However, the most influential two models that are generally accepted at the present time are respectively the “seven categories classification” and the “ten categories classification”.

The former includes 1) Guanhua (also called the Northern Dialect), 2) Wuyu, 3) Ganyu, 4) Xiangyu, 5) Minyu, 6) Kejiahua, and 7) Yueyu. The latter model adds three dialects to the former, namely, 8) Jinyu, 9) Huiyu, and 10) Pinghua.

The following diagram may largely represent the general situation of the Chinese language or languages.



1. Guanhua (Mandarin)

Guanhua is unique in that its status as a dialect is not so much based on its geographically determined features as on sociological ones. In fact, the word originally means “official tongue”, and thus refers to the standard language used in the officialdom of civil service. Therefore, with the transfer of the political and cultural center of the country time and again in history, it has also undergone changes from one dialect to another. For instance, the official language named Guanhua of the Ming Dynasty

(1368-1644) was the Nanjing dialect, but in the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911), it gradually adopted the Beijing dialect as its basis, which has kept its status as such to the present day, serving as the foundation of Standard Mandarin (Putonghua). Although Guanhua has also been called “the Northern Dialect”, it is actually used in a much more extensive area of the country, not really limited to the northern part in geographical terms. Areas using Guanhua also include the southwest, the south central region and the central part of the country, actually covering the whole or some parts of provinces such as Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, Anhui, and Jiangsu.

As for the sub-classifications of Guanhua, there used to be four major categories (before 1987), named after their geographical situation: the northern, northwestern, southwestern, and the Jianghuai (the Yangtze, Changjiang and Huai River reaches). Then the Maps of Chinese Languages, published in 1987 in the mainland, re-classified Guanhua into eight categories according to finer regional differences and distinctive features in pronunciation, which include the varieties of Guanhua in 1) Beijing (i.e. Putonghua or Standard Mandarin), 2) the Northeast, 3) Liaojiao (Liaoning and Eastern Shandong), 4) Jilu (Hebei and Western Shandong), 5) Zhongyuan (the Middle Plain), 6) Lanyin (Lanzhou and Yinchuan Area), 7) Jianghuai, and 8) the Southwest. At present, this classification has been adopted in most academic publications in China’s mainland.

The regional varieties of Guanhua (Mandarin) have evolved through a long course of interaction between the official language and different dialects. Although various Guanhua forms may share common grammatical structures and a larger part of the vocabulary, and thus stand very close in condition to the official written language, they nevertheless have many minor differences in speech, most strikingly in the tones.

In all varieties of Chinese, Guanhua (Mandarin) is by far the most widely spread, used by the most people—nearly one billion—which accounts for well over 70% of the Chinese population.

The varied influences of regional dialects taken by the official Guanhua in different areas have certainly brought the distinctive features of its subcategories. However, these features are not so striking as to make understanding between them impossible. This is why it actually stands out as an independent category against all other distinctively different major dialects.

The following table gives a general description of the other major dialects of the Chinese language.

Dialects	Users (10 thousand)	Areas
Wu 吴语	7379	Dialects Users (ten thousand): Areas south of Jiangsu, south of Anhui, Shanghai, most parts of Zhejiang, etc.
Min 闽语	7500	Fujian, Hainan, east of Guangdong, Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore, etc.
Kejia 客家话	4200	North and east of Guangdong, west of Fujian, south of Jiangxi, southeast of Guangxi, etc.
Yue 粤语	5882	With Guangzhou as the center, used in larger parts of Guangdong and Guangxi, Hong Kong, Macau and overseas Chinese towns.
Jin 晋语	6305	Most parts of Shanxi and northern part of Shaanxi, western part of Hebei, northwest of Henan, and southern part of Inner Mongolia, etc.
Gan 赣语	4800	Most parts of Jiangxi, southeastern part of Hunan.
Xiang 湘语	3637	Most parts of Hunan
Hui 徽语	330	Southern part of Anhui, and bordering areas between Jiangxi, Zhejiang and Jiangsu.
Ping 平话	778	Parts of Jiangxi
Special Notes: 1) Both “语 yu” and “话 hua” mean the spoken language, but the former is more formal. 2) The above names are all given after the formal short appellations of the central areas, with Kejia as an exception. 3) Yue Dialect and Kejia Dialect are more commonly known in English as Cantonese and Hakka.		

2. Major Chinese Dialects: Their Users and Areas

In fact, the Chinese people hold a view quite unlike that of the Europeans as regards the relation between the language of a nation and its dialects. For one thing, a dialect in a European country will be taken as a language variety with certain regional features in pronunciation and some vocabulary items, different from those in another variety of the same language, but not so different as to make understanding impossible. However, when the Chinese people use the same word, “dialect”, it often means that the language variety is hard for people outside the dialect area

to understand. Actually, some linguists even believe that Chinese dialects differ from one another as greatly as completely different languages in the Indo-European language family (such as English and German). Therefore, it remains a very controversial issue even today as to whether the Chinese language should be regarded as a language family or just one language with regional dialects.



However, the grounds for the majority of Chinese linguists to regard all major Chinese dialects as one language instead of a language family are solid enough. That is, the different varieties of spoken Chinese all share the same unified writing system, no matter how little intelligibility there is between them when actually spoken. And it is indeed sometimes seen that people of different Chinese dialect zones do communicate with the aid of writing if one or both sides cannot speak or understand the Standard Mandarin.

The central Chinese government's language policy is to promote the use of Standard Mandarin (Putonghua) while advocating the equal rights of ethnic languages and protecting regional dialects. As a result, a great many of the population in Chinese dialect regions are actually bilingual or even multi-lingual, using both Putonghua and at least one dialect. In many

regions, local radio and TV stations usually run some programs in both Putonghua and the regional dialects, so as to cater to different needs. Most Chinese people who live in big cities use a dialect in the family or the neighborhood, but shift to Putonghua when at work, in school or in other public situations. Regrettably, there is not yet a report to date on the percentage of people making such regular “code shifts” in the population. There is quite a large proportion of people, however, who can understand Putonghua broadcast on radio and TV stations, but they don’t actually speak it themselves.

In Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and Singapore, most people who have received tertiary education can actually use or understand three languages: the local Chinese dialect, English and Putonghua.

Classic Chinese and Modern Chinese

The Chinese Language, like all other languages of the world, has developed and changed throughout history. Given China’s 4,000 years of civilized history marked by the use of written signs to record the spoken language, one may imagine how great the language change might be. Classic Chinese, a term used relatively in opposition to Modern Chinese, refers to the language of the Chinese people in ancient times. The division line between Classic Chinese and Modern Chinese is generally taken to be 1919, the year when the “May 4th Movement” broke out, which directly ushered in the all-round cultural renovation under the name of the “New Cultural Movement” and the language reform of the “Baihuawen Movement” (also known as the Vernacular Language Movement). Classic Chinese is strikingly different from Modern Chinese, particularly in that it uses every character to its full extent and so is extremely concise. It is tacitly understood as the written form of the ancient Chinese (called “Wenyan”) because no authentic records of the ancient spoken language are available. In fact, not many contemporary Chinese people can fully understand Classic Chinese that is hundreds of years old, except for highly educated scholars and those with a special interest in it. On the other hand, however, the relation between Classic and Modern Chinese is one of source and branch, and thus the latter has kept many of the former’s qualities in terms of phonology, vocabulary and structure. These traces are most apparent in a great deal of idioms used in the more formal style of modern Chinese writing, but may also be found in the informal speeches of some dialects.

Of course, the Chinese language of the ancients also had its spoken forms, besides the formal Wenyan writing. It is known from historical records that the difference between the two was very great, with the written style much more compact and concise. Therefore, the real ancient Chinese language is actually regarded to have two distinct systems, one referred to as Wenyanwen, and the other called Gubaihua (literally the formal written text and vernacular speech respectively). The first is based on the strictly written texts of the Qin (221-206 BC) and Pre-Qin periods about two thousand years ago, which have been preserved mainly in stele inscriptions, reduplicated and imitated through history with little change in the style, such as those classic texts represented by *The Book of Songs* (*Shi*), *Collection of Ancient Texts* (*Shu*), *The Rites* (*Li*), *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, Lao Zi, *The Analects of Confucius*, Xun Zi, etc. Needless to say, this category also includes texts of the later periods that followed the style of the Qin and Pre-Qin texts, like that in the poetry and songs of the West Han (206 BC-25 AD) and East Han (25-220) dynasties, and the essays of the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1127) dynasties. The other category contains the written records of the more informal speech that evolved through the Wei and Jin periods, such as *Essays and Criticism* (*Shishuo Xinyu*), the Buddhist song scripts (*Bianwen*) of the Tang Dynasty, Zen Quotations, and the written records of the orally told stories of the Yuan (1206-1368), Ming and Qing dynasties. This category has more in common with Modern Chinese.

Of the two categories, only the former is considered as the orthodox texts which are used in Classic Chinese courses for college students in China, for the simple reason that it is relatively more formal and representative, and was used for keeping serious records of Chinese history.

Modern Chinese developed mainly on the basis of the ancient Chinese Baihua (of the latter category), but at the same time, it has also inherited some traits of the formal Wenyan written style. Besides, what is considered as “modern” in China often implies some relation with the more developed countries of the West. That is to say that modern Chinese has also more or less taken on features not only in the direct relation between its written and spoken forms but also in a relatively rigid grammatical conception behind it, which is more or less related to that of the English. This is because the first Chinese work on grammar was almost entirely constructed with reference to the grammars of Latin and French. Although this first grammar book was born in 1883, before the birth of Modern Chinese, it nevertheless laid the first corner stone for the modernization of Chinese, which soon began to take place.

Apart from a closer relation between the written texts and the spoken language, Modern Chinese features the following aspects in contrast to Classic Chinese:

- 1) Having a grammatical frame that is systematically similar to that of the Western languages, like English and French;
- 2) Longer sentences with definite punctuation marks borrowed from the Western languages;
- 3) More two-syllable (or two-character) words and multi-syllable words (characters);
- 4) Relatively more stable parts of speech and of words. If learning the Chinese language is for the purpose of communicating with contemporary Chinese people, the learner should of course learn Modern Chinese. And for the needs of daily conversation with possibly most Chinese speakers, the Standard Mandarin, Putonghua, should be learned first.

The Speech and Writing of Modern Chinese

The May 4th Movement in 1919 ushered in a period of great cultural reform in China, of which the most important event concerning language reform in particular is the so-called “Baihuawen Movement”(or “Vernacular Chinese Movement”) calling for “unification of speech and writing”. Since then, the orthodox Wenyan written style of Classic Chinese has gradually fallen away because of its detachment from the spoken language, and the educated Chinese began “to write down what is actually spoken”. However, this “unification of speech and writing” is set in the socio-cultural context of the time in which the two were greatly different. Actually, differences exist to a greater or lesser extent between the spoken and written forms of all languages, modern or classic, which are sometimes called stylistic variations. To professional linguists, it is often simply a matter of scale, and not of polar contrast. In the case of Modern Chinese, such differences may still be striking at times, for there are definitely a great many language phenomena that are peculiar to only one of the two forms or styles.

The following is a short list of the major differences:

- 1) Some characters are pronounced differently;
- 2) Some characters are pronounced with different tones and stresses;

- 3) Some words are used only in informal speech, and others only in written text;
- 4) Some structures or sentence patterns are used only in the spoken language, and some may be particular to the written text;
- 5) Spoken Chinese tends to use simple words and shorter or incomplete sentences, as in other languages.

Apart from these differences, the two styles nevertheless also share a great deal of common language features. Not all that is written is in the written language style by nature, and not all that is spoken belongs to the spoken style, simply for the reason that speech can be written down and text can be spoken. Therefore, learning Chinese by starting with the spoken words and sentences that are used daily is still very beneficial for learning to read the Chinese of the more formal writing. As a matter of fact, although there are some learners who began learning Chinese directly with the texts of the very formal written-style language, most of them still begin with everyday spoken Chinese and usually find it relatively easy.

Chinese Characters and Their Changes

Although the origin of human languages is difficult to trace, the beginning of writing may be relatively clear, at least for some languages that are supported with more evidence that has been found in archaeological excavations. As for the origin of Chinese characters in particular, this is also frequently told as legends and thus just taken as such rather than hard facts. Among various sayings, such as “tie knots”, the “eight diagrams”, and “picture”, the legendary story about Cang Jie inventing the characters is most wide-spread and often appears in many books. According to historical records, Cang Jie was said to be the grand scribe of the legendary Yellow Emperor, the supposed foremost ancestor of the Chinese Han people. And it was said that the creation of the Chinese characters was such a shocking event that “the heaven rained grains and ghosts cried at night” while he was making them. As seen in history books, the tale about Cang Jie became well known during the period of the Qin and Han dynasties (which spanned from 221BC to 220AD).

Given the immense amount of time that has passed, it is just a matter of course that all efforts by past historians in trying to find the truth about Cang Jie have been largely fruitless due to the lack of proof. What researchers nowadays generally agree is that the name of Cang Jie may well have been given to a person who only worked at sorting out and



An ancient drawing of Cang Jie, the legendary maker of Chinese characters

standardizing the characters that had been created and used earlier by a group of people, simply for the reason that the whole writing system of such a complicated language as Chinese could hardly be “made” overnight by a single individual and directly accepted by the whole society. More reasonably, the “creation” of Chinese characters would have been the result of collective efforts, through a long period of trial and improvement. Through research, modern specialists have found that one way the ancestors of the Chinese people used to record events was to tie knots in a rope, and

another way, which was used later, was to use sharp tools to inscribe signs on stone or to engrave them on pottery clay. Archeological findings have exposed such inscribed signs on Neolithic pottery shards in Banpo Village in Shaanxi Province, which dates back to over 6,000 years ago. Seeing apparent similarities between these signs and the later Chinese characters, now researchers generally believe that they are most probably the very roots of Chinese characters.

Over time, the Chinese characters created by the ancient people have undergone a continuous course of change, and the result is that, except for specialists, contemporary readers generally no longer understand many of the ancient characters. However, since the unification of the country by the Qin Dynasty in 221-206 BC, Chinese characters gradually became stabilized, looking more like those being used today. Moreover, there is one thing that has remained unchanged throughout history, and that is the use of more or less the same strokes in writing the characters.

The evolution of the writing of Chinese characters through history is usually summarized into the following stages:

1. Oracle Bone Script (甲骨文, *jia³gu³wen²*)

This type of writing is literally translated as “shell-bone script”. It is so named because it was found inscribed on oracle bones made of turtle shells or other animal bones and used in divination in the Shang Dynasty (about 16-11 centuries BC). It is thought to be the earliest system of writing Chinese characters that was later to gradually evolve into the modern forms.

2. Bronze Script (金文, *jin¹wen²*)

So called because it is characteristic of the inscriptions on bronze artifacts such as *zhong* bells and *ding* tripod cauldrons, of which a great number have been unearthed from the Shang and Zhou (1046-256 BC) dynasties and even later, spanning a vast amount of time, covering over two thousand years. In comparison with the Oracle Bone Script, the characters in this writing style are more detached from primitive pictographs, more stable, and generally more regular.



A sample of Oracle Bone Text (on ox bone)

3. Seal Script (篆书, *zhuànshu*¹)

The literal translation of the Chinese name *zhuànshu* is “engraved decorative writing”, because by the time this name was coined in the Han dynasty, its use had been reduced from general use in earlier times to decorative inscriptions and seals.

This style of writing evolved gradually out of the bronze script of the Zhou dynasty, and came into wide use during the Warring States Period

(475-221 BC). Then, the different forms of the characters were unified in the Qin dynasty after Qin Shihuang unified China in 221 BC.

There are two subcategories of the seal script, the Large or Great Seal script (大篆 *da⁴zhuan⁴*; Japanese *daiten*), and the Small Seal Script (小篆 *xiao³zhuan⁴*). The latter developed later but had greater influence, and thus is sometimes simply referred to as the seal script, if comparison between the two is not in question.

Most people today cannot read the seal script, except a few characters, so its use is largely confined to the fields of seals and calligraphy studies.

In contrast to the large seal script, the small seal script is not only more stabilized in formation but is also less rectangular and more square, thus assuming greater similarities to the modern characters.

4. Official Script (also called Clerical Script, 隶书, *lì⁴shū¹*)

The official script is generally believed to have evolved as a distinctive writing style in the Qin dynasty on the basis of the unification and standardization of the various forms of seal script used in the Warring States. It became dominant in the Han dynasty and remained in use through the Wèi-Jin periods (220-420). Highly legible to modern readers, it is still used for artistic flavor in a variety of functional applications such as headlines, signboards and advertisements. Compared with the preceding seal script, it has a highly rectilinear structure, a feature shared with the modern standard (or regular) script. However, in contrast with the tall-to-square modern script, it tends to be square-to-wide, and often has a pronounced, wavelike flaring of isolated major strokes, especially a dominant rightward or downward diagonal stroke.

5. Standard Script (also called Regular Script, 楷书, *kǎi³shū¹*)

Standard script or regular script is called *kaishu* in Chinese. It first appeared in the Wei Dynasty (200-265 CE), matured stylistically around the 7th century in the Tang Dynasty, and is still most commonly used in modern writings and publications. In appearance, it looks tall-to-square in contrast to the preceding Official Script and is also faster to write.

To see the differences and the gradual evolution of the above styles, we can take the character for “horse” as an example to illustrate: