

The Chinese language has many dialects, which are mutually incomprehensible. We will be learning modern standard Chinese, also known as Mandarin Chinese (though Mandarin Chinese also has many subdialects). It is generally recognized as the ‘lingua franca’ of China.

The first words everyone should learn in Chinese are

nǐ (你) – you hǎo (好) – good

Put together, we get the basic greeting of Chinese: nǐ hǎo, literally meaning “you good”. Notice the structure of these words. Each syllable in Chinese corresponds to a single character, and is formed from three parts. An initial part, a final part, and a tone. In this case, we have the initial parts ‘n’ and ‘h’, which are pronounced just like their English counterparts. The finals ‘i’ is pronounced like the English ‘ee’, like the i in pizza. The ‘ao’ is pronounced like you’ve just stubbed your toe – ow! The carat á indicates that we should pronounce the word raising our voices from low to high. ǎ indicates that we should keep our voice low and bounce our voice.

1 The Simple Finals

There are six simple finals, and other finals which can be obtained from combining this simple finals. In order, they are a,o,e,i,u,ü.

- a as is pronounced as in English, like ‘fa la la’. The tongue remains in a natural relaxed position in the mouth.
- o is pronounced as in English, like ‘log’. Round your lips.
- e has no counterpart in English. Start by beginning to pronounce o, then unround your lips and spread them apart as if you were smiling, somewhat like the ‘ir’ in ‘bird’.
- i is pronounced like the English ‘ee’ in ‘sheep’. However, the tongue is raised slightly higher.
- u is pronounced like the ‘oo’ in ‘moon’.
- ü is pronounced like the German letter. First position your mouth to pronounce i, then then move your mouth to the ‘oo’ position.

2 Tones

There are four tone indicators, which indicate syllables to be announced, along with a fifth neutral tone. They are indicated by a symbol, called a tone mark, above a letter in the syllable. If there is more than one letter, the first letter in the order a,o,e,i,u,ü gets the tone mark. In order to learn these ones, partition the lowest tone you can speak comfortably to the highest tone uniformly in the range 1 to 5.

- The first tone is a is the easiest. You just say the word as a constant 5 pitch. The sound that results normally sounds sing songy.
- The second tone is á, which we've already encountered in the word ní. You start at at 1, then raise to a 5. Try not to remain at any tone while you pronounce your syllable – it should sound as if you're asking a question.
- The third tone is ǎ, which officially starts at 2, goes down to 1, and then back up to 4. It feels more bouncy the the fourth tone, which is a straight drop.
- The fourth tone is à, which is the opposite of 2nd tone. You start at the top, then quickly drop your voice to the lowest tone, without remaining at any particular pitch. It should sound like you are being direct, like answering a question.
- The neutral tone is pronounced briefly and softly, like an unannounced syllable in English.

3 Simple Finals

There are twenty-one initial consonans in Chinese. They are divided into six groups, based on the finals they are matched with when they are pronounced as characters (just like we say a as ah in English).

1. b,p,m,f.

- The b is pronounced as in English, but the vocal cords do not vibrate, so it sounds more similar to a p.
- The p is the aspirated equivalent of b, pronounced exactly as in english. If you put a tissue to your face, then the tissue should move when you pronounce p, but not b.
- m and f are pronounced as in English.

2. d,t,n,l

- These letters are pronounced very similar to their english counterparts, but the tongue is slightly more back than in English. In english, our tongue touches our teeth. In Chinese, we want our tongue to touch our pallette instead.

3. g,k,h

4. j,q,x

5. z,c,s

6. zh,ch,sh,r

You should be able to pronounce ní hǎo with ease. Here's some more phrases

xiè xie (谢谢) – 'thank' 'thank'.
bú yòng xiè (不用谢) – 'no' 'need' 'thank'.
bà ba (爸爸) – father
mā ma (妈妈) – mother
dì di (弟弟) – younger brother
gē ge (哥哥) – older brother

4 The Chinese Writing System

Unlike English, each syllable in Chinese has a certain meaning, and a unique character. Characters are formed, traditionally at least, in six ways.

- Pictographs: These characters are drawn directly to describe what they denote (though they may have morphed and been stylized beyond recognition sometimes). Examples include:

- rén (人) means person.
- zǐ (子) means baby.
- nǚ (女) means woman.
- rì (日) means sun.

5 Chinese Numerals

A great set of words to begin learning in Chinese are the numerals.

- (1) yī (一) - The character is just a single slash.
- (2) èr (二) - Two slashes.
- (3) sān (三) - Three slashes.
- (4) sì (四) - A picture of a nose.
- (5) wǔ (五) - 5 slashes?
- (6) liù (六) -
- (7) qī (七) - An upsidedown seven?
- (8) bā (八)
- (9) jiǔ (九)
- (10) shí (十)