Languages of China

There are several hundred languages in China. The predominant language is Standard Chinese, which is based on Beijingese, but there are hundreds of related Chinese languages, collectively known as *Hanyu* (simplified Chinese: 汉语; traditional Chinese: 漢語; pinyin: *Hànyǔ*, 'Han language'), that are spoken by 92% of the population. The Chinese (or 'Sinitic') languages are typically divided into seven major language groups, and their study is a distinct academic discipline.[1] They differ as much from each other morphologically and phonetically as do English, German and Danish, but meanwhile share the same writing system (Hanzi) and are mutually intelligible in written form. There are in addition approximately 300 minority languages spoken by the remaining 8% of the population of China.[2] The ones with greatest state support are Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur and Zhuang.

According to the 2010 edition of *Nationalencyklopedin*, 955 million out of China's then-population of 1.34 billion spoke some variety of Mandarin Chinese as their first language, accounting for 71% of the country's population.[3] According to the 2019 edition of *Ethnologue*, 904 million people in China spoke some variety of Mandarin as their first language in 2017.[4]

Standard Chinese, known in China as *Putonghua*, based on the Mandarin dialect of Beijing,[5] is the official national spoken language for the mainland and serves as a lingua franca within the Mandarin-speaking regions (and, to a lesser extent, across the other regions of mainland China). Several other autonomous regions have additional official languages. For example, Tibetan has official status within the Tibet Autonomous Region and Mongolian has official status within Inner Mongolia. Language laws of China do not apply to either Hong Kong or Macau, which have different official languages (Cantonese, English and Portuguese) from the mainland.

Languages of China	
Distribution of language families in China	
Official	Standard Mandarin
	Cantonese (Hong Kong and Macau)
	Portuguese (Macau)
	English (Hong Kong)
	Mongolian (Inner Mongolia, Haixi in Qinghai, Bayingolin and Bortala in Xinjiang)
	Korean (Yanbian in Jilin)
	Standard Tibetan (Tibet, Qinghai)
	Uyghur (Xinjiang)
	Zhuang (Guangxi, Wenshan in Yunnan)
	Kazakh (Ili in Xinjiang)
	Yi (Liangshan in Sichuan, Chuxiong and Honghe in Yunnan)
Signed	Chinese Sign
	Hong Kong Sign
	Tibetan Sign

Spoken languages

The spoken languages of nationalities that are a part of China belong to at least nine families:

- The Sino-Tibetan family: 19 official ethnicities (including the Han and Tibetans)
- The Tai–Kadai family: several languages spoken by the Zhuang, the Bouyei, the Dai, the Dong, and the Hlai (Li people). 9 official ethnicities.
- The Hmong–Mien family: 3 official ethnicities
- The Austroasiatic family: 4 official ethnicities (the De'ang, Blang, Gin (Vietnamese), and Wa)
- The Turkic family: Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Salars, etc. 7 official ethnicities.[6]
- The Mongolic family: Mongols, Dongxiang, and related groups. 6 official ethnicities.[6]
- The Tungusic family: Manchus (formerly), Hezhe, etc. 5 official ethnicities.
- The Koreanic family: Korean language
- The Indo-European family: 2 official ethnicities, the Russians and Tajiks (actually Pamiri people). There is also a heavily Persian-influenced Äynu language spoken by the Äynu people in southwestern Xinjiang who are officially considered Uyghurs.
- The Austronesian family: 1 official ethnicity (the Gaoshan, who speak many languages of the Formosan branch), 1 unofficial (the Utsuls, who speak the Tsat language but are considered Hui.)

Ethnolinguistic map of China

Below are lists of ethnic groups in China by linguistic classification. Ethnicities not on the official PRC list of 56 ethnic groups are italicized. Respective Pinyin transliterations and Chinese characters (both simplified and traditional) are also given.

Sino-Tibetan

- Sinitic

  - Chinese, 汉语, 漢語

    - Mandarin Chinese, 官话, 官話

      - Beijing Mandarin, 北京官话, 北京官話

        - Standard Chinese, 普通话, 普通話
        - Singaporean Mandarin, 新加坡华语, 新加坡華語
        - Malaysian Mandarin, 马来西亚华语, 馬來西亞華語

      - Taiwanese Mandarin, 台湾华语, 臺灣華語

        - Taipei Mandarin, 台北腔/国语, 臺北腔/國語

      - Northeastern Mandarin, 东北官话, 東北官話
      - Jilu Mandarin, 冀鲁官话, 冀魯官話
      - Jiaoliao Mandarin, 胶辽官话, 膠遼官話
      - Zhongyuan Mandarin, 中原官话, 中原官話
      - Lanyin Mandarin, 兰银官话, 蘭銀官話
      - Lower Yangtze Mandarin, 江淮官话, 江淮官話

- - - - Southwestern Mandarin, 西南官话, 西南官話
  - - - Jin Chinese, 晋语, 晉語
    - - Wu Chinese, 吴语, 吳語

      - - - Shanghainese, 上海话, 上海話
    - - Huizhou Chinese, 徽语, 徽語
    - - Yue Chinese, 粤语, 粤語

      - - - Cantonese, 广东话, 廣東話
    - - Ping Chinese, 平话, 平話
    - - Gan Chinese, 赣语, 贛語
    - - Xiang Chinese, 湘语, 湘語
    - - Hakka language, 客家话, 客家話
    - - Min Chinese, 闽语, 閩語

      - - - Southern Min, 闽南语, 閩南語

        - - - - Hokkien, 泉漳话, 泉漳話
          - - Teochew dialect, 潮州话, 潮州話
      - - Eastern Min, 闽东语, 閩東語
      - - Pu-Xian Min, 莆仙话, 莆仙話
      - - Leizhou Min, 雷州话, 雷州話
      - - Hainanese, 海南话, 海南話
      - - Northern Min, 闽北语, 閩北語
      - - Central Min, 闽中语, 閩中語
      - - Shao-Jiang Min, 邵将语, 邵將語

- Bai, 白語

  - Dali language, 大理語

    - Dali dialect(Bai: Darl lit)
    - Xiangyun dialect

  - Yitdut language/Jianchuan language, 剑川语, 劍川語

    - Yitdut dialect(Bai: Yit dut)
    - Heqing dialect(Bai: hhop kait)

  - Bijiang language

    - Bijiang dialect
    - Lanping dialect(Bai: ket dant)
    -

- Tibeto-Burman

  - Tujia

- Qiangic
  - Qiang
    - Northern Qiang
    - Southern Qiang
  - Prinmi
  - Baima
  - Tangut
- Bodish
  - Tibetan
    - Central Tibetan (Standard Tibetan)
    - Amdo Tibetan
    - Khams Tibetan
  - Lhoba
  - Monpa/Monba
- Lolo–Burmese–Naxi
  - Burmish
    - Achang
  - Loloish
    - Yi
    - Lisu
    - Lahu
    - Hani
    - Jino
  - Nakhi/Naxi
- Jingpho–Nungish–Luish
  - Jingpho
  - Derung
  - Nu
    - Nusu
    - Rouruo

Kra–Dai

(*Possibly the ancient Bǎiyuè 百越*)

- Be
- Kra
  - Gelao
- Kam–Sui

- - Dong
  - Sui
  - Maonan
  - Mulao/Mulam
- Hlai/Li
- Tai
  - Zhuang (Vahcuengh)
    - Northern Zhuang
    - Southern Zhuang
  - Bouyei
  - Dai
    - Tai Lü language
    - Tai Nüa language
    - Tai Dam language
    - Tai Ya language
    - Tai Hongjin language

Turkic

- Karluk
  - Ili Turki
  - Uyghur
  - Uzbek
- Kipchak
  - Kazakh
  - Kyrgyz
  - Tatar
- Oghuz
  - Salar
- Siberian
  - Äynu
  - Fuyu Kyrgyz
  - Western Yugur
  - Tuvan
  - *Old Uyghur (extinct)*
- *Old Turkic (extinct)*

Mongolic

- Mongolian
- Oirat

- - Torgut Oirat
  - Buryat
  - Daur
  - Southeastern
    - Monguor
      - Eastern Yugur
    - Dongxiang
    - Bonan
    - Kangjia
  - *Tuoba (extinct)*

Para-Mongolic

- *Khitan (extinct)*
- *Tuyuhun (extinct)*

Tungusic

- Southern
  - Manchu
    - Jurchen
  - Xibe
  - Nanai/Hezhen
- Northern
  - Evenki
  - Oroqen

Korean

- Korean

Hmong–Mien

(*Possibly the ancient Nánmán 南蛮, 南蠻*)

- Hmong
- Mien
- She

Austroasiatic

- Palaung-Wa

- Palaung/Blang
- De'ang
- Wa/Va
- Vietnamese/Kinh

Austronesian

- Formosan languages
- Tsat

Indo-European

- Russian
- *Tocharian (extinct)*
- *Saka (extinct)*
- Pamiri, (mislabelled as "Tajik")

  - Sarikoli
  - Wakhi
- Portuguese (spoken in Macau)
- English (spoken in Hong Kong)

Yeniseian

- *Jie (Kjet) (extinct)* (?)

Unclassified

- *Ruan-ruan (Rouran) (extinct)*

Mixed

- *Wutun (Mongolian-Tibetan mixed language)*
- *Macanese (Portuguese creole)*

Written languages

The following languages traditionally had written forms that do not involve Chinese characters (*hanzi*):

- The Dai people

  - Tai Lü language – Tai Lü alphabet
  - Tai Nüa language – Tai Nüa alphabet
- The Daur people - Daur language - Manchu alphabet

- The Hmong people - Hmongic languages - Hmong writing(Pollard script, Pahawh Hmong, Nyiakeng Puachue Hmong, etc.)
- The Kazakhs – Kazakh language – Kazakh alphabets
- The Koreans – Korean language – Chosŏn'gŭl alphabet
- The Kyrgyz – Kyrgyz language – Kyrgyz alphabets
- The Lisu people - Lisu language - Lisu script
- The Manchus – Manchu language – Manchu alphabet
- The Mongols – Mongolian language – Mongolian alphabet
- The Naxi – Naxi language – Dongba characters
- The Qiang people - Qiang language or Rrmea language - Rma script
- The Santa people (Dongxiangs in Chinese) - Santa language - Arabic script
- The Sui – Sui language – Sui script
- The Tibetans – Tibetan language – Tibetan alphabet
- The Uyghurs – Uyghur language – Uyghur Arabic alphabet
- The Xibe – Xibe language – Manchu alphabet
- The Yi – Yi language – Yi syllabary

Many modern forms of spoken Chinese languages have their own distinct writing system using Chinese characters that contain colloquial variants. These typically are used as sound characters to help determine the pronunciation of the sentence within that language:

- Written Sichuanese - Sichuanese
- Written Cantonese - Cantonese
- Written Shanghainese - Shanghainese
- Written Hakka - Hakka
- Written Hokkien - Hokkien
- Written Teochew - Teochew

The first page of the astronomy section of the 御製五體清文鑑 *Yuzhi Wuti Qing Wenjian*. The work contains four terms on each of its pages, arranged in the order of Manchu, Tibetan, Mongolian, Chagatai, and Chinese languages. For the Tibetan, it includes both transliteration and a transcription into the Manchu alphabet. For the Chagatai, it includes a line of transcription into the Manchu alphabet.

Some non-Sinitic peoples have historically used Chinese characters:

- The Koreans – Korean language – Hanja
- The Vietnamese - Vietnamese language - Chữ nôm
- The Zhuang (Tai people) – Zhuang languages – Sawndip
- The Bouyei people - Bouyei language - Bouyei writing(方塊布依字)
- The Bai people - Bai language - Bai writing(僰文)
- The Dong people - Dong language (China) - Dong writing(方塊侗字)

Other languages, all now extinct, used separate logographic scripts influenced by, but not directly derived from, Chinese characters:

- The Jurchens (Manchu ancestors) – Jurchen language – Jurchen script
- The Khitans (Mongolic people) – Khitan language – Khitan large and small scripts
- The Tanguts (Sino-Tibetan people) – Tangut language – Tangut script

During Qing dynasty, palaces, temples, and coins have sometimes been inscribed in five scripts:

- Chinese
- Manchu
- Mongol
- Tibetan
- Chagatai

During the Mongol Yuan dynasty, the official writing system was:

- 'Phags-pa script

Chinese banknotes contain several scripts in addition to Chinese script. These are:

- Mongol
- Tibetan
- Arabic (for Uyghur)
- Latin (for Zhuang)

Other writing system for Chinese languages in China include:

- Nüshu script

The reverse of a one jiao note with Chinese (Pinyin) at the top and Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Zhuang along the bottom.

Ten nationalities who never had a written system have, under the PRC's encouragement, developed phonetic alphabets. According to a government white paper (http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20050 301/index.htm) published in early 2005, "by the end of 2003, 22 ethnic minorities in China used 28 written languages."

Language policy

One decade before the demise of the Qing dynasty in 1912, Mandarin was promoted in the planning for China's first public school system.[5]

Mandarin has been promoted as the commonly spoken language for the country since 1956, based phonologically on the dialect of Beijing. The North Chinese language group is set up as the standard grammatically and lexically. Meanwhile, Mao Zedong and Lu Xun writings are used as the basis of the stylistic standard.[5] Pronunciation is taught with the use of the romanized phonetic system known as *pinyin*. Pinyin has been criticized for fear of an eventual replacement of the traditional character orthography.[5]

The Chinese language policy in mainland China is heavily influenced by the Soviet nationalities policy and officially encourages the development of standard spoken and written languages for each of the nationalities of China.[5] Language is one of the features used for ethnic identification.[7] In September 1951, the *All-China Minorities Education Conference* established that all minorities should

be taught in their language at the primary and secondary levels when they count with a writing language. Those without a writing language or with an "imperfect" writing language should be helped to develop and reform their writing languages.[7]

However, in this schema, Han Chinese are considered a single nationality and the official policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) treats the different varieties of Chinese differently from the different national languages, even though their differences are as significant, if not more so, as those between the various Romance languages of Europe. While official policies in mainland China encourage the development and use of different orthographies for the national languages and their use in educational and academic settings, realistically speaking it would seem that, as elsewhere in the world, the outlook for minority languages perceived as inferior is grim.[8] The Tibetan Government-in-Exile argue that social pressures and political efforts result in a policy of sinicization and feels that Beijing should promote the Tibetan language more. Because many languages exist in China, they also have problems regarding diglossia. Recently, in terms of Fishman's typology of the relationships between bilingualism and diglossia and his taxonomy of diglossia (Fishman 1978, 1980) in China: more and more minority communities have been evolving from "diglossia without bilingualism" to "bilingualism without diglossia." This could be an implication of mainland China's power expanding.[9]

In 2010, Tibetan students protested against changes in the Language Policy on the schools that promoted the use of Mandarin Chinese instead of Tibetan. They argued that the measure would erode their culture.[10] In 2013, China's Education Ministry said that about 400 million people were unable to speak the national language Mandarin. In that year, the government pushed linguistic unity in China, focusing on the countryside and areas with ethnic minorities.[11]

Mandarin Chinese is the prestige language in practice, and failure to protect ethnic languages does occur. In summer 2020, the Inner Mongolian government announced an education policy change to phase out Mongolian as the language of instructions for humanities in elementary and middle schools, adopting the national instruction material instead. Thousands of ethnic Mongolians in northern China gathered to protest the policy.[12] The Ministry of Education describes the move as a natural extension of the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* (Chinese: 通用语言文字法) of 2000.[13]

Study of foreign languages

English has been the most widely-taught foreign language in China, as it is a required subject for students attending university.[14][15] Other languages that have gained some degree of prevalence or interest are Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian.[16][17][18] During the 1950s and 1960s, Russian had some social status among elites in mainland China as the international language of socialism.

In the late 1960s, English replaced the position of Russian to become the most studied foreign language in China. After the Reform and Opening-up policy in 1988, English was taught in public schools starting in the third year of primary school.[19][20]

Russian, French, and German language classes have been made widely available in universities and colleges.[21] In Northeast China, there are many bilingual schools (Mandarin-Japanese; Mandarin-Korean; Mandarin-Russian), in these schools, students learn languages other than English.

The Economist reported in 2006 that up to one fifth of the population was learning English. Gordon Brown, the former British prime minister, estimated that the total English-speaking population in China would outnumber the native speakers in the rest of the world in two decades.[22]

There have been a growing number of students studying Arabic, due to reasons of cultural interest and belief in better job opportunities.[23] The language is also widely studied amongst the Hui people.[24] In the past, literary Arabic education was promoted in Islamic schools by the Kuomintang when it ruled mainland China.[25]

There have also been a growing number of students choosing to learn Urdu, due to interest in Pakistani culture, close ties between the respective nations, and job opportunities provided by the CPEC.[26]

Interest in Portuguese and Spanish have increased greatly, due in part to Chinese investment in Latin America as well as in African nations such as Angola, Mozambique, and Cape Verde. Portuguese is also one of the official languages in Macau, although its use had stagnated since the nation's transfer from Portugal to the PRC. It was estimated in 2016 that 2.3% of Macau's locals spoke the language,[27] although with government backing since then, interest in it has increased.[28]

Use of English

In China, English is used as a lingua franca in several fields, especially for business settings,[29] and in schools to teach Standard Mandarin to people who are not Chinese citizens.[30] English is also one of the official languages in Hong Kong.

See also

- *Language Atlas of China*
- *Linguistic Atlas of Chinese Dialects*
- Varieties of Chinese
- List of varieties of Chinese
- Han Chinese subgroups
- Demographics of China
- Racism in China
- Hong Kong English
- Languages of Hong Kong
- Culture of Macau
- Macanese Portuguese
- List of ethnic groups in China
- Classification of Southeast Asian languages
- Cantonese
- Standard Chinese

China portal

Language portal

- Chinglish

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External links

- Minzu Yuwen (民族语文): *Minority Languages of China* journal (http://www.nssd.org/journal/cn/806 01X/)
- Linguistic maps of China (http://www.muturzikin.com/cartesasie/9.htm) on Muturzikin.com
- Audio Bible recordings in various minority languages of China (http://globalrecordings.net/country/ CH?page=all)

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