

Lesson 1

The Chinese Phonetic Alphabet

There have been many different systems of transcription used for learning to pronounce Chinese. Today the official transcription accepted on an international basis is the Pinyin alphabet, developed in China at the end of the 1950's.

Initials

A syllable in Chinese is composed of an initial, which is a consonant that begins the syllable, and a final, which covers the rest of the syllable.

b	p	m	f
d	t	n	l
g	k	h	
j	q	x	
z	c	s	
zh	ch	sh	r

- **m, f, n, l, h** and **sh** are pronounced as in English.
- **d** like "d" in "bed" (unaspirated)
j like "g" in "genius" (unaspirated)
z like "ds" in "beds"
zh like "j" in "job"
b like "p" in "spin" (unaspirated)
g a soft unaspirated "k" sound
x like "sh" in "sheep" but with the corners of the lips drawn back
r somewhat like "r" in "rain"
- Particular attention should be paid to the pronunciation of the so-called "aspirated" consonants. It is necessary to breath heavily after the consonant is pronounced.
p like "p" in "pope"
t like "t" in "tap"
k like "k" in "kangaroo"
q harder than "ch" in "cheap"
c like "ts" in "cats"
ch (tongue curled back, aspirated)
- Distinction between certain initials:
b / p d / t g / k j / q z / c zh / ch

Finals

In modern Chinese, there are 38 finals besides the above-represented 21 initials.

	i	u	ü
a	ia	ua	
o		uo	üe
e	ie		
er			
ai		uai	
ei		uei (ui)	
ao	iao		
ou	iou (iu)		
an	ian	uan	üan
en	in	uen (un)	üen
ang	iang	uang	
eng	ieng	ueng	
ong	iong		

- **ie** like "ye" in "yes"
- **e** like "e" in "her"
- **er** like "er" in "sister" (american pronunciation)
- **ai** like "y" in "by" (light)
- **ei** like "ay" in "bay"
- **ou** like "o" in "go"
- **an** like "an" in "can" (without stressing the "n")
- **-ng** (final) a nasalized sound like the "ng" in "bang" without pronouncing the "g"
- **uei, uen** and **iou** when preceded by an initial, are written as **ui, un** and **iu** respectively.

Tones

Mandarin Chinese has four pitched tones and a "toneless" tone.

Tone	Mark	Description
1st	dā	High and level
2nd	dá	Starts medium in tone, then rises to the top
3rd	dǎ	Starts low, dips to the bottom, then rises toward the top
4th	dà	Starts at the top, then falls sharp and strong to the bottom
Neutral	da	Flat, with no emphasis

Tones Changes

A 3rd tone, when immediately followed by another 3rd tone, should be pronounced in the 2nd tone.

Nǐ hǎo = Ní hǎo

Conversation

Nǐ hǎo!

你好！

Zài jiàn!

再见！

你	nǐ	(pro)	You
好	hǎo	(adj)	good, well, fine
你好！	nǐhǎo!		Hello, How are you?
再	zài	(adv)	again
见	jiàn	(v)	see
再见！	zàijiàn!		Goodbye!

Hànzì Exercises

你	你	你	你	你	你	你
好	好	好	好	好	好	
再	再	再	再	再	再	
见	见	见	见			