

SOUNDS

Chinese is written using characters. However, these characters cannot be sounded out like English words can be. If one has not memorized the pronunciation of a character, there is really no way to know how it is pronounced by looking at it. So, Chinese children and foreign learners of Chinese alike first learn a phonetic system, called romanization or *pīnyīn*, to represent the sounds. This system uses letters from the alphabet as its base, making it an efficient way to learn how to speak and pronounce Chinese characters. Although it is not the only system for representing the sounds of Chinese, it is the better choice in that it is the most accessible and widely-used.

Since Chinese is a monosyllabic language, these sounds can be divided into a basic two-part structure: an initial sound and a final sound. Initials are consonants that are first pronounced, while finals are either vowels (e.g., a, ai, iu) or vowel and consonant combinations (e.g., ang, en, er) that come at the end of the syllable. To use the most common Chinese surname Wang as an example, the initial and final are:

<u>INITIAL</u>	<u>FINAL</u>
	W
ANG	

This separation of initial and final sounds has been used by Chinese to aid in pronunciation for at least the last 2,000 years. It is a useful division in initially learning Chinese pronunciation.

We will begin by covering the sounds of all the initials. But first, an important warning is necessary. Since *pīnyīn* uses English letters, you will have a tendency to read them with their English pronunciation. However, only a part of these initials have the same or a similar pronunciation as English. Several have a different (and sometimes very different!) pronunciation. So even if you have learned them before, reviewing this section several times will train you to read them correctly.