



# Lotus Chinese Learning

## Introduction

This document won't teach you Chinese. It is more of an FAQ *about* the Chinese language. Knowledge about a language is not enough to learn how to speak a language. You need something called [comprehensible input](#) to actually learn a language. Many students (and parents) still have common questions about the Chinese language. Those questions are exactly what this document is for. If you would like to know whether Chinese characters are tiny pictures or what the difference between Mandarin and Cantonese is, read on!

## Pinyin

What is pinyin?

*Hanyu pinyin*, often just referred to as “pinyin” is the system of Romanization for Mandarin Chinese. It is the system for learning the pronunciation of Chinese characters and it is used for typing Chinese as well. Much of the credit for inventing pinyin is given to linguist Zhou Youguang.

Hanyu pinyin is not a “middle ground” for non-Chinese to learn the Chinese language without having to learn the characters. School children in China today learn *hanyu pinyin* from early on and everyone from office workers to grandparents use the system to type into their phones and computers (although there are other ways to input Chinese electronically). Conveniently for foreign travelers, street signs in China often use Chinese characters and pinyin.

Pinyin is a system of Romanization for Chinese, which means that it is a system for writing Chinese with the Roman alphabet. This doesn't mean that someone who uses the Roman alphabet in their native language, e.g. English, can pronounce words written in pinyin. Some letters are the same as their English counterparts and some are different. Below is an introduction to pinyin pronunciation. It is meant to describe the



# Lotus Chinese Learning

sounds of letters and some combinations of letters in pinyin to students who have no knowledge of linguistics.

Pinyin is broken down into initials, finals and tones (diacritical marks)

## **Initials:**

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

## **Finals:**

**a, ai, an, ang, ao, e, ei, en, eng, er, i, ia, iao, iang, ie, in, ing, iong, iu, o, ong, ou, u, ua, uai, uan, uang, ui, un, uo, ü, üan, üe, ün**

## **Basic pronunciation of the initials:**

“m,” “f,” and “p” are pronounced the same as the English letters.

“b” is pronounced like a soft “p” as in “spine.”

“d,” “t,” are similar to English, the “d” is spoken with the tongue curving upwards towards the roof of the mouth and the “t” is pronounced with the tongue curving in the opposite direction.

“n” is similar to English, with a slightly more nasal sound.

“g,” and “k” are similar to the English sounds (with the “g” being closer to a hard “g” sound in English), and also to each other, however the pinyin “g” is unaspirated and the “k” is aspirated.

“h” is an English “h” with more friction.

“j” is similar to the English “j” as in “Jeep,” but the tongue is placed closer to the back of the upper front teeth.

“q” is pronounced like “ch” in English.

“x” is pronounced somewhere between the English “sh” as in “she” and an “s” with a small lisp.

“c” is pronounced like the “ts” in “cats.”

“z” is pronounced like the “ds” in “lads.”



# Lotus Chinese Learning

“ch” is pronounced similarly to the English “ch” but with the tip of the tongue pressed against the top of the mouth. The “ch” is aspirated.

“zh” sounds like an English “j,” but is unaspirated.

## Tones

There are four tones in Mandarin Chinese.

	Character	Pinyin	Meaning	Tone description
1.	妈	mā	Mother	High tone; “baby talk voice”
2.	麻	má	Hemp	Rising tone
3.	马	mǎ	Horse	Falling and rising tone
4.	骂	mà	To scold	Falling tone; “the angry tone”

NB- We also have the “neutral” tone in Chinese, sometimes called the 5<sup>th</sup> tone

## Chinese Characters

Lotus Chinese Learning generally uses simplified characters, which are used in Mainland China. Most Chinese programs in the US currently use simplified characters. Traditional characters are used in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Chinese characters are the written representation of Chinese syllables. Each character also has at least one meaning. In general, Chinese words are made up of two characters. Characters are made up of radicals, which may represent either meaning or sound. The smallest unit of characters are the strokes, which have no meaning on their own.

### Sample Characters:

Simplified character: 国 guó “country”

Traditional Character: 國

“Surround” radical suggests the meaning, referring to national boundaries

Word as it is used in regular speech: 国家 guójiā “country”



# Lotus Chinese Learning

Ex. 中国是一个发展中国家。Zhōngguó shì yīgè fāzhǎn guójiā. China is a developing country.

## Character categories

Since the earliest dictionaries, Chinese characters have been classified into six categories. While it is not necessary to memorize which category a character belongs to, understanding the origin of characters can aid students in remembering their meaning. Since characters predate their having a classification system, some fit better in their categories than others. Most characters derive their meaning from the system of radicals, such as 氵 "three dots water" mentioned in the table, a chart of the modern radicals should be used when beginning to study the characters.

象形字 xiángxíngzì	Pictographic characters	人，月，日， 木，目，网， 耳，田，羊， 山，心，门， 女，水。。。	Very few Chinese characters fall into the 象形 category. Of the ones that do, however, most, if not all, are quite common. While some characters such as 人 rén "person" or 山 shān "mountain" are fairly straightforward pictures, some require more of a squint and are more recognizable in earlier or traditional forms.
指事字 zhǐshìzì	Self-explanatory characters	上，下，本， 一，二， 三。。。	There aren't many of these self-explanatory characters, whose meanings should be clear from their forms. Like the pictographic characters above, there aren't many of these types of



# Lotus Chinese Learning

			characters in existence, but they are used very frequently.
会意字 huìyìzì	Associative characters/compounds Meaning-meaning compound	明, 休, 好, 男, 家。。	These characters get their meaning from the combined meanings of their components. Thus, 日 “sun” + 月 “moon” = 明 “bright,” and so on.
形声字 xíngshēngzì	Pictophonetic characters Sound-meaning compounds	江, 河, 洋, 请, 情, 盲	By far the most common of the character types, these characters are formed by a component that suggests the meaning and another that suggests the sound. Thus 氵 “three dots water” + 可 kě = 河 hé “river”



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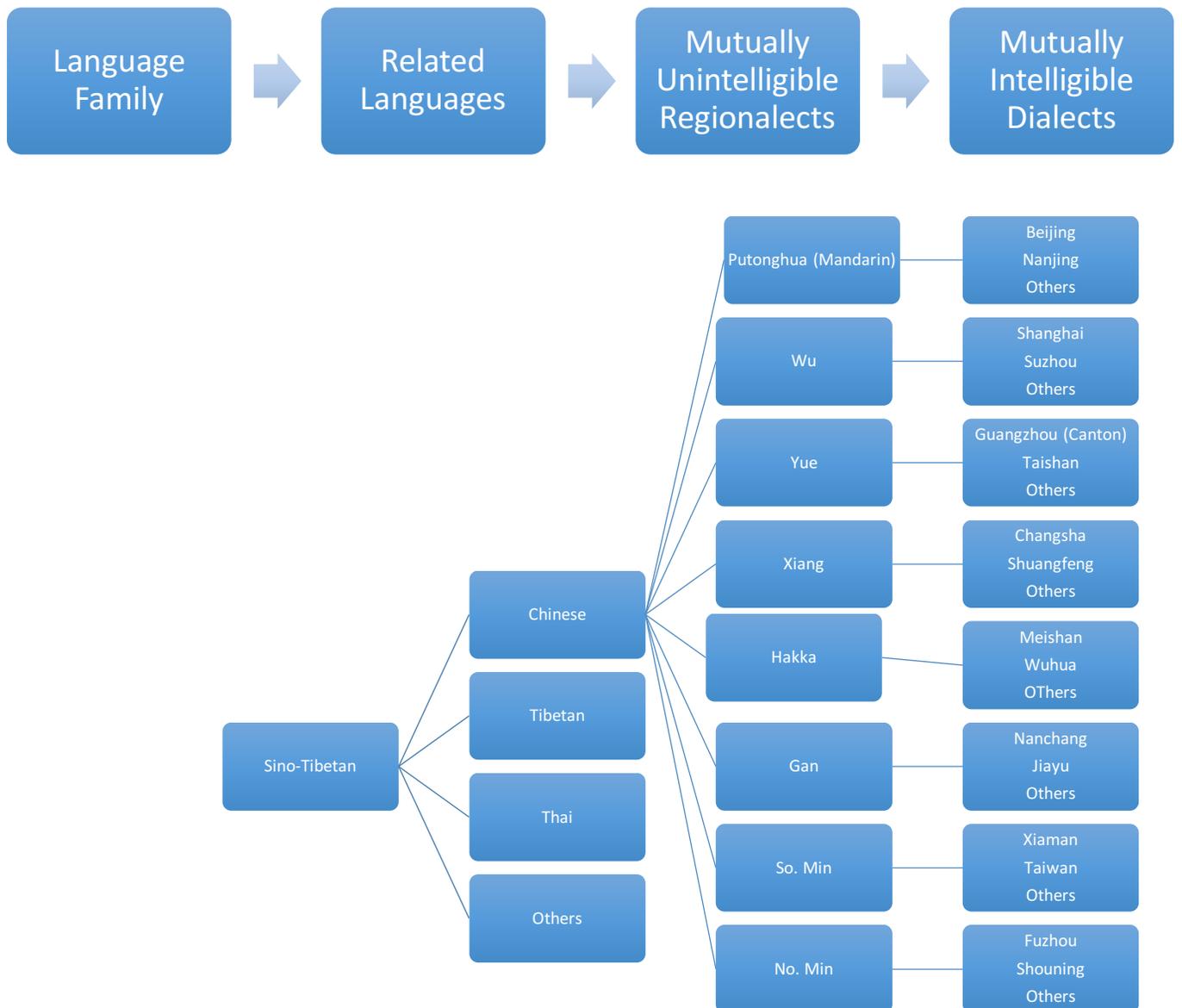
<p>假借字 jiǎjièzì</p>	<p>Phonetic loan characters</p>	<p>来，我，万， 六，北。。。。</p>	<p>These characters borrow their sounds from other characters (which have vastly different meanings are not likely to be confused in context) and their meanings will just have to be remembered by the student. Some linguists include explanative characters, or characters that are made of a component that gives meaning and another that gives both sound and meaning in this category, while others consider those characters to be 形声字。</p>
<p>转注字 zhuǎnzhùzì</p>	<p>Mutually explanatory characters</p>	<p>老，考</p>	<p>These are the only two mutually explanatory characters in regular use. This category of characters is therefore very small and not well understood.</p>



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## The Linguistic Diversity of China

Lotus Chinese Learning teaches Mandarin Chinese (also known as Putonghua). There are however, many different languages and dialects spoken in China. These dialects might be better understood at topolects since they are particular to their own regions and cities. Some dialects are mutually intelligible and some are not. Below please find a chart that illustrates how many of the languages spoken in China are related. There are many languages spoken in China that are not listed here.





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## Chinese grammar

Most people who have studied a second language remember looking at verb charts. They go something like “*yo soy, tu eres...*” Chinese does not have verb forms. It is 是 (to be) for everything: is, am, are, was, were. We could talk about Chinese grammar, and its differences with English grammar all day. What is a topic-comment sentence? How do we use 的? What is the difference between 把 and 将? Again, learning about grammar won’t teach you how to speak a language. That’s what comprehensible input is for. You can get that through taking language classes. For more information on language classes, get in touch: [mary@lotuschineselearning.com](mailto:mary@lotuschineselearning.com).