



Chinese

A Linguistic Introduction

Chaofen Sun

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Chinese: A Linguistic Introduction

Chinese is spoken by more people than any other language in the world, and has a rich social, cultural and historical background. This is a comprehensive guide to the linguistic structure of Chinese, providing an accessible introduction to each of the key areas. It describes the fundamentals of its writing system, its pronunciation and tonal sound system, its morphology (how words are structured), and its syntax (how sentences are formed) – as well as its historical development, and the diverse ways in which it interacts with other languages. Setting the discussion of all aspects of Chinese firmly within the context of the language in use, *Chinese: A Linguistic Introduction* will be of great benefit to learners wishing to extend their knowledge and competence in the language, and their teachers. It will also be a useful starting point for students of linguistics beginning work on the structure of this major world language.

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Preface

Over the past decade, with more and more students thinking of a China-related career, interest in Chinese culture and China's languages has grown rapidly. In the meantime, at Stanford University where I teach Chinese linguistics, the Chinese as a foreign language program has become the second-largest one in terms of the number of students enrolled in different levels of instruction. In writing this book, I hope to systematically introduce English-speaking students to some basic linguistic knowledge, in addition to different socio-cultural aspects of the Chinese languages to meet their diverse interests. I first recognized the need for such an elementary book when I was preparing to teach a new course on Chinese language, culture and society in 1998 and could not find any published work in English specifically dealing with the topic. It so happened that in the summer of 2001 Ms. Kate Brett of Cambridge University Press visited me and, upon hearing of my search for such a book, encouraged me to write one myself. The following year, I submitted a book proposal and was very glad that Cambridge University Press quickly decided to move forward with it.

In the course of writing the manuscript, I have received generous support from my colleagues and friends. In particular I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Dean's office of the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford University and Stanford Humanities Center for providing me with a Stanford Humanities Fellowship that has given me a year's time to write up this manuscript. I also want to thank the Stanford Center for East Asian Studies that provided me with an undergraduate research assistantship in the 2004 summer allowing me to work with Andrea Snaveley, who has corrected my English errors and offered many valuable suggestions to make the manuscript more readable to a general audience. In addition, I want to acknowledge my gratitude toward the anonymous Cambridge University Press reviewer for valuable comments and suggestions making me clarify my thinking and correcting many mistakes. I am also grateful to Cambridge

University Press editor, Ms. Helen Barton, for her patience. Finally, I must mention my many students over the years as they are really the reason for me to write this book. In the course of this effort, my knowledge of the field was greatly extended either through our discussion and debate in and out of class or through the research I did on various topics of our common interest.

Of course, all the errors in this book are completely mine.

Major chronological divisions of Chinese history

夏	Xia dynasty – twenty-first to sixteenth centuries BCE
商	Shang dynasty – sixteenth to eleventh centuries BCE
西周	Western Zhou dynasty – eleventh century to 770 BCE
春秋	Spring and Autumn period – 770 to 403 BCE
战国	Warring States period – 403 to 221 BCE
秦	Qin dynasty – 221 to 207 BCE
汉	Han dynasty – 206 BCE to 220 CE
三国	Three Kingdoms period – 220 CE to 265
晋	Jin dynasty – 265 to 420
南北朝	Northern and Southern dynasty – 420 to 589
隋	Sui dynasty – 589 to 618
唐	Tang dynasty – 618 to 907
五代	Five Dynasties period – 907 to 960
北宋	Northern Song dynasty – 960 to 1127
南宋	Southern Song dynasty – 1127 to 1279
辽	Liao dynasty – 916 to 1126
金	Jin dynasty – 1115 to 1234
元	Yuan dynasty – 1279 to 1368
明	Ming dynasty – 1368 to 1644
清	Qing dynasty – 1644 to 1911

Major periods of the Chinese language

Oracle and Bronze inscriptions	sixteenth century to 771 BCE
Old Chinese	771 BCE to 220 CE
Middle Chinese	220 CE to 960
Early Modern Chinese	960 to 1900
Modern Chinese	1900 to present

Introduction

The phonetic transcriptions used in this book for Mandarin data are the officially adopted *hànyǔ pīnyīn* spelling used in China. The data from various Chinese dialects are transcribed in the International Phonetic Alphabet adopted by the International Phonetic Association (see Appendix 1).

1 China and Chinese in the world

For centuries China stood as the most powerful country in Asia with a splendid civilization, outpacing the rest of the world in many ways. With the longest unbroken line of recorded history, its extant literature has lasted for more than three millennia, with a legacy extending back to 1500 BCE and with many outstanding Chinese scholars in science, philosophy, literature, and many other fields that continue to influence the modern world. However, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China was devastated by a series of foreign invasions, famines, and internal turmoils that prevented it from keeping pace with the rapid developments in science and technology and caused it to lag behind the industrialized world in many aspects. It was not until 1979, when Chinese leaders decided to reopen China's doors to the outside world and to convert its state-planned economy into a market-oriented one, that China's national economy started to develop at one of the world's fastest growth rates. After more than twenty years of sustained development, China is now the fourth-largest trading nation and has the second-largest foreign reserves in the world.¹ Its major trading partners include the United States, Japan, Germany, France, the United Kingdom and many other European Union members. In fact, it has been claimed that, measured on a purchasing-power parity basis, China currently stands as the second-largest economy in the world after the United States.²

As the world is becoming more and more integrated, contacts between China and the rest of the world have also become common. During the last

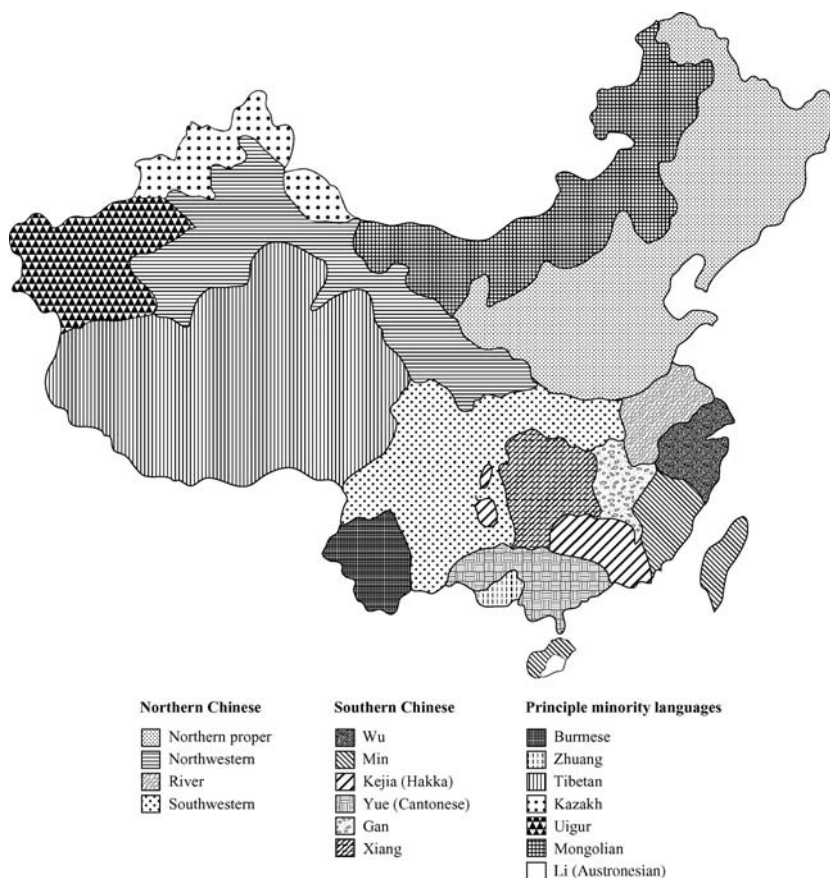
ten years of the twentieth century, China actually sent more international students than any other country in the world to study in the United States. In recent years, many people, particularly overseas Chinese, have moved to live and build up their careers in the People's Republic of China.

The population in China alone accounts for about 1.3 billion,³ approximately one-fifth of the total population of the human race. With such a high percentage of the human race growing up speaking different varieties of the language as their first language, Chinese is indisputably one of the most commonly used languages in the world.

Against such a background, interest in the Chinese language has grown rapidly outside China. Over the last decade, many colleges in the United States saw the number of students enrolled in their Chinese-language classes double, or in some cases triple. It has been reported⁴ that, accompanying China's becoming an official member of the World Trade Organization in 2003, the total number of non-Chinese students who were studying Chinese outside the People's Republic of China reached 25 million. In the same year, there was a great shortage of qualified Chinese-language instructors in the People's Republic to teach some 50,000 foreign students who had traveled to China to study Chinese.

2 China

China is a unitary multinational state which officially recognizes 56 ethnic groups including Han, Zhuang, Uygur, Hui, Yi, Tibetan, Miao, Manchu, Mongol, Buyi, and Korean. Chinese, or *zhōngguó rén* 中国人, is used to refer to all citizens the People's Republic of China regardless of ethnic nationality. Apart from the Han majority, the non-Han Chinese, with a total of more than 96.5 million people, constitute roughly 8% of the total population in the People's Republic. Small as the percentage may appear, they nevertheless inhabit nearly 60% of the land mass of the nation. Nearly all the ethnic groups have spoken languages of their own, and twenty-three have written languages of their own (Map 1 is a linguistic map of China). In the south are the Tai-speaking Zhuang people; in southwest China reside the Tibeto-Burman speakers like Tibetans, Yi, etc; in the northwest corner live the Turkic branch Altaic speakers like Uygurs and Kazakhs; in the north are Altaic speakers like Mongols, Koreans, etc. With a population larger than 15 million, Zhuang is, next to Han, the largest ethnic group in China. However, there are eighteen



Map 1

other ethnic groups with a population larger than a million, including Manchu, Hui, Miao, Uygur, Tibetan, Mongolian, Korean and Kazakh. Another fifteen ethnic groups have a population larger than 100,000. The rest are smaller (Zhou 2003).

The territory of China currently occupies an area of about 9,600,000 square kilometers in East Asia, a country that is geographically almost as big as the United States or only 700,000 square kilometers smaller than the entirety of Europe. After the 1911 Revolution when the Qing Empire fell after a popular revolt led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party, the new Republic was then known as *zhōnghuá míngguó* 中华民国 "Republic of China." Later,

in 1949, the Nationalists under the leadership of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, lost the civil war and control of most of China to the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Zedong, and the name of the country was changed into *zhōnghuá rénmin gònghéguó* 中华人民共和国 “the People’s Republic of China.” Nowadays, the Republic of China has jurisdiction over the island of Taiwan where the Nationalist government continued to rule after its defeat in the mainland in 1949. However, in spite of the differences in official names, the Chinese people in modern times most commonly identify China in Chinese with the shortened form *zhōngguó* 中国, that is composed of the first and last syllables of the two official names of modern China.

In Chinese history, the country was most commonly referred to in Chinese by the name of its ruling empire such as *dàqīngguó* 大清国 “the Qing Empire” (1644–1911 CE). Even the English name of the country, i.e., *China*, may be phonetically related to the sounds of the name of the powerful Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE), which defeated various warring states and established the first Chinese empire with a highly centralized government. However, after the 1911 Revolution, the country was commonly referred to as *zhōngguó*. Furthermore, the Chinese people have used *zhōngguó* 中国 to denote the area where the natives accept and carry on the Chinese civilization for a very long time, although sinologists sometimes translate *zhōngguó* into English literally as *Middle Kingdom* or sometimes *Central States*. In isolation, the two syllables, *zhōng* 中 and *guó* 国, that make up the short name actually carry the meanings “middle” or “central” for *zhōng* and “country” or “state” for *guó* separately. But the notion of *Central States* implies multiple entities, whereas *Middle Kingdom* refers to one country. As early as the Chunqiu period (770–476 BCE),⁵ *zhōng-guó*, refers to a geographical area with many warring states and, therefore, *Central States* is an appropriate translation for the land at that time. For example, in (1) *zhōngguó* was already in use referring to an area contrasting with *yídí* 夷狄 “foreign countries” in a document written over two millennia ago.

(1) 桓公救中国而攘夷狄

Huán gōng jiù zhōngguó ér rǎng yí-dí (公羊传: 僖公)

Name duke save central-states and resist foreign-foreign

“Duke Huan saved the central states and resisted the foreign countries.”

Therefore, at that time, *zhōngguó* was already used as a term to distinguish the states that embraced Chinese civilization from those that did not. However, after all the warring states were unified by the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE) under one central government, the term *zhōngguó*, from its former sense, a central area occupied by a number of states, naturally developed into a noun for the unified country. This happened as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). In example (2), *zhōngguó* clearly refers to the entire Han empire. Therefore, it makes sense to translate it as “Middle Kingdom.”

- (2) 天下名山八而三在蛮夷五在中国
 tiān-xià míng shān bā ér sān zài mán-yí
 sky-down noted mountain eight and three in foreign-foreign
 wǔ zài zhōng-guó (史記：本紀)
 five in central-state
 “There are eight famous mountains in the world. Three are in
 foreign countries, and five in the Middle Kingdom.”

From these examples we can see that the Chinese name for China, *zhōngguó*, originally refers to a number of states situated roughly along the Yellow River in North China that defines the limits of Chinese civilization and later becomes a noun designating the unified empire. In modern times, when serving as a short name for China, the meanings of “central,” or “middle” in this lexical item are completely lost.⁶

3 Chinese

Chinese, as a language name in English, refers to the Sinitic subgroup of Sino-Tibetan languages in Asia. But it can be translated into various Chinese nouns for the language encompassing many different ideas depending on the context. First of all, Chinese can be translated as *zhōngwén* 中文 generally referring to the language. *Zhōngwén* 中文 is also the right term to use for the academic discipline in studying Chinese language and literature, such as *zhōngwénxì* 中文系 for the Chinese department in a university setting. Second, the term *hànyǔ* 汉语 “Han language” is used in the context contrasting the languages spoken by the Han nationality that makes up 92% of the 1.3 billion Chinese citizens of the People’s Republic with all of the non-Han languages

spoken in China and the rest of the world. Therefore, foreign students who are now learning Chinese are said to be learning *hànyǔ* 汉语. Third, as *hànyǔ* is a general term for the languages, many of which are mutually unintelligible among speakers of different varieties of Han language, it by default refers to the standard dialect of the country that is known as *pǔtōnghuà* 普通话 literally meaning “common language” in the People’s Republic. *Pǔtōnghuà* is a constructed norm based upon the language, a variety of Northern Chinese, spoken in the capital city, Beijing. Moreover, Chinese corresponds to a number of Chinese equivalents depending on the given speech community. In Singapore, an important Chinese-speaking community, as well as in the other Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, Chinese is known as *huáyǔ* 华语 “Hua-language,” as *Huá* is another Chinese name for the Han-Chinese. In Taiwan, for historical reasons, standard Chinese is known as *guóyǔ* 国语, literally “national language.” Different as *huáyǔ* 华语 and *guóyǔ* 国语 may appear, the standard is practically the same as *pǔtōnghuà*. Mandarin referring to Northern Chinese in English originated from the fact that the Mandarin officials of the Qing Empire spoke to each other in that language. Fourth, “Chinese” also refers to different Chinese dialects, or *hànfāngyán* 汉方言, but does not include any of the non-Han-Chinese languages spoken by ethnic minorities in China.

An extraordinary phenomenon for the Han-Chinese is the lack of mutual intelligibility among people within the same ethnic group. A Chinese person from Beijing who has grown up speaking the most prestigious dialect of the nation cannot speak or understand the local languages in the south, or the so-called Southern Chinese dialects, such as those used in the streets of Shanghai or Hong Kong. Traditionally, Han-Chinese is divided into seven major dialect groups, Mandarin (or *beifānghuà* Northern Chinese), Wu, Xiang, Gan, Kejia (Hakka), Yue (Cantonese), and Min.⁷ Among the Han-Chinese, Northern Chinese speakers comprise 70% (840 million), Wu 8.5% (102 million), Yue 5.5% (66 million), Min 4.5% (54 million), Kejia 4% (48 million), Gan 2.5% (30 million), and Xiang 5% (60 million).⁸ In spite of sharing a large number of cognates, or words of common origin, Chinese dialects vary most strikingly in their sound systems. All Chinese dialects have tones with different pitch contours for each syllable (for details see chapter 2). Table 1 shows the tonal variations of different dialects as given in *hànyǔ fāngyīn zìhuì* “A list of words with dialectal pronunciations” (Chinese Department, Beijing University 1989).

Table 1 *Tonal variation in Chinese dialects. 55, 35, 214, etc. are tonal values. For a more detailed description please refer to section 2.4.*

Dialect	City	Tones (with tonal values)
Mandarin	Beijing	four tones: 55, 35, 214, 51
Wu	Suzhou	seven tones: 44, 24, 52, 412, 31, 4, 23
Xiang	Changsha	six tones: 33, 13, 41, 55, 21, 24
Gan	Nanchang	seven tones: 42, 24, 213, 45, 21, 5, 21
Kejia	Meixian	six tones: 44, 11, 31, 52, 1, 5
Yue	Guangzhou	nine tones: 55, 21, 35, 23, 33, 22, 5, 22, 2
Min	Xiamen	seven tones: 55, 24, 51, 11, 33, 32, 5

Table 2 *Pronunciation of some Chinese cognates in different dialects.*

City	口 “mouth”	金 “gold”	男 “male”	省 “province”
Beijing	kou	jin	nan	sheng
Suzhou	k'ʊ	tɕin	nø	*sən/saŋ
Changsha	kəu	tɕin	lan	sən
Nanchang	k'ieʊ	tɕin	lan	*sən/saŋ
Meixian	*k'ɛu/hɛu	kim	nam	*sən/saŋ
Guangzhou	hɛu	kəm	nam	ʃaŋ
Xiamen	*k'ɔ/k'au	kim	lam	stŋ

* The first of the pair represents literary pronunciation, *wéndú*, and the second colloquial pronunciation, *báidú*.

The examples in Table 2 show the diversified pronunciation of cognates for *mouth*, *gold*, *male*, and *province* in different Chinese dialects (Chinese Department, Beijing University 1989).

The seven major Chinese dialect groups are actually like many European languages that are members of the Indo-European language group but are mutually unintelligible. However, unlike Europeans, the inability to understand each other's speech has not made Chinese speakers feel any less Chinese, regardless of the variety of language they grew up speaking. Norman (1988: 1) observes that:

The explanation is to be found in the profound unity of Chinese culture that has been transmitted in an unbroken line beginning from the third millennium BC and continuing down to the present day. Even in periods of political disunity at various times in the past, the ideal of a single, culturally unified Chinese empire has never been forgotten. The Chinese language, especially in its written form, has always been one of the most powerful symbols of this cultural unity.

Unlike European languages, the writings of which are alphabetical and bear a direct relationship to the speech sounds in the given language, Chinese writing adopts a logographic system with characters that are partially morpho-syllabic (see Chapter 4).⁹ Although Chinese speakers from different parts of the country may not be able to carry out a meaningful conversation in their own spoken language, they can easily communicate in writing, which creates a common, solidifying, and profound cultural bond among all Chinese dialect speakers.

This connection is made possible by the fact that the grammar of written Chinese generally follows the grammar of standard Chinese *pǔtōnghuà* without incorporating into it too many regional dialectal features. All Han-Chinese children, particularly those growing up in dialect-speaking areas, must learn to write in this literary language in school. Fortunately, in spite of some minor structural variations, the syntactic structures in *pǔtōnghuà* and the various dialects do not differ substantially, thus making learning less onerous for dialect-speaking children. Their primary task in learning *pǔtōnghuà* is to a large extent simply to master the sound system of the national standard. For example, other than the differences in speech sounds, the most conspicuous difference between two sentences in *pǔtōnghuà* and Cantonese, or a Yue dialect, is perhaps the perfective marker (glossed as PFV in (3), *le* versus *zo*, that may not share a common origin.

- (3) *pǔtōnghuà*: 我买了一本书
 wǒ mǎi le yì-běn shū
 1st buy PFV a-CL book
 “I have bought a book.”
- Cantonese: 我买佐一本书
 ŋ o mai zo jat-pun Sy
 I buy PFV a-CL book
 “I have bought a book.”

Of course, these similarities do not mean that learning the grammar of standard Chinese is completely effortless for dialect-speaking Chinese children. Dialectal variations among the Chinese dialects go beyond speech sounds and vocabularies and definitely reach sentence grammar. For example, in (4) the adverb *xiān* “first” goes before the verb in *pǔtōnghuà* but

the adverb *Sin* with a similar function in Cantonese takes the sentence-final position.

- (4) *pǔtōnghuà*: 我 先 去
 wǒ xiān qù
 I first go
 “I go first.”

Cantonese: 我 行 先
 ŋ o haŋ Sin
 I go first
 “I go first.”

It is highly possible for a Cantonese speaker to learn to say something with the correct *pǔtōnghuà* pronunciation, but with the Cantonese sentence grammar like *wǒ qù xiān* “I go first.” In this case, even though the sentence may sound very odd to a Northern Chinese speaker, the chance for her/him to comprehend the sentence is still good. However, in the school setting, the wrong word order in syntax would still be considered incorrect and not tolerated by the teachers. In most cases, children growing up in a Cantonese-speaking area would be taught to avoid speaking *pǔtōnghuà* and writing formally in this kind of ungrammatical manner.

Standard Chinese, or *pǔtōnghuà*, is generally considered to be the most prestigious variety of the Chinese language all over the country, perhaps only with the exception of Hong Kong, which is located in the Yue-speaking area. For example, whereas in the city of Shanghai, which is located in the Wu-speaking area, the language that is most commonly used in schools is *pǔtōnghuà*, it is not so in Hong Kong as its sovereignty was not returned to the Chinese authorities until 1997. During the 150 years of colonial rule under the United Kingdom, English was considered the primary language of the colony even though the majority of the people living in the colony could not speak this language. Compared to Hong Kong, Guangzhou (Canton), another city located in the Yue-speaking area which was never placed under British rule, has a profile in which English is hardly used at all in any sociolinguistic domain. It seems that even though *pǔtōnghuà* is most prestigious in the two Southern-dialect-speaking cities, Shanghai and Guangzhou, English is still the language that enjoys the highest prestige in Hong Kong as English still figures most importantly in legal, governmental, and educational sectors,