

Onsets

Many Chinese syllables include an onset, so this lesson will focus on the correct pronunciation of these onsets. As we have seen in the last lesson, Chinese has a total of 23 onsets, all of which can be seen in this table.

		Onsets																						
		b	p	m	f	d	t	n	l	g	k	h	z	c	s	zh	ch	sh	r	j	q	x	∅	
Offsets	a	ba	pa	ma	fa	da	ta	na	la	ga	ka	ha	za	ca	sa	zha	cha	sha					a	
	o	bo	po	mo	fo																		o	
	e			me		de	te	ne	le	ge	ke	he	ze	ce	se	zhe	che	she	re				e	
	ai	bai	pai	mai		dai	tai	nai	lai	gai	kai	hai	zai	cai	sai	zhai	chai	shai					ai	
	ei	bei	pei	mei	fei	dei	tei	nei	lei	gei	kei	hei	zei			zhai	chai	shai					ei	
	ao	bao	pao	mao		dao	tao	nao	lao	gao	kao	hao	zao	cao	sao	zhao	chao	shao	rao				ao	
	ou		pou	mou	fou	dou	tou	nou	lou	gou	kou	hou	zou	cou	sou	zhou	chou	shou	rou				ou	
	an	ban	pan	man	fan	dan	tan	nan	lan	gan	kan	han	zan	can	san	zhan	chan	shan	ran				an	
	ang	bang	pang	mang	fang	dang	tang	nang	lang	gang	kang	hang	zang	cang	sang	zhang	chang	shang	rang				ang	
	en	ben	pen	men	fen	den		nen		gen	ken	hen	zen	cen	sen	zhen	chen	shen	ren				en	
	eng	beng	peng	meng	feng	deng	teng	neng	leng	geng	keng	heng	zeng	ceng	seng	zheng	cheng	sheng	reng				eng	
	ong					dong	tong	nong	long	gong	kong	hong	zong	cong	song	zhong	chong	shong	rong				ong	
	u	bu	pu	mu	fu	du	tu	nu	lu	gu	ku	hu	zu	cu	su	zhu	chu	shu	ru				wu	
	ua									gua	kua	hua				zhuo	chuo	shuo	ruo				ua	
	uo					duo	tuo	nuo	luo	guo	kuo	huo	zuo	cuo	suo	zhuo	chuo	shuo	ruo				uo	
	uai									guai	kuai	huai				zhuai	chuai	shuai					wai	
	ui					dui	tui			gui	kui	hui	zui	cui	sui	zhui	chui	shui	ruì				ui	
	uan					duan	tuan	nuan	luan	guan	kuan	huan	zuan	cuan	suan	zhuan	chuan	shuan	ruan				uan	
	uang									guang	kuang	huang				zhuang	chuang	shuang					wang	
	un					dun	tun	nun	lun	gun	kun	hun	zun	cun	sun	zhun	chun	shun	run				wen	
	ueng																						weng	
	i	bi	pi	mi		di	ti	ni	li				zi	ci	si	zhi	chi	shi	ri	ji	qi	xi	yi	
	ia					dia			lia											jia	qia	xia	ya	
ie	bie	pie	mie		die	tie	nie	lie											jie	qie	xie	ye		
iao	biao	piao	miao		diao	tiao	niao	liao											jiao	qiao	xiao	yao		
iu			miu		driu			liu											jiu	qiu	xiu	you		
ian	bian	pian	mian		dian	tian	nian	lian											jian	qian	xian	yan		
iang								liang											jiang	qiang	xiang	yang		
in	bin	pin	min					lin											jin	qin	xin	yin		
ing	bing	ping	ming		ding	ting	ning	ling											jing	qing	xing	ying		
iong																			jiong	qiong	xiong	yong		
ü							nü	lǘ											jǘ	qǘ	xǘ	yǘ		
üe							nǚe	lǚe											jue	que	xue	yue		
uan																			juan	quan	xuan	yuan		
ün																			jun	qun	xun	yun		

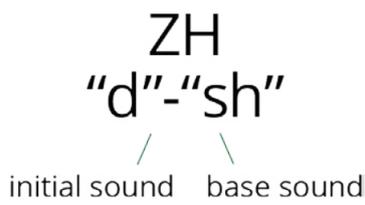
Out of these 23 onsets, most are very similar to their counterparts in the English language—with only small differences in aspiration and other fine details. There are only ten onsets that require further analysis to pronounce them correctly.

G Z C S ZH CH SH J Q X

G

The easiest among them is the onset “g”. In English, the letter “g” can be pronounced in two different ways, which can be seen when comparing “gene” to “gap”. In Chinese, only the latter exists, making it always being read as [ge](#).

The sound of some of the onsets can be further divided into two parts: an initial sound and a base sound.



The remaining nine onsets, that we still have to cover, include three initial sounds and three base sounds in all possible combinations. For this lesson, we are going to divide them into three classes according to their base sound. Three onsets each share a common sound and only differ in the initial sound coming before it.



Z, C, S

The first base sound is a simple English “s” as in “sun”. Z, C, S, all three onsets share this same sound but differ in the initial sound coming before it.

For Z, a sound similar to an English “d” is added in front, making it sound similar to the end of the word “kids”, but, instead of placing that sound at the end of the syllable, it is placed at the beginning of it. In Chinese, after adding a vowel it would be [za](#).

For C, a sound similar to an English “t” is added in front, making it sound similar to the of the word “hats”. But again, since this is the onset of a syllable, it is placed at the beginning of it. In Chinese, after adding a vowel it would be [ca](#).

For S, no further initial sound is added to the base sound, thus keeping it [sa](#).

These three initial sounds (d-like, t-like, none) also apply to the other two classes, which results in the following table.

“d”-sound	“t”-sound	∅
z	c	s
zh	ch	sh
j	q	x

ZH, CH, SH

The second base sound is similar to an English “sh” as in “shoe”. As seen in the table, the same initial sounds apply.

For ZH, a sound similar to an English “d” is added in front, thus, after adding a vowel, making it [zha](#).

For CH, a sound similar to an English “t” is added in front, thus, after adding a vowel, making it [cha](#).

For SH, no further initial sound is added to the base sound, thus keeping it [sha](#).

J, Q, X

The last base sound is the only onset sound which has no easy English approximation, so it has to be learned as a completely new sound. However, this sound mainly depends on the positioning of the tongue and not any movement which makes it rather easy to pick up.

The sound is produced by audibly breathing air out between your lips, similar to an English “sh”. But, instead of the tongue resting on the so-called alveolar ridge behind the upper front teeth, the tip of the tongue moves downwards and actually rests behind the lower front teeth.



Furthermore, while the “sh” requires the lips to be a little pursed, for this sound, they are rather drawn back a little as if preparing for a smile. With an “ee”-sound added behind to aid pronunciation, it makes the Chinese syllable “xi”. If you’re unsure about how to pronounce it, there are a number of videos online that can help to further illustrate.

This base sound might feel odd and uncomfortable in the beginning, but with some training it will become quickly second nature.

Once the base sound is mastered, the same initial sounds as before can be added:

For J, a sound similar to an English “d” is added in front, thus, after adding a vowel, making it [ji](#).

For Q, a sound similar to an English “t” is added in front, thus, after adding a vowel, making it [qi](#).

For X, no further initial sound is added to the base sound, thus keeping it [xi](#).

These are all the onsets of any Chinese syllable. All onsets that have not been analyzed in more depth here can be pronounced as they would be in the English language.

The following lesson will focus on the offsets of Chinese syllables.