

How to pronounce Chinese

Preface

This short lesson is aimed at teaching beginners of Chinese how to read and pronounce Chinese names and words. It will explain how a transcription is used to transform the Chinese characters into Latin letters to then teach how different letter combinations are read. The lesson is thus directed at people who are able to speak English and are looking for a quick and easy way to learn how to pronounce Chinese.

It is neither an introduction to the Chinese language, nor to Chinese characters, nor trying to teach the perfect pronunciation. The goal is to enable people to read out any Chinese word, in order to serve as a starting point for further learning of the language or as a means to make yourself understood by a native speaker of Chinese.

The lesson is divided into five parts, with the first being a general introduction to the Chinese language, the following two focussing on basics of pronunciation and the fifth serving as a training session with real examples. The fourth part will give a quick introduction into the four different Chinese tones, aimed at the most enthusiastic and can be skipped by anyone else However, after the first two lessons and a little training, readers should be able to pronounce any Chinese name or word in a way that a Chinese person would understand.

1	2	3	4	5
Introduction	Onsets	Offsets	Examples	Tones

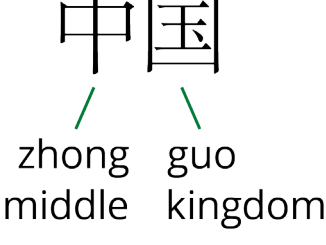
Introduction

The Chinese language has the image of being highly complicated, difficult to pronounce and even more difficult to read. This image, however, holds only partially true: The system of Chinese characters used in writing is undoubtedly more complex than most other scripts which are phonetically based and thus have a limited amount of recurring letters (although even Chinese characters are structured around recurring elements).

However, luckily, to pronounce (and even speak) Chinese you don't have to be able to read the characters, as scholars have developed different ways of transcribing Chinese into a phonetic system using Latin letters. The official transcription in use today in China is called PinYin, which is a completely standardized way of writing Chinese words in Latin letters. This is not only used all around the world to write Chinese names but also extensively within China to input Chinese characters into any electronic device.

Basics About the Chinese Language

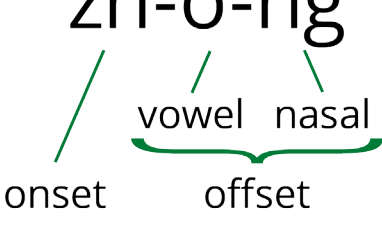
The Chinese language is entirely constructed around syllables. Unlike Latin based languages, every Chinese character does not represent a single sound (a letter) but a whole syllable. Since every character has (or at least used to have) a meaning, every syllable in a Chinese word has a meaning, too. To illustrate, this is the word „China“ as characters, transcription and syllable-for-syllable translation.



So, in a way, it is similar to compound words in English—like football—but, since most Chinese words consist of at least two syllables, it is a lot more common than in other languages.

Structure of a Chinese syllable

Chinese syllables share a common structure. They consist of an optional onset and an offset. The offset can be further divided into a vowel sound and an optional nasal. Using the first syllable of „China“ to illustrate:



The shortest syllable is thus a single vowel (e.g. “a”) while the longest consists of six letters: two onset letters and four offset letters (two vowels and two nasal letters).

There are 23 onsets, 21 vowel combinations and 2 nasal sounds, resulting in a total of 410 syllables.

Onsets																						
	b	p	m	f	d	t	n	l	g	k	h	z	c	s	zh	ch	sh	r	j	q	x	Ø
a	ba	pa	ma	fa	da	ta	na	la	ga	ka	ha	za	ca	sa	zha	cha	sha					
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		rong				
Offsets	u	bu	pu	mu	fu	du	tu	nu	lu	gu	ku	hu	zu	cu	su	zhu	chu	shu	ru			wu
	ua									gua	kua	hua				zhua	chua	shua	rua			wa
	uo					duo	tuo	nuo	luo	guo	kuo	huo	zuo	cuo	suo	zhuo	chuo	shuo	ruo			wo
	uai									guai	kuai	huai				zhuai	chuai	shuai				wai
	ui					dui	tui			gui	kui	hui	zui	cui	sui	zhui	chui	shui	ruì			wei
	uan					duan	tuan	nuan	luan	guan	kuan	huan	zuan	cuan	suan	zhuan	chuan	shuan	ruan			wan
	uang									guang	kuang	huang				zhuang	chuang	shuang				wang
un						dun	tun	nun	lun	gun	kun	hun	zun	cun	sun	zhun	chun	shun	run			weng
ueng																						
i	bi	pi	mi		di	ti	ni	li				zi	ci	si	zhi	chi	shi	ri	ji	qi	xi	yi
ie		bie	pie	mie		die	tie	nie	lie										jia	qia	xia	ya
iao		biao	piao	miao		diao	tiao	niao	liao										jiao	qiao	xiao	yao
iu				miu		diu		niu	liu										jiu	qiu	xiu	you
ian		bian	pian	mian		dian	tian	nian	lian										jian	qian	xian	yan
iang								niang	liang										jiang	qiang	xiang	yang
in		bin	pin	min				nin	lin										jin	qin	xin	yin
ing		bīng	pīng	mīng		dīng	tīng	nīng	līng										jīng	qīng	xīng	yīng
iong																			jiong	qiong	xiong	yiong
ü								nü	lǜ										jǜ	qǜ	xǜ	yü
üe								nǜe	lǜe										jue	que	xue	yue
üan																			juan	quan	xuan	yuan
ün																			jun	qun	xun	yün

On first glance, this table might seem a little intimidating, but speakers of the English language have already mastered most of the sounds required to pronounce Chinese in an understandable manner. The next two lessons will then focus on the small number of sounds that have to be examined, starting first with the onsets and then, in the third lesson, explaining the offsets.