

## Sounds and symbols: An overview of pinyin

“The writer was required at school to read his lessons aloud sixty times; that was for reading books in his own language.”

*Chao Yuen Ren, talking about himself, in Mandarin Primer, Harvard University Press, 1961, fn. 1, p. 118.*

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To learn to converse in Chinese, it helps to develop two abilities: the ability to recognize and produce the sounds of the language adequately so you can hear and repeat Chinese material; and the ability to match the sounds of Chinese to phonetic notation so you can read, take notes or otherwise keep track of language material before you have internalized the formal character based writing system. However, it is monotonous – and probably inefficient – to try to learn the sounds and transcription before you learn how to say anything. So this introductory lesson serves a short-term and a long-term purpose. In the short-term, it provides the information you need to proceed to the first speech samples in Unit 1. And in the long-term, it provides detailed information about the sounds and their notation, which you will be able to refer to regularly as you progress through the book.



Station sign at a Beijing subway station, written in characters and pinyin  
(the latter showing word divisions but not tones). [JKW 2005]

## 1 The syllable

As noted in the introduction, Hànyǔ Pīnyīn (literally ‘Chinese-language joined-sounds’), called ‘pinyin’ for short, is the a notation for representing standard Mandarin pronunciation. It has official status not only in China but also in the international community, and is now generally used throughout the Chinese speaking world. Though based on familiar Roman letters (only *v* is not utilized), both consonantal letters (*c*, *x*, and *q*, for example) and vocalic (such as *i*, *u* and *o*) are sometimes matched to sounds in ways unfamiliar, or even counterintuitive to speakers used to modern English spelling conventions.

### 1.1 Sound versus symbol (letter)

From the start, it is important to make a distinction between sound and the representation of sound. In pinyin, for example, *jī* is pronounced *jee* (with 'level tone'), *qī* is *chee*. Neither is hard (for English speakers) to pronounce, but the way the latter is represented – with a ‘*q*’ (and no following ‘*u*’) – is counterintuitive, and difficult to remember at first. On the other hand, pinyin *r* represents a sound that, for many speakers of standard Mandarin, is a blend of the *r* of *run* with the *s* of *pleasure* (or the *j* of French *je*) – in other words, an ‘*r*’ with friction. This sound may be difficult for a non-Mandarin speaker to produce well, but associating it with the symbol ‘*r*’ is less problematical. So, as you learn pinyin, you will encounter problems of pronunciation on the one hand, and problems of transcription, on the other. It is important to keep the distinction clear.

### 1.2 The syllable

When introducing the sounds of standard Chinese, it is useful to begin with the syllable, a unit whose prominence is underscored by the one-character-per-syllable writing system. The *spoken* syllable in Chinese is often analyzed in terms of an initial consonant sound and a rhyme, the latter being everything other than the initial. Chinese school children, when focusing on pronunciation, often read out pinyin syllables (which are usually also meaningful units associated with characters) in an exaggerated initial-rhyme division: *tuh--ù* > *tù* (‘hare’), *luh--óng* > *lóng* (‘dragon’), etc.

The pinyin *written* syllable can also be usefully analyzed in terms of an initial and a rhyme. The rhyme, in turn, contains vowels (V), a tones (T) written above the vowels, medials (M) and endings (E). Of these, only the vowel is always present (as, for example, in the sentence-final particle that is simply an untuned *a*). Thus, all possible pinyin syllables can be represented by the following formula:

<i>Initial</i>		<i>Rhyme</i>		
C <sub>i</sub>		M	T V	E
			i, u, ü	
				i, o/u, n, ng

<i>Vowel</i> :	a
<i>Vowel\Tone</i> :	ā, è
<i>Initial + Vowel\Tone</i> :	tā, bǐ, kè, shū
<i>Initial + Medial + Vowel\Tone</i> :	xiè, zuò, duì, xué, jiù, nüé
<i>Initial + Vowel\Tone + Ending</i> :	hěn, máng, hǎo, lèi, dōu
<i>Initial + Medial + Vowel\Tone + Ending</i> :	jiàn, jiǎng, jiāo

**Initials** are 21 in number, and are usually presented in a chart of representative syllables, arranged in rows and columns (shown in §3.1 below). Whether the initials are written with a single consonant letter (l, m, z) or several (sh, zh), they all represent only one sound unit (or phoneme). Chinese has no initial ‘clusters’ of the sort represented by ‘cl’ or ‘sn’ in English.

There are six possible [written] **vowels**: a, e, i, o, u and ü (the last representing a ‘rounded high front’ vowel, as in German *über* or the last vowel of French *déjà vu*). Vowels can be preceded by **medials** (i, u and ü), and followed by **endings**, two of which are written with vowel symbols (i, o), and two with consonantal (n, ng). There is actually a third vowel ending that can occur after the main vowel (in addition to i and o), and that is u; for with the main vowel o, the ending o is written u to avoid the misleading combination ‘oo’. Thus, to cite words from Unit 1, one finds hǎo, lǎo (both with -o), but instead of ‘dǎo’, you get dǎu, and instead of ‘zhǎo’, you get zhǎu (both with -u).

Notice that the inventory of consonantal endings in Mandarin is small – only n and ng. Regional Chinese languages, such as Cantonese, have more (-p, -t, -m, etc.) The well known name of the Chinese frying pan, the ‘wok’, is derived from a Cantonese word, with a final ‘k’ sound; its Mandarin counterpart, guō, lacks the final consonant. In historical terms, Mandarin has replaced final consonants, Cantonese has preserved them. Surnames often show the same kind of distinction between the presence and absence of a final consonant in Mandarin and Cantonese: Lu and Luk, Yip and Ye, for example.

**Tones** are a particularly interesting feature of the Mandarin sound system and will be discussed in more detail in §2 in this unit. For now, we note that stressed syllables may have one of four possible tones, indicated by the use of diacritical marks written over the main vowel (V). Unstressed syllables, however, do not have tonal contrasts; their pitch is, for the most part, conditioned by that of surrounding syllables.

Because medials, vowels and some endings are all written with vowel letters, pinyin rhymes may have strings of two or three vowel letters, eg: -iu, -ui, -iao, -uai. By convention, the tone mark is placed on the vowel proper, not on the medial or on the ending: lèi, jiāo, zuò. As a rule of thumb, look to see if the first of two vowel letters is a possible medial; if it is, then the next vowel letter is the core vowel, and that gets the tone mark; if not, then the first gets it: iè, ǎo, ué, ōu, jào.

**Exercise 1.**

Without trying to pronounce the syllables, place the tone marks provided over the correct letter of the pinyin representations:

xie [˥]    jiang [˨˩˦]    dui [˥˩]    hao [˥˩]    lian [˥]    gui [˥˩]    zhou [˨˩˦]    qiao [˥˩]

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One sound that is not shown in the syllable formula given in §1.2 above is the final r-sound. It is represented, not surprisingly, by r in pinyin, and is obligatory in a few words with the e-vowel, such as èr ‘two’. However, in northern Mandarin, a common word-building suffix, appearing mostly in nouns, and favored by some speakers and some regions more than others, is also represented by a final ‘r’, eg diǎnr, huàr, bànr, huángr. The final r often blends with the rest of the syllable according to rather complicated rules that will be discussed in detail elsewhere.

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