

UNIT 1

Jiǔ céng zhī tái, qǐ yú lěi tǔ; qiān lǐ zhī xíng shǐ yú zú xià.

9 level tower, begin by piling earth, 1000 mile journey begins with foot down

A tall tower begins with the foundation; a long journey begins with a single step.

Lǎozǐ

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1.1 Conventions

The previous Unit on ‘sounds and symbols’ provided the first steps in learning to associate the pinyin transcription of Chinese language material with accurate pronunciation. The task will continue as you start to learn to converse by listening to conversational material while reading it in the pinyin script. However, in the early units, it will be all too easy to fall back into associations based on English spelling, and so occasionally (as in the previous overview), Chinese cited in pinyin will be followed by a more transparent transitional spelling [placed in brackets] to alert you to the new values of the letters, eg: máng [mahng], or hěn [huhn].

In the initial units, where needed, you are provided not only with an idiomatic English translation of Chinese material, but also, in parentheses, with a word-for-word gloss. The latter takes you into the world of Chinese concepts and allows you to understand how meanings are composed. The following conventions are used to make the presentation of this information clearer.

Summary of conventions

- a) Parentheses (...) enclose literal meanings, eg: Máng ma? (‘be+busy Q’)
- b) Plusses (+) indicate one-to-many, eg: hǎo ‘be+well’; nín ‘you+POL’
- c) Capitals (Q) indicate *grammatical notions*, eg: Q for ‘question’; POL for ‘polite’. In cases where there is no easy label for the notion, the Chinese word itself is cited in capitals, with a fuller explanation to appear later: Nǐ ne? (‘you NE’)

- d) Spaces () enclose words, eg: hěn hǎo versus shūfu.
- e) Hyphens (-) used in standard pinyin transcription to link certain constituents, eg dì-yī ‘first’ or māma-hūhū ‘so-so’. In English glosses, hyphens indicate meanings of the constituent parts of Chinese compounds, eg: hǎochī (‘good-eat’).
- f) Brackets [] indicate material that is obligatorily expressed in one language, not in the other: Máng ma? ‘Are [you] busy?’ Or they may enclose notes on style or other relevant information: bàng ‘be good; super’ [colloquial].
- g) Angle brackets < > indicate optional material: <Nǐ> lèi ma? ie, either Nǐ lèi ma? or Lèi ma?
- h) Non-italic / *italic*: indicates turns in a conversation.

1.2 Pronunciation

To get your vocal organs ready to pronounce Chinese, it is useful to contrast the articulatory settings of Chinese and English by pronouncing pairs of words selected for their similarity of sound. Thus kǎo ‘to test’ differs from English ‘cow’ not only in tone, but also in vowel quality.

- | | | | | | | | | |
|----|------|--------------|----|-----|------|----|------|-------|
| a) | kǎo | cow | b) | xìn | sin | c) | shòu | show |
| | hǎo | how | | qín | chin | | zhōu | Joe |
| | nǎo | now | | jīn | gin | | sǒu | so |
| | chǎo | chow[-time] | | xìn | seen | | ròu | row |
| | sǎo | sow[’s ear] | | jīn | Jean | | dōu | dough |
| | bǎo | [ship’s] bow | | lín | lean | | tóu | toe |
-
- | | | | | | | | |
|----|-----|--------|-----|--------|----|------|-------|
| d) | pāo | paw | duō | doo[r] | e) | bízi | beads |
| | bō | bo[r]e | tuō | to[r]e | | lǐzi | leads |
| | mō | mo[r]e | luō | law | | xízi | seeds |

1.3 Numbering and ordering

This section contains information that can be practiced daily in class by counting off, or giving the day’s date.

1.3.1 The numbers, 1 – 10:

yī	èr	sān	sì	wǔ	liù	qī	bā	jiǔ	shí
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

1.3.2 Beyond 10

Higher numbers are formed quite regularly around shí ‘ten’ (or a multiple of ten), with following numbers additive (shísān ‘13’, shíqī ‘17’) and preceding numbers multiplicative (sānshí ‘30’, qīshí ‘70’):

shíyī	shí’èr	shísì	èrshí	èrshíyī	èrshí’èr	èrshísì	sānshí	sānshíyī
11	12	14	20	21	22	24	30	31

1.3.3 The ordinal numbers

Ordinals are formed with a prefix, dì (which by pinyin convention, is attached to the following number with a hyphen):

dì-yī	dì-èr	dì-sān	dì-sì	dì-wǔ, etc.
1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th

1.3.4 Dates

Dates are presented in descending order in Chinese, with year first (nián, *think [nien]*), then month (yuè, *think [yu-eh]*) and day (hào). Years are usually presented as a string of digits (that may include líng ‘zero’) rather than a single figure: yī-jiǔ-jiǔ-liù nián ‘1996’; èr-líng-líng-sān nián ‘2003’. Months are formed regularly with numerals: yīyuè ‘January’, èryuè ‘February’, shí’èryuè ‘December’.

èrlínglíngsān nián bāyuè sān hào	‘August 3 rd , 2003’
yījiǔbāwǔ nián èryuè shíbā hào	‘February 18 th , 1985’

Notes

1. Amongst northern Chinese, yīyuè often shows the *yī* tone shift in combination with a following day: yíyuè sān hào. Qī ‘7’ and bā ‘8’, both level-toned words, sometimes show the same shift in dates (as well as in other contexts prior to a fourth toned word): qíyuè liù hào; báyùè jiǔ hào.
2. In the written language, rì ‘day’ (a much simpler character) is often used in place of hào: thus written bāyuè sān rì (八月三日), which can be read out as such, would be spoken as bā ~ báyùè sān hào (which in turn, could be written verbatim as 八月三号).

1.3.5 The celestial stems

Just as English sometimes makes use of letters rather than numbers to indicate a sequence of items, so Chinese sometimes makes use of a closed set of words with fixed order known as the ‘ten stems’ (shígān), or the ‘celestial stems’ (tiāngān), for counting purposes. The ten stems have an interesting history, which will be discussed in greater detail along with information on the Chinese calendar in §4.6.2. For now, they will be used in much the same way that, in English, roman numerals or letters of the alphabet are used to mark subsections of a text, or turns in a dialogue. The first four or five of the ten are much more frequent than the others, simply because they occur early in the sequence.

The ten celestial stems (tiāngān)

jiǎ	yǐ	bǐng	dīng	wù
甲	乙	丙	丁	戊
A	B	C	D	E

jǐ	gēng	xīn	rén	guī
己	庚	辛	壬	癸
F	G	H	I	J

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