

eChineseLearning
Live Teachers from China!

10 Things You Must Know Before Learning Chinese



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1. History of the Mandarin Chinese Language

The Han people of China have their own spoken and written language. Chinese belongs to the Han-Tibetan language family. Mandarin Chinese, often referred to as simply “Chinese”, is the most commonly used language in China, and one of the most commonly used languages in the world.



Written Chinese emerged in its early and most primitive form with carved symbols approximately 6,000 years ago in China. The Chinese characters used today evolved gradually from those used in bone and tortoise shell inscriptions more than 3,000 years ago and the bronze inscriptions produced soon after.

Drawn figures were gradually reduced to patterned strokes, pictographs were reduced to symbols, and the complicated graphs became simpler. Early pictographs and ideographs were joined by pictophonetic characters.

Currently, there are six categories of Chinese characters: pictographs, self-explanatory characters, associative compounds, pictophonetic characters, phonetic loan characters and mutually explanatory characters.



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Chinese words are monosyllabic. A large proportion of Chinese characters are composed of an ideogrammatic element combined with a phonetic element.

There are approximately 56,000 characters, of which only about 3,000 are in common use today. In addition to their functional value as symbols for records and communication, Chinese characters have an aesthetic value (e.g., calligraphy).

All of China's 55 minority groups have their own spoken languages, except for the Hui and Manchu, who use Mandarin Chinese; 23 of these dialects have a unique written form. Nowadays, classes in schools in predominantly national minority areas are taught in the local language, using local language textbooks.

Mandarin is a category of Chinese dialects spoken across most of northern and southwestern China. The term "Mandarin" can also refer to Standard Mandarin, which is based on the Mandarin dialect spoken in Beijing. It is considered to be the standard for the People's Republic of China.

Why do most non-Chinese speakers choose to learn standard Mandarin Chinese? Mandarin is understood by most Chinese people. As mentioned above, it is China's national language and spoken widely in areas outside of China. Whether you are interested in basic communication, scholarly research, or pursuing a career in China, standard Mandarin is a necessary tool for communication.



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2. Benefits of Studying Chinese

Studying anything new and unfamiliar has many advantages, and languages are no different. There are personal and professional advantages to be gained from studying Chinese. Currently, Mandarin Chinese is moving itself into a position to be one of the dominant languages and cultural forces of the 21st century. Therefore, learning Chinese just makes sense at this time, due to its ability change your life. But what, specifically, can be gained from knowing how to communicate in the Chinese language?



Let's begin with the most commonly cited reasons for studying Chinese:

1. China is the most populous country in the world, with over 1.4 billion people. Mandarin is spoken by almost one billion people. It is the most widely-spoken language in the world. One out of five people in the world is Chinese;
2. Mandarin is spoken in the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, The Philippines, Mongolia and many areas of global cities such as London, Sydney and New York;
3. Knowing Chinese will allow individuals to compete effectively in the business environment of the future;



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4. China is the largest trading partner of the United States, Japan, Germany, Australia and many other countries;
5. Many American companies do business in China, including Coca-Cola and Ford;
6. Knowing Chinese may give you an edge when applying for and competing for a job. The demand for business people who know Chinese is skyrocketing;
7. China is now playing a major role in world affairs and will continue to do so;
8. A Newsweek article stated that “In U.S. homes, Chinese has eclipsed French, German and Italian to become the third most commonly spoken language after English and Spanish”;
9. By studying Chinese, students will develop an appreciation for Chinese culture and history;
10. Learning a second language develops critical and creative thinking skills.

Many interested in Chinese are familiar with these benefits and have heard them on several occasions. Let's begin with the most obvious benefit in your life to learning Chinese: the convenience of knowing the language to build interpersonal relationships. Chinese opens more than one billion doors of communication. The Chinese are educated and sophisticated and getting to know them will make anyone's life fuller and more interesting, wherever you are on the globe. Not to mention the travel possibilities! Being able to travel around China and see and experience the country and culture is an immeasurable benefit to a person's life. Once those doors are open what will you communicate and learn? Cultural exchange, history, art, and of course business, are four that readily spring to mind.



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Still, there are other benefits. For instance, a little less easy to see but just as important is that it creates further opportunity to learn. Access to a large part of Chinese culture is blocked from the average non-Chinese speaker because only the books and other cultural aspects of Chinese heritage that someone thought might make a profit is available through translated works. The parts that have been made available in non-Chinese languages don't even represent a fraction of a percent of what is really there to learn. The lion's share is on a bookshelf waiting to be discovered by those with the ability to do so. This knowledge is like a precious and valuable diamond mine waiting to be discovered by the rest of the world.

Anyone who has spent some time, even briefly, learning about China quickly realizes how rich, vibrant and insightful the experience of cultural discovery is. The Chinese have a culture that reaches back at least 5,000 years and have managed to record much of the events, folklore and wisdom created over those years. Without a foothold in the language, you are forced to rely on someone who might not be sensitive to your personal sense of curiosity. Knowing Chinese allows a freedom of movement through their history.

Further in the same vein, studying and knowing Chinese characters is like challenging your mind to a deeply fascinating puzzle. Anyone with knowledge of Chinese has access to Chinese art and design. In fact, the characters themselves are a kind of art. Calligraphy is an ancient art form and studying it is a kind of art appreciation.

Finally, at the financial end of the spectrum, the Chinese are getting richer. It is estimated that 600 million people will reach the middle class in the not-so-distant future.



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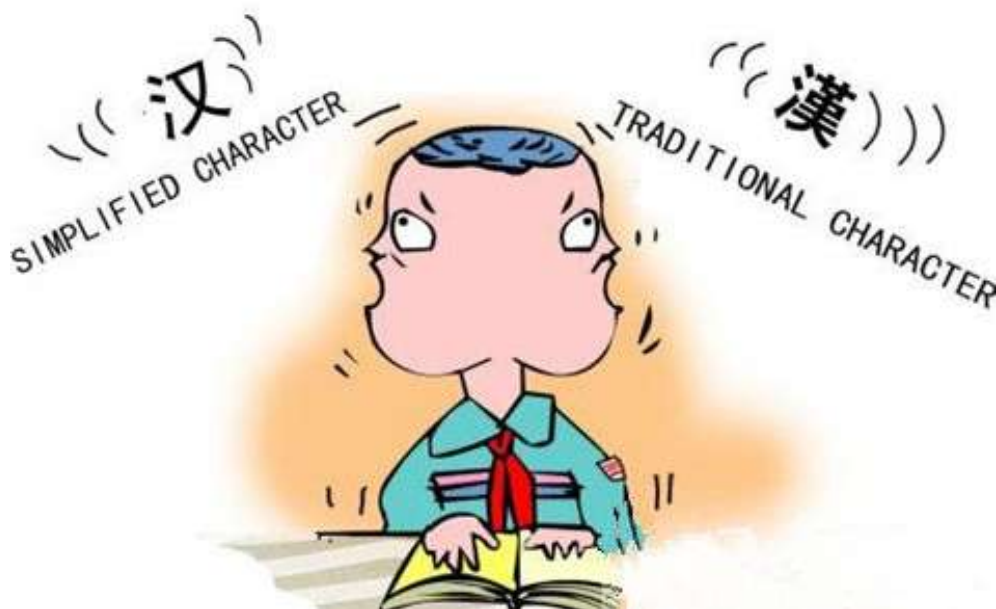
This middle class represents the world's largest single consumer base, with a significant amount of money to spend anywhere in the world. Those entrepreneurs with no knowledge of the Chinese language are going to need a Chinese speaker to communicate with these potential customers. This means learning Chinese presents a career opportunity for anyone with the drive to invest the time and effort into learning this beautiful language. The longer a business ignores the Chinese market, the more financial opportunity is lost. The most ambitious and sensible solution is to take the time to learn the language.



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3. Simplified or Traditional Characters: Which Should I Learn?

“Traditional Chinese” refers to the characters used before simplification reforms enacted during the second half of the 20th century in mainland China. This means that traditional characters are still being used in Taiwan, Hong Kong and in many overseas Chinese communities. Simplified characters are then, as the name implies, simplifications of the traditional characters.



For most people, learning simplified Chinese characters is the obvious choice, because most Chinese-speaking people in the world use them. People living in Taiwan or Hong Kong naturally learn the traditional character set. Therefore, it really comes down to where you plan to use your skills.



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The two character sets have their own pros and cons.

Traditional:

Traditional characters provide more visual cues to support reading and help facilitate learning and character recognition. Researchers have explained how this visual impact often helps young children recognize traditional characters more easily than simplified characters. In addition, learning traditional characters first can present an easier transition to learning the simplified characters later on. However, traditional characters can take longer to learn how to write and there are fewer resources in the US. Also, it is sometimes harder to access materials unless you buy and ship them from Taiwan or Hong Kong.

Simplified:

Learning simplified characters strengthens visual and spatial relationship skills due to the way simplified characters are structured and formed. Simplified characters provide fewer visual cues, so they require the student to pay more attention to detail when learning characters via rote memorization. When controlled for reading ability, this method has shown that children learning simplified characters demonstrated superior visual skills. Understanding simplified characters may be more useful as the majority of the entire population of mainland China, therefore the vast majority of Chinese people, utilize this form of writing.



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4. Is Learning Chinese Difficult?

Most Mandarin Chinese learners feel that Chinese is hard to learn. We also believe that Chinese is not a language which can be learned in a short time. Here are some reasons why learning Chinese could be difficult:



Tones

Unlike languages like English, in Chinese how you pronounce a sound dictates what that sound means. This would be something similar to where you place the stress on a word in English, changing its meaning. For this reason, Chinese is considered a tonal language. Standard Chinese recognizes four tones: high, rising, falling-rising and falling. It is a little like singing while speaking. For most learners, mastering the tones takes years of trial and error. Why? Well, there are just certain sounds that exist in Chinese that don't exist in other languages.

Characters

The Chinese script is among the world's most recognized. In fact, it's one of the reasons many are initially drawn to learning the language. However, written Chinese is far different than languages that make use of a romanized alphabet system.



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Written Chinese is made up of thousands of characters, each having their own meaning and pronunciation. In order to be considered fluent, you'll need to know somewhere around 2,000 different characters. However, if you only learn the 500 most common characters, you will be able to read about 75% of Chinese that is used today. It's often said that each character represents an idea. This actually isn't true. Characters have a variety of functions, and when strung together to form words, their meanings can change drastically. Characters also shouldn't be viewed as puzzles. Characters can be broken down into individual pieces, but there's no guarantee that those individual pieces will reveal what that character truly means.

Dialects

What many don't realize is that even though Chinese has standardized rules of pronunciation, most people in China speak a regional dialect. In fact, most Chinese people learn their regional dialect before learning standard Mandarin. Regional dialects often sound wildly different from what you'll be taught in a classroom. Luckily, most educated Chinese have no problem switching to standard Mandarin. Communicating with the average local might be a bit more challenging, but as you learn and grow in Chinese, you will get used to hearing different accents. If you're ambitious enough to sign up for Chinese lessons, you're probably ready for the challenge!

Chinese learning may be difficult to a beginner. However, finding the right method will make it a lot easier. We strongly suggest you work with a qualified native Chinese teacher. A qualified teacher will be able to help you make the most of your studies with an efficient method that impossible when studying on your own. And, since going to China isn't realistic for everyone, you can simulate a Chinese learning environment from the comfort of home when you work with a native speaker.



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5. How to Learn Chinese Effectively



How to learn Chinese is a frequently asked question. With the intention of helping you become successful in learning Chinese, here are some tips you can use:

Learning Chinese Tip #1: Where to start? Chinese pinyin should be the first step to learning Chinese. Pinyin contains all of the Chinese phonetic alphabet which is used in the pronunciation of Chinese characters. The earlier you start with pinyin, the easier to grasp the correct pronunciation. Therefore the Chinese learning method for children always works very efficiently.

Learning Chinese Tip #2: The only way to learn Chinese characters is to memorize them. Writing will enable you to use your motor memory for recollection. Otherwise, characters can be forgotten quickly. Rather than writing one word many times before going on to the next one, write each word once or twice, then go through the whole list again until you've done the required number of repetitions. This method will put the new words more firmly in your memory.



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Make vocabulary flashcards. The physical act of writing reinforces words in your memory, while also giving you an easy way to prepare for tests. Make study cards for word classes (verbs, nouns, etc.) and carry them with you to review during spare minutes. Play online games to reinforce character recognition. To prepare for vocabulary quizzes, make a three-column vocabulary sheet with characters, pinyin, and English definitions. Fold the paper so only that one or two columns are showing and take, for practice, written quizzes.

Learning Chinese Tip #3: Learn Chinese through systematic Chinese reading. By doing this, you will know more about Chinese characters, Chinese culture and enlarge your Chinese vocabulary. Select Chinese reading material according to your own level. In addition, find a tutor to help you learn Chinese. In some cases, however, taking part in a face-to-face class may be inconvenient due to scheduling, traffic, safety, and other issues, especially for children who want to learn Chinese or for those who want to learn Chinese for business, but are busy with work obligations. One option is to take an online Mandarin Chinese course which will offer both convenience and flexibility.

Learning Chinese Tip #4: Studying a little each day is more effective than studying for a cramming just before a test. It's impossible to learn a language by studying only once a week, even if the study period is very long. Studying one to two hours each day throughout the term will make it easy for you to do well on tests without cramming at the end.



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Learning Chinese Tip #5: If a student wants to know their Chinese level, the best way is to take a Mandarin Chinese Proficiency test. There are several authoritative Chinese tests such as the AP Chinese exam and the HSK test, among others. For foreign students, online Mandarin Chinese lessons may be an effective way to prepare for the tests because of the convenience and authenticity offered by online Mandarin language courses (e.g. how to write Chinese, etc.). For those who don't have enough time to learn Chinese during the school year, joining a summer Chinese program is helpful to their progress.

Learning Chinese Tip #6: A fun way to master Mandarin Chinese: try ordering Chinese food by speaking Mandarin Chinese with the restaurant staff. You might feel embarrassed at first, but they'll respect you for trying out your new Mandarin skills! This will give you some good Mandarin practice, and you'll still get some great Chinese food. Chinese restaurants are everywhere, so everyone should have the chance to practice. This is especially suitable for children, as Chinese for children requires a vivid and fun experience. In this way, children can easily review their Chinese courses. Learning Mandarin can include a lot of fun!

Practice makes perfect! Developing these habits will make your Chinese study much easier.



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6. How Long Does It Take to Learn Chinese?

It depends on your gift for language learning, as well as the time you are able to dedicate to learning it. If you study a few hours every day you're going to learn a lot faster than someone who only spends one day a week.

For speaking, the key is to LISTEN and REPEAT. Over and over and over. Every time you learn something new, repeat it to yourself again and again. Work it into a sentence you think would be useful to



you in the future. Say that over and over. To learn how to speak there's no other way than to just do it.

Now, as far as time necessary, if you study on your own it may take upwards of five years to reach a certain level of fluency, while the entire language school system taken in China can be completed in two years (full-immersion).

One big problem with self-study is that you're more prone to miss things and repeat errors. Whether it's never really knowing if you're pronouncing the tones correctly (it's VERY important that you learn these properly the first time or else you'll spend the rest of your life making up for it), or spending more time actually gathering information to study and then studying it. It's a tricky and long process compared to taking a class or getting a tutor.



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