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0.1 The Chinese language (汉语 hànyǔ) is the language of the Han nationality (汉族 Hànzú) and the official language of China. It is also called Zhongwen (中文 Zhōngwén, Chinese language), Huayu (华语 Huáyǔ, Chinese language), or, mainly in Taiwan, Guoyu (国语 Guóyǔ, the language of the country). The English word “Mandarin”, originally used by Western people to refer to the official language of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911, established by the Manchu people), is eventually another term for the Chinese language. At the time when the word “Mandarin” was created, Westerners mistakenly thought that the official language of the Qing dynasty was the language of the Manchu people. Therefore, all the terms mentioned above refer to the same language — the Chinese language. Cf. 0.6 The common speech.

0.2 Chinese is an ideographic language (表意文字 biǎoyì wénzì). The writing system of the Chinese language is different from that of the alphabetic languages in the world. The basic writing units of Chinese are Chinese characters (汉字 hànzì) but not words composed of Roman alphabets. Around 90% of Chinese characters have a radical, a kind of character component that indicates the meaning of the character, therefore Chinese characters roughly indicate their meanings instead of their pronunciations.

江 jiāng, river (The radical 氵 means “water”.)
燃 rán, to burn (The radical 火 means “fire”.)
椅 yǐ, chair (The radical 木 means “wood”.)
跨 kuà, to step (The radical 足 means “foot”.)

Because of this characteristic of the Chinese characters, the Chinese language is called an ideographic language.

0.3 The basic phonetic unit of Chinese is the syllable. Each character is pronounced as one syllable (音节 yīnjié):

日 ri, the sun
星 xīng, star
世界 shìjiè, the world
历史 lìshǐ, history
代表团 dáitiáotuán, delegation
大使馆 dàshǐguǎn, embassy

From the perspective of phonetics, Chinese, therefore, can be viewed as a language of syllables (音节文字 yīnjié wénzì). There are around 430 syllables in Chinese language, including a few rarely used syllables such as “ń” (嗯 an interjection), “mń” (呣 an interjection), and “yō” (哟 an interjection).

*All characters with the “r” ending are pronounced as one syllable, even if they are sometimes written as two characters:

花儿 huār, flower
鸟儿 niǎor, bird

Cf. 1.8.

0.4 Chinese is a language with tones. Each syllable has four tones (light tone is not included):

ma: 妈 mā, mother
麻 má, hemp
马 mǎ, horse
骂 mài, to curse
wan: 弯 wān, curved
玩 wán, to play
晚 wǎn, late
万 wàn, ten thousands

0.5 Dialects (方言 fāngyán) are regional forms of Chinese, distinguished from the standard or literary Chinese in both phonetics and vocabulary. There are 7 principle dialects in China. They are:

0.5.1 The Northern dialect (北方方言 běifāng fāngyán) is used in the North, the Northeast, the center, the Northwest, and the Southwest of China. About 73% of the Chinese population speak it.
0.5.2 The **Shanghai dialect** (吴方言 wúfāngyán) is used in Shanghai, most areas in Jiangsu and Zhejiang province. About 7% of the Chinese population speak it.

0.5.3 The **Hunan dialect** (湘方言 xiāngfāngyán) is mainly used in Hunan province. About 3% of the Chinese population speak it.

0.5.4 The **Jiangxi dialect** (赣方言 gànfāngyán) is mainly used in Jiangxi Province. About 3% of the Chinese population speak it.

0.5.5 The **Hakka dialect** (客家方言 kèjiā fāngyán) is used by Hakka people, who are living in some areas in Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian, Jiangxi, Hunan, Sichuan, and Taiwan. Hakka people are descendants of the immigrants, who moved from the North to the South during the long period from the 4th century to the 13th century. They conserve and use their unified dialect within their resident areas in different provinces. About 4% of the Chinese population speak the Hakka dialect.

0.5.6 The **Guangdong dialect** (粤方言 yuè fāngyán) is mainly used in Guangdong province. About 4% of the Chinese population speak it.

0.5.7 The **Fujian dialect** (闽方言 mǐn fāngyán) is mainly used in Fujian province, Hainan province, and some areas in Guangxi province and Taiwan. About 6% of the Chinese population speak it.

*Other scholars are of opinions that there are 8 principle dialects in China (further dividing the Fujian dialect into northern Fujian dialect and southern Fujian dialect) and even more.*

0.6 The **common speech** (普通话 pǔtōnghuà), contrary to dialects, refers to standard or literary Chinese, which is the official language of Chinese government and commonly used by all Chinese people in all dialect areas, including people of minorities. Its vocabulary items are selected from commonly used words from all dialects, especially from the northern dialect. Its pronunciation is based on the Beijing speech. It is the only standard language in China, which is extensively used in government administration, education, communication, publication and broadcasting, as well as most services and entertainments.

0.7 Chinese is a sounding language in speaking. Phonetically speaking, vowels account for a large proportion in Chinese language. A syllable may have no initial sound but contains at least one vowel:

- 啊 à, an interjection
- 一 yī (=ǐ), one
- 鹅 é, goose
- 五 wǔ (=ū), five

*A few characters, such as “ǹ” (嗯) and “ǹˇ” (呣) which function as interjections, are exceptional. Some syllables contain as many as three vowels:

- 教 jiāo, to teach
- 坏 huài, bad
- 吹 chuī (=chuei, the main vowel “e” is omitted), to blow
- 贵 guì (=guei, the main vowel “e” is omitted), expensive

0.8 **Chinese characters** (汉字 hànzì)
The basic Chinese characters used daily number approximately 5,500. The commonly used characters for all specialties in the modern era are about 8,000 to 10,000. The total number of Chinese characters, including those are rarely used and written in different forms, exceeds 50,000. For example, the *Kangxi Dictionary*, compiled in the Qing dynasty, contains 47,035 characters. *The Grand Chinese Dictionary* (Taiwan, 1968) contains 49,905 characters. *The Grand Chinese Dictionary* (Shanghai, 1986) contains about 56,000 characters. According to the statistics of some scholars, about 40% of the characters in these grand dictionaries are, however, variant forms of other characters.

0.9 The **writing systems of Chinese** (中文书写系统 zhōngwén shūxíe xìtǒng)
Originally, Chinese had only one writing system used by all Chinese people in all dialect areas for thousands of years. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the Chinese government in Mainland created a simplified writing system, which is comparatively simple and convenient for common people to use. More than 2,000 characters have been simplified by means of reducing character strokes and/or adopting simple character components. These characters are called simplified characters (简体字 jiǎntìzì). Accordingly, the characters before the simplification are called traditional characters (繁体字 fándìzì). The average strokes of the simplified characters have been reduced to eight, in comparison to eleven strokes of the traditional characters. At present, the writing system of the simplified characters is used mainly in Mainland China; the writing system of the traditional characters is used mainly in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao.

0.10 The morphology of Chinese
Chinese words do not change forms to reflect number, aspect, or voice as words of alphabetic languages do; there is also no concept of "tense" in Chinese. Instead, some suffixes, adverbs, and particles are often used to express different grammatical meanings, making the Chinese language more accurate and sophisticated. In addition, a great number of measure words are used to increase the language’s figurative nature.

0.11 Chinese is one of the languages that have the longest history in the world. It was created more than 3,000 years ago. The ancient Chinese people in the Shang dynasty (商朝 Shāngcháo, 16th—11th century B. C.) engraved characters on tortoise shells and animal bones. These characters were first discovered in 1899 in the ruins of the ancient city Yin (殷 Yīn, nowadays安阳Anyang in 河南Henan province), and later formally named inscriptions of tortoise shells and bones (甲骨文 jiǎgǔwén). There are about 4,500 characters found in these inscriptions, among which 1,700 characters have been recognized. Till the Later Han dynasty (东汉 Dōnghàn, 25-220 A. D.), Analytic Dictionary of Characters (《说文解字》 shuōwén jiězì), the most important ancient dictionary compiled by Xu Shen’s (许慎), contains 9,353 characters.

0.12 Chinese is one of the most sophisticated languages in the world. During a long period of more than 3,000 years, Chinese developed into a sophisticated language with an abundant vocabulary and an accurate grammar. A Chinese character can be a word (词 cí), a word stems (词根 cīgēn), or an affixes (词缀 cízhùi). Most words are composed of two or more characters. The basic method to create words is combination. According to certain basic rules, a word stem is able to combine with another word stem or an affix, either a prefix (前缀 qiánzhūi) or a suffix (后缀 hòuzhùi), to create a new vocabulary item easily and effectively.

0.13 Chinese is one of the most succinct languages in the world. For example, the Chinese version of certain text is only about 70% in length or size as its English version.