

**A Guide to the Chinese
(Pinyin) Spelling System-How
to Pronounce Chinese Names**

by

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Overview

- The Chinese Language
- Mandarin or “Putonghua”
- The Mandarin Sound System
- The Pinyin Spelling System
- Chinese Names
- Pinyin and Cultural Literacy

The Chinese Language

- The Chinese language is spoken by over 1 billion people, and is spoken in the People's Republic of China, in Taiwan, and other countries around the world
- Chinese has numerous dialects, many of which are mutually unintelligible.
- Mandarin is the most populous dialect, and is the official language of the People's Republic of China.

Mandarin or “Putonghua”

- Mandarin, known as “putonghua,” or “common speech,” is based on the dialect of Beijing.
- Mandarin and other dialects are normally written with Chinese characters.
- The pinyin spelling system is a Romanized, alphabetic system used to indicate the sounds of Mandarin, or putonghua. It is used in dictionaries and maps, as well as on street signs and storefronts. It is also learned by children in school.

The Mandarin Sound System

- Mandarin has over 1300 syllables
- A syllable consists of:
 - An initial
 - A final
 - A tone

The Initial

- The initial is the initial consonant of the syllable
- Examples include:
 - The initial “b” in the syllable “Bai”
 - The initial “m” in the syllable “Ma”
 - The initial “j” in the syllable “Jiang”

The Zero or Null Initial

- Some syllables in Mandarin that have no initial consonant (i.e., begin with a vowel) are said to have a “zero” or “null” initial.
- Examples include:
 - The “null” initial in the syllable “a”
 - The “null” initial in the syllable “wu”
 - The “null” initial in the syllable “yang”

The Final

- The final consists of all the vowels and consonants that come after the initial.
- Example finals include:
 - The final “ai” in the syllable “bai”
 - The final “a” in the syllable “ma”
 - The final “iang” in the syllable “jiang”

The Tone

- The tone is the pitch pattern associated with each syllable in Mandarin
- Every syllable in Mandarin has a tone, and changing the tone will change the meaning of the syllable

The Tones in Mandarin

There are four basic tones in standard Mandarin:

- The first tone: mā “mother”
- The second tone: má “hemp”
- The third tone: mǎ “horse”
- The fourth tone: mà “scold”

The Pinyin Spelling System

- The pinyin spelling system is used to indicate or spell Chinese words with Roman letters
- Letters are used to indicate both consonants and vowels
- Tone marks are used in dictionaries but are not commonly used in maps or street signs, and are not normally used to indicate Chinese names
- Tones will therefore not be indicated in this presentation

The Pinyin Initials

- There are 21 initials in the pinyin spelling system
- These will be indicated in the following tables, giving the initials in pinyin and IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) and, where useful, the equivalent pronunciation in English
- (IPA from Wang, Zhu, and Ren (1983)-see Note 1)

b p m f

<u>Pinyin</u>	<u>IPA</u>	<u>English</u>
• b	[p]	
• p	[pʼ]	
• m	[m]	
• f	[f]	

d t n l

<u>Pinyin</u>	<u>IPA</u>	<u>English</u>
• d	[t]	
• t	[tʰ]	
• n	[n]	
• l	[l]	

g k h

• Pinyin	IPA	English
• g	[k]	
• k	[kʰ]	
• h	[x]	

Z C S

• Pinyin	IPA	English
• z	[ts]	“ts” in “cats”
• c	[ts’]	“ts” in “cats” heavily aspirated
• s	[s]	

zh ch sh r

• Pinyin	IPA	English
• zh	[tʂ]	“j” in “jury”
• ch	[tʂʰ]	“ch” in “church”
• sh	[ʂ]	
• r	[ʐ]	

j q x

- | • Pinyin | IPA | English |
|----------------|--------|---|
| • j
palatal | [tɕ] | “g” in “gee”, but
more front, |
| • q | [tɕʰ] | “ch” in “cheep”, but
more front, palatal |
| • x | [ɕ] | “sh” in “she”, but
more front, palatal |

The Pinyin Finals

- These will be indicated in the following tables, giving the finals in pinyin and IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) and, where useful, the equivalent pronunciation in English
- (IPA from Wang, Zhu, and Ren (1983)-see Note 2)

Finals “a, o, e, er”

• Pinyin	IPA	English
• a	[a]	ah
• o	[o]	
• e	[ɤ],	
• er	[əɾ]	

Finals “ai, ei, ao, ou”

• Pinyin	IPA	English
• ai	[ai]	l, ay, aye
• ei	[ei]	letter “a”
• ao	[au]	ow
• ou	[ou]	oh

Finals “an, en, ang, eng, ong”

• Pinyin	IPA	English
• an	[an]	on
• en	[ən]	un-
• ang	[aŋ]	
• eng	[eŋ]	
• ong	[uŋ]	

“i”

Pinyin

IPA

English

i in li,ji ..

[i]

letter “e”

-i in zi,ci,si [ɿ]

-i in zhi,chi,shi,ri [ʅ]

ia, iao, ie, iou

Pinyin	IPA	English
ia	[ia]	
iao	[iaʊ]	yow in yowl
ie	[iɛ]	
iou	[iou]	yo in yoga

ian, in, iang, ing, iong

Pinyin	IPA	English
ian	[iɛn]	yen
in	[in]	
iang	[iaŋ]	
ing	[iŋ]	
iong	[iuŋ]	

u, ua, uo, uai, uei

Pinyin	IPA	English
u	[u]	
ua	[ua]	
uo	[uo]	
uai	[uai]	why
uei	[uei]	whey

uan, uen, uang, ueng

Pinyin

IPA

English

uan

[uan]

wan in wand

uen

[uən]

one

uang

[uaŋ]

ueng³

[uəŋ]⁴

“ü”, “üe”, “üan”, “ün”

Pinyin

ü

üe

üan

ün

IPA

[y]

[yɛ]

[yɛn]

[yn]

Pinyin Syllables

There are about 400 spoken syllables (without tones) in Mandarin, written in the pinyin spelling system, which are combinations of pinyin initials and finals. Not every initial combines with every final to produce a spoken syllable in Mandarin.

Null Initial Syllables

- Syllables that have no initial consonant are known as null initial syllables.
- These syllables are composed of only vowels or vowels plus consonants.
- The spelling of null initial syllables follows certain rules according to the spelling of the final.

Spelling Rules

Null Initial Syllables

Null Initial Syllables

“a, e, o” Finals

Final

Syllable

a

a

e

e

ai

ai

ei

ei

an

an

ang

ang

Null Initial Syllables

“u” Finals

Final

u

uo

ui

uan

uang

Syllable

wu

wo

wei

wan

wang

Null Initial Syllables

“i” Finals

Final

Syllable

i

yi

ie

ye

iao

yao

iu

you

ian

yan

iang

yang

Null Initial Syllables

ü Finals

Final

ü

üe

üan

ün

Syllable

yu

yue

yuan

yun

Pinyin Letters and Syllables

to Pay Special Attention to

“i”

“u”

“uan” and “un”

“z”, “c”, “zh”, “q”, “x”

“i”

Pinyin Letter

Description

Syllable

i

[i]

bi, di, ji, qi

-i

[ɿ]

zi, ci, si

-i

[ʅ]

zhi, chi, shi, ri

“u”

Pinyin Letter

Description

Syllable

“u”

[u]

bu,du,zu

“u” (ü)

[y]

ju,qu,xu

“uan” , “un”

Pinyin Letters	Description	Syllable
uan	[uan]	duan, zhuan
uen	[uən]	dun, zhun

u as a back, round vowel

“uan” , “un”

Pinyin Letters	Description	Syllable
uan (üan)	[yɛn]	juan, quan
un (ün)	[yn]	jun, qun

u as a front, round vowel

“z”, “c”, “zh”, “q”, “x”

Consonant letter

Closest to English

z

“ts” in “cats”

c

“ts” in “cats” w. asp.

zh

“j”

q

“ch”

x

“sh”

“z”, “c”, “zh”, “q”, “x”

Consonant letter

z

c

zh

q

x

Syllable

zi, ze, zao, zu

ci, cao, cai, cong

zhi, zhe, zhan

qi, qian, qu, que

xi, xian, xu, xue

Chinese Names

- Chinese names consist of the surname or last name, usually written first, followed by the first name
- The Chinese surname usually consists of one syllable, sometimes two syllables, while the first name can be one or two syllables

Example Chinese Names

- Wang Liangbi
- Zhu Yuan
- Ren Yongchang
- Yin Binyong
- Zhao Yuanren

Example Chinese Surnames

- B Bai
- P Pan
- M Ma, Mao
- F Fang

Example Chinese Surnames

- D Deng
- T Tao
- N Nan
- L Lei, Li, Lu, Liu

Example Chinese Surnames

- G Gao
- K Ke
- H Hu, Hou

Example Chinese Surnames

- Z Zao
- C Cao
- S Song

Example Chinese Surnames

- Zh Zhang, Zhou, Zhao, Zhu
- Ch Chen, Cheng, Chang
- Sh Shao, Shang, Shi
- R Ren, Rui

Example Chinese Surnames

- J Jiang, Jian
- Q Qi, Qin, Qian, Qiang
- X Xu, Xie,

Example Chinese Surnames

- ∅ initial Wu, Wang, Wei
- ∅ initial Yao, Yan, Yang

Pinyin and Cultural Literacy

- Learning pinyin enables one to read and pronounce all Chinese names including:
 - Personal names and Place names
 - Chinese Classics
 - Chinese Dynasties and Emperors
 - All references to Chinese history and culture

Some Chinese Personal Names-Political Leaders

- Mao Zedong
- Hua Guofeng
- Hu Yaobang
- Deng Xiaoping
- Zhao Ziyang
- Jiang Zemin
- Hu Jintao

Chinese Provinces

- Yunnan
- Zhejiang
- Sichuan
- Guizhou
- Jiangxi
- Qinghai

Chinese Cities

- Beijing
- Shanghai
- Tianjin
- Qingdao
- Suzhou
- Chongqing
- Xi'an

Chinese Classics

- Yi Jing
- Shi Jing
- Dao De Jing

Chinese Dynasties

- Qin
- Han
- Sui
- Tang
- Yuan
- Ming
- Qing

Xiexie

(Thank you.)

Notes

1. The values for the initial consonants in pinyin are taken from Wang, Zhu, and Ren (1983), Appendix II, “Tables of Consonants and Vowels of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet and Other Phonetic Systems”, Table 1, pages 255-256.

Notes

2. Values for the finals in pinyin are taken from Wang, Zhu, and Ren (1983), Appendix II, “Tables of Consonants and Vowels of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet and Other Phonetic Systems”, Table 2, Pages 257-258; and Appendix V, “Table of the Combinations of the Initials and Finals in Common Speech”, page 264.

Notes

3. From DeFrancis (1976:xxvi) and Yin and Felley (1990:77).
4. The approximate IPA based on Kratochvil (1968:34).

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