

# SUCH DIFFERENT MANDARIN CHINESE OR WHAT WE SHOULD EXPECT FROM THE MOST DIFFICULT LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** This article is devoted to the different aspects of Chinese language. Valuable information about traditional and simplified characters is given; differences in oral speech are explained. There is brief information about characters history and its spreading all over the world.

**Keywords:** Mandarin Chinese, traditional characters, simplified characters, Taiwan, China, Pinyin, Bopomofo.

Chinese language can be described as the most difficult language all over the world. It is not a secret that in the Chinese there is no such a typical thing as an alphabet. This language consists of graphic signs having unique meaning, connected with its pictorial form. Every character has its own history, because Chinese language is closely related to Chinese history. There is an interesting fact that historical domination of men, which resulted in sexual discrimination against women, can be easily traced in constrictions of some Chinese characters.

Tab. 1. Illustration of sexual discrimination against women in Chinese language<sup>1</sup>

Character	Translation	Literal sense
女	Woman	kneeling woman
妇	married woman	one son's wife
奴	Slave	a self-derogatory expression used by a girl to refer to herself in former times
妖	Demonic	bewitching (usually said of a woman)
嫉	Jealous	to hate
安	Calmness	woman under the roof
好	Good	woman with a child

Moreover, you should understand that there is no such thing as the common Chinese language. It includes different dialects – varieties of Chinese language. Scientists assert that there are eight main dialects of Chinese language. Some of them differ by some sounds while others are totally dissimilar. It is an unobvious fact that, for example, people from different cities can't understand each other during the conversation.

To solve this problem official Chinese was established. It is the northern dialect called Mandarin Chinese. The word "Mandarin" originally means "official of the imperial court". After establishing the People's Republic of China in 1949 Mandarin Chinese was chosen as an official language in mainland China. Nowadays, this dialect of Chinese language is used on radio and

<sup>1</sup> Mobo C. F. Gao, Mandarin Chinese: An Introduction - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 11-13.

television, in schools, universities and all governmental institutions. Mandarin Chinese is also an official language in such countries as Taiwan, Macao, Hong Kong and it is one of the five official languages in the United Nations. As a result, it is spoken by more than 20 percent of the Earth population.

But, as it has already been mentioned, there is a variety of Chinese languages. The most obvious part is difference between the simplified and traditional characters. Before economic, scientific, social and other developments of mainland China, China itself and such countries as Taiwan, Macao, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, and South Korea used traditional Chinese characters. But, after a chain of reforms was adopted, the rules of using Chinese language have changed.

Chinese government understood the necessity to simplify Chinese language in order to spread it in other countries. That is why in the 1950's simplified Chinese characters were created to increase literacy by reducing the number of strokes in more complex characters. Of course, prerequisites for this step in Chinese history appeared several centuries ago, when Chinese world collided with Europeans for the first time. During these centuries there already were different projects of character simplification, connected with such thing as shorthand writing. Furthermore, some of Chinese diplomats used simplified characters in correspondence. Final and the most influential step of character transformation was in 1950's when more than 2000 widely spread characters were chosen and were officially substituted with simpler analogues.

But China is not the only country that decided to make cultural reforms. Singapore, Japan and Malaysia also replaced the most abundant characters, while South Korea changed them into its own language<sup>2</sup>.

However, still there are countries which prefer using traditional characters. They are Taiwan, Macao and Hong Kong. But it doesn't mean that the wish to save its "original language" impedes international cooperation in these countries. They have more in common with Western world than other Asian countries. During several centuries of their history, these countries worked arm in arm with such European countries as Portugal (with Macao), United Kingdom (with Hong Kong), Holland and Spain (with Taiwan). Of course, it wasn't just cooperation; Taiwan, Macao and Hong Kong were colonial possessions of these countries. But, as a result, today we can describe these territories as one of the most successful and the most developed Asian countries. Nowadays, we even can find some pieces of western lifestyle in everyday life of Taiwan, Macao and Hong Kong. For example, Macao and Hong Kong have several official languages (Macao – Chinese and Portuguese, Hong Kong – Chinese and English). By the way, Taiwan has only one official language - Chinese, but every Taiwanese, irrespective of his age can speak English quite fluently. It is the main reason why some Asian countries can still afford to use traditional characters, while China, which was always closed from other countries, needs to make simplification of its own language, of its own culture.

Tab. 2. Comparison of simplified and traditional characters

Traditional Chinese	Simplified Chinese	Translation
買/賣	买/卖	Buy/ Sell
聽	听	Listen
開	开	Open
學	学	Learn

Except differences in written language there are also some differences in oral speech. Mandarin Chinese is fully based on Pinyin. Pinyin is the special phonetic system which is used to transcribe Chinese characters with a Roman alphabet in China, Taiwan, and Singapore. The history of this system started with cultural reforms of 1950's. The main idea of Pinyin is that every character collates with a letter or their combinations (e.g. ch, sh, zh) and represents different sounds in Chinese. And such traditional part of Chinese language as tones is indicated with numbers or accent marks.

<sup>2</sup> Michael E. Everson, Teaching Chinese As a Foreign Language: Theories and Applications, English Edition – Boston: Cheng&Tsui Company Inc., 2008, p. 49-53.



Pic.№1. Tone marks in Mandarin Chinese<sup>1</sup>  
 yi1 or yī (high level tone)  
 yi2 or yí (rising tone)  
 yi3 or yǐ (falling rising tone)  
 yi4 or yì (falling tone)

ㄅ	ㄆ	ㄇ	ㄈ
ㄉ	ㄊ	ㄋ	ㄌ
ㄍ	ㄎ	ㄏ	
ㄐ	ㄑ	ㄒ	
ㄓ	ㄔ	ㄕ	ㄖ
ㄗ	ㄘ	ㄙ	
ㄨ, ㄩ, ㄨ...	ㄨ, ㄩ, ㄨ...	ㄨ, ㄩ, ㄨ...	
ㄚ	ㄛ	ㄜ	ㄝ
ㄞ	ㄟ	ㄠ	ㄡ
ㄢ	ㄣ	ㄤ	ㄥ
ㄦ			

Pic. 2 Bopomofo symbols <sup>1</sup>

This system is a good and convenient way for learning Chinese pronunciation. But before the system of Pinyin was established there was such thing as Bopomofo<sup>3</sup>.

Bopomofo is a phonetic system used to transcribe Mandarin Chinese. This system consists of 37 characters and four tone marks that represent all possible sounds in Chinese. In mainland China this system was used before 1950's and was replaced by Pinyin. It was known as Zhuyin (from Chinese word 注音, which means “phonetic”). But Bopomofo (it is named by the pronunciation of the first 4 symbols) is still widely used in Taiwan's elementary schools to teach students reading and writing. It is also a popular computer input method in Taiwan.

Simplified characters are used today in mainland China. These characters are used by more than one billion people. This part of Chinese language is more attractive for foreigners because of its simplicity. But traditional Chinese characters retain their original strokes and are used in Taiwan, Macao, Hong Kong, and many Chinese communities living abroad, but anyway they all are part of the most difficult and at the same time the most interesting language all over the world – Chinese language.

## References

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<sup>3</sup> Kan Qian, *Colloquial Chinese: A Complete Language Course for Beginners* - Routledge, 1999, p. 134-135.