Background

1. China

Names for China

It used to be thought that the name 'China' derived from the name of China's early Qin dynasty (Chin or Ch'in in older transcriptions), whose rulers conquered all rivals and initiated the dynasty in 221 BCE. But, as Wilkinson notes (*Chinese History: A Manual*: 753, and fn 7), the original pronunciation of the name Qin was rather different, and would make it an unlikely source for the name China. Instead, China is thought to derive from a Persian root, first used for porcelain and only later applied to the country from which the finest examples of that material came. Another name, Cathay, now rather poetic in English but surviving as the regular name for the country in languages such as Russian (Kitai), is said to derive from the name of the Khitan Tarters, who formed the Liăo dynasty in the north of China in the 10th century. The Khitan dynasty was the first to make a capital in the region of modern Beijing.

The Chinese now call their country Zhōngguó, often translated as 'Middle Kingdom'. Originally, this name meant the central, or royal, state of the many that occupied the region prior to the Qin unification. Other names were used before Zhōngguó became current. One of the earliest was Huá (or Huáxià, combining Huá with the name of the earliest dynasty, the Xià). Huá, combined with the Zhōng of Zhōngguó, appears in the modern official names of the country (see below).

Chinese places

a) The People's Republic of China (PRC) [Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó]

This is the political entity proclaimed by Máo Zédōng when he gave the inaugural speech ('China has risen again') at the Gate of Heavenly Peace [Tiān'ānmén] in Beijing on October 1, 1949. The PRC claims sovereignty over Taiwan and the regions currently controlled by the government in Taipei.

b) Mainland China; the Mainland [Zhōngguó Dàlù]

This is a geographic term, used to refer to the continental part of China, without Taiwan, but also implying the land in actual control of the PRC. When the term functions as a proper name, referring to the *de facto* PRC, then we go against custom and write 'the Mainland', with a capital M; otherwise, it is written with the usual small 'm'.

c) The Republic of China (ROC) [Zhōnghuá Mínguó]

This was the name of the political entity established in 1912, after the fall of the Manchu (or Qing) dynasty, which took place the previous year. The man most responsible for the founding of the Republic was Sun Yat-sen (Sūn Yìxiān in Mandarin), and for this, he has earned the name Guófù 'Father of the Country'. But although he was named provisional president in 1911, fears for the unity of the country led to the appointment of Yuán Shìkăi (Yuan Shih-k'ai), an important military and diplomatic official under the Qing, as the first president of the Republic in 1912. When the later president, Chiang Kai-shek (Mandarin: Jiăng Jièshí), fled with his government to Taiwan in 1949, he kept the name

Republic of China as the basis of legitimacy over the whole of China, both Taiwan and the mainland.

d) Taiwan [Táiwān]
Taiwan is some 130 miles off the coast of Fujian; its central mountains are just visible from the Fujian coast on a clear day. Taiwan was named Formosa by the Dutch, who took over the Portuguese name of *Ilha Formosa* 'beautiful island'. The Dutch colonized the island in the early 17th century, fighting off the Spanish who had also established bases on the northern part of the island. Taiwan's earliest inhabitants spoke Austronesian languages unrelated to Chinese, and indigenous groups such as the Ami, Paiwan and Bunan who still speak non-Chinese languages are descendents of those early Taiwan Austronesians. By the 13th century, if not earlier, Chinese speaking Hakka and Fukienese – regional Chinese languages – had established small communities on the island. These were joined by holdouts from the Ming after the fall of that dynasty on the mainland. The Qing dynasty, that followed the Ming, annexed Taiwan in 1683, making it a province. In 1895, Taiwan was ceded to Japan as part of a war settlement, and remained a colony until 1945. Then, in the period before the Communist victory in 1949, large numbers of mainlanders fled to Taiwan along with, or in conjunction with, the removal of the Nationalist government.

e) Hong Kong [Xiāng Gǎng]
From July 1997, Hong Kong has been a Special Administrative Region [tèbié xíngzhèngqū] of China, which guarantees it autonomy within the PRC in all but foreign affairs and defense. Its English name reflects the Cantonese pronunciation of what is in Mandarin Xiāng Gǎng 'fragrant harbor'. Hong Kong was formally ceded to the British in the Treaty of Nanking [Nánjīng], signed in 1842 (on a ship anchored in the Yangtze River, slightly east of Nanjing) at the end of the Opium War. The Kowloon Peninsula [Jiǔlóng 'nine dragons'] was added in 1860, and the New Territories [Xīnjiè] were leased for 99 years from 1898, making Hong Kong, in all, a little more than 1000 square kilometers.

Hong Kong has been settled by a number of distinct Chinese groups, including the so-called *Bendi* ('locals'), who emigrated in the Sung (10th – 12th C.) after being driven from their homes in north China; the *Tanka*, fisherfolk who live on boats and are thought by some to be the descendents of the non-Han *Yue* people; the *Hokla*, early immigrants from Fujian; the *Hakka*, who ended up mostly in less fertile parts of the New Territories; and numerous clans and people from nearby Cantonese speaking regions, as well as other parts of China. Despite its small size, Hong Kong has preserved the traces of many traditional Chinese social forms and practices better than many other parts of the Chinese speaking world.

f) Greater China
The occasional need to talk about a single Chinese entity, consisting of the Mainland with Hong Kong, and Taiwan, has recently given rise to a term, Liǎng'àn Sāndì 'two-shores three-lands'.

Liǎng'àn Sāndì

(From *The World Factbook, 2005*; https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html)

g) Nationalists and Communists

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, it was customary to distinguish the two political entities by their only extant political parties, the Communist Party (Gòngchǎndǎng), abbreviated CCP, and the Nationalist Party (Guómíndǎng, or Kuomintang), the KMT. Hence 'the Communist government', 'the Nationalist leaders', etc. Recent changes in Taiwan and the Mainland make neither term appropriate. In Taiwan, in the election of 1998, the first democratic election in a Chinese country, the Nationalists failed to win and became the main opposition party. Meanwhile, on the Mainland, the Communist Party, though retaining its institutional position in the government, has become less of a dominating force in political life.

h) Běijīng and Běipíng (and Peking)

One of the curious consequences of the political differences between the PRC and the ROC (Taiwan) is that they have different names for the city formerly known to the English speaking world as Peking. For the PRC, the capital is Běijīng ['the northern capital'], the city that has been the capital for all but brief periods since 1422 when Emperor Yǒng Lè of the Míng dynasty moved the government north from Nánjīng ['the southern capital'] in Central China. However, in 1927, the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek, having little real power in the north and under threat from the Japanese, made Nánjīng their capital, and restored the name Běipíng (Peiping) 'northern-peace' that the northern city had had before Yǒnglè made it his capital in the 15th century. Officially, the Nationalists retained the name Běipíng even after the Japanese conquered the city of Nánjīng, and continued to do after Běijīng reverted to the capital in 1949 under the PRC.

The spelling 'Peking', with a 'ki' may be a vestige of the French system of transcription that used 'ki' to represent the sound 'tš' – now written with a 'j'. Or it may reflect the Cantonese pronunciation of the name Beijing, in which the initial of the second syllable is pronounced with a hard 'k' sound. Representations of Cantonese pronunciation were often adopted by the British as official postal spellings (cf. Nanking [Nánjīng] and Chungking [Chóngqìng]). Though most foreigners now spell the name of the city in *pinyin* transcription, Beijing (which represents the Mandarin pronunciation), the old spelling survives to this day in certain proper names, such as Peking University (still the official English name of the institution) and Peking duck. The transcription, Beijing, is not without its problems either, since speakers who do not know the *pinyin* system tend to make the 'j' sound more foreign or exotic by giving it a French quality: 'bay-zhing'. As you will soon learn, the actual Mandarin pronunciation is closer to 'bay-džing'.

2. Chinese speech

Chinese

Chinese, as a term for language, is used to refer to the native languages, spoken or written, now or in the past, of the Chinese people. Thus Mandarin, Cantonese, Taiwanese, and Classical Chinese are all Chinese. In other words, while Chinese can be used in a narrow sense to refer to what is sometimes called Modern Standard Chinese, colloquially called Mandarin by most English speakers, it is also used to refer to the Sinitic branch of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. In that respect it is comparable to the term 'Romance', that applies to the modern derivatives of Latin, such as French, Catalan, Romanian, and Spanish, as well as to Latin itself.

Mandarin [Guóyǔ, Pǔtōnghuà, Huáyǔ]

Mandarin is a term that derives from a Portuguese word meaning 'counselor' – or 'a mandarin'. As a name for the language, it dates from early Portuguese contacts with China, when it was used to translate the Chinese term Guānhuà, literally 'speech of officials'. Guānhuà was the name given to specialized speaking practices which, though they might vary from one historical period to another, served as a *lingua franca* among officials and other educated classes who might come from different parts of China and speak mutually unintelligible Chinese in their home regions. A late form of Guānhuà, based on Beijing speech, can be regarded as the precursor to modern Mandarin. However, while Mandarin has survived as the English name for the modern language, the Chinese make use of a variety of terms.

Taiwan and most overseas communities call Mandarin Guóyǔ ('national language'), a term dating at least from 1918. The PRC calls it Pǔtōnghuà ('common language'), another term with a legacy dating back to the early part of the 20th century. In Singapore, where the different linguistic situation makes both terms inappropriate, it is called Huáyǔ ('the language of the Huá', Huá being an ancient name for the Chinese people). All three terms refer to a language that continues to be promoted as a national standard by the governments of both the PRC and Taiwan, and is generally conceived of as a norm for educated or formal speech by Chinese speaking peoples the world over.

The origins of Mandarin

In traditional China, the majority of the population spoke regional or local languages and were illiterate. For them, there was no general medium of communication across regional lines. For the educated, however, Guānhuà served in a limited way as a spoken medium; and Classical Chinese, the language of administration, education and high culture (see below), served as a written medium. By the 19th century, it was clear that the lack of a spoken norm that could serve the communication needs of all classes across the country was a major obstacle to the modernization of China, and eventually efforts were made to identify a suitable medium and promote it as the standard. Guānhuà was an obvious candidate, but by the 19th century, it had become strongly associated with the educated speech of Beijing, putting southerners at a disadvantage. And Classical Chinese, though it had no regional bias, was a highly stylized written language with ancient roots that made it unsuitable as the basis for a national spoken medium.

After various interesting attempts to establish a hybrid language to balance regional differences, particularly between north and south, the Chinese language planners settled on the northern strategy, promoting the speech that had also been the basis of Guānhuà: the *educated speech* of north China and particularly that of the capital Beijing. However, though Mandarin is based on educated northern usage and in particular, a refined Beijing pronunciation, it has also incorporated material from a broad range of other sources. Words with wide distribution have been adopted over northern or Beijing localisms, for example; and grammatical constructions characteristic of southern languages, such as Cantonese, Shanghainese, often co-exist with northern patterns in the modern language. Spoken Mandarin also absorbed material from written sources that introduced words and phrasing from the important economic and cultural region of the Lower Yangtze Valley (Shànghǎi to Nánjīng), and words for modern concepts first coined in Japanese.

Varieties of Mandarin

Though both Taiwan and the PRC have always agreed on the relationship between Mandarin pronunciation and educated Beijing speech, political separation and cultural divergence have resulted in the emergence of two norms, as comparison of dictionaries from Taiwan and the PRC will show. These differences, though still moderate in scope, extend from pronunciation to lexicon and usage.

Even more variety is to be found at local levels. The case of Taiwan is illustrative. There, Mandarin is not the first language of much of the population. The most common first language is Táiyǔ ('Taiwanese'), a Southern Min language that is very similar to the Southern Min spoken in the province of Fujian across the Taiwan Straits. (Southern Min is also the predominant spoken language of the Singapore Chinese, and many other Chinese communities in Southeast Asia.) With so many in Taiwan speaking Táiyǔ as a first language, it is not surprising that Mandarin there is often influenced by the pronunciation, grammar and usage of that language. The result is Taiwan Mandarin. The same phenomenon occurs elsewhere, of course, so that no matter where you are in China, Mandarin heard on the street will generally have local features. Native speakers quickly get used to these differences, just as English speakers get used to the regional accents of

English. But learners will find the variation disruptive, and will need time and experience to adjust to it.

Though there are probably more and more Chinese whose first language is Mandarin and whose speech is close to the appointed norms, it is still true that the majority of Chinese speak more than one variety of Chinese, and for many of them Mandarin would be a second language. A few years ago, *USA Today* published statistics on the 'world's most common languages, ranked by population that uses each as a first language'. Mandarin was listed first, with 885 million speakers (followed by Spanish with 332 million and English with 322million). The figure for Mandarin would not include those whose first language is Cantonese or one of the other regional languages. But it must include a large number of speakers whose Mandarin would be barely understandable to someone familiar only with the standard.

When describing the best Mandarin (or the best Chinese), Chinese tend to focus on pronunciation, praising it as biāozhǔn 'standard' (as in 'your Chinese is very biāozhǔn'). For this reason, native Chinese speakers, who tend to be effusive in their praise in any case, will sometimes flatter a foreigner by saying s/he speaks the language better than they do. By better, they mean with a better approximation to the standard, educated accent. Apart from language classrooms, the most biāozhǔn Mandarin is heard on the broadcast media, in schools, and in the speech of young, educated urban Chinese.

Regional languages and minority languages

There are some seven major dialect groupings of Chinese, including the geographically extensive Northern group (divided into Southwestern, Northwestern and Northern regions) from which Mandarin was promoted. Of the others, Cantonese (Yuè), Shanghainese (Wú), Fukienese or Hokkien (Mǐn) and Kèjiā or Hakka are the best known. (Yuè, Wú and Mǐn are Chinese linguistic designations, while Hokkien and Hakka are dialectal pronunciations of the Mandarin names Fújiàn and Kèjiā, respectively.) All represent groupings of diverse dialects thought to share a common origin. Even within the group, the varieties are not necessarily mutually intelligible. Cantonese for example, includes many dialects, such as Táishān (Hoisan), which are quite distinct from the standard Canton dialect.

In many respects the dialect groupings of Chinese – represented by Cantonese, Shanghainese, Hakka etc. – are different languages. They are not, after all, mutually intelligible and they have their own standard speeches (Canton for Cantonese, Suzhou for Shanghainese, etc.) In linguistic terms, they are often said to be comparable to Dutch and German, or Spanish and Portuguese. However, as noted earlier, unlike those European languages, the Chinese regional languages share a written language, make reference to a common standard (Mandarin), and identify with a common culture. Recently, the term 'topolect', a direct translation with Greek roots of the Chinese term fāngyán 'place-language', has gained currency as a more formal term for what are generally called 'regional languages' in this text. So we may speak of Cantonese as the standard language within the Cantonese (or Yuè) grouping, and varieties such as Hoisan as dialects within Cantonese.

Regional languages should be distinguished from the languages of the non-Chinese (non-Han) ethnic groups, such as the Mongolians, Tibetans, or Uighurs, that make up about 8 to 9% of the total population of China. There are 56 officially recognized ethnic minorities in China, almost all of them with their own languages or language groups.

Representatives from China's minorities gather around the Chairman. A painting in the Minorities Research Institute in Beijing. [JKW 1982]

3. Chinese writing

Written Mandarin

As noted above, Mandarin is often used to refer to the written language of China as well as to the standard spoken language. This is the language of composition learned in school and used by all educated Chinese regardless of the particular variety or regional languages that they speak. A Cantonese, for example, speaking Taishan Cantonese (Hoisan) at home and in the neighborhood, speaking something closer to standard Cantonese when s/he goes to Canton (city), and speaking Cantonese flavored Mandarin in certain formal or official situations, is taught to write a language that is different in terms of vocabulary, grammar and usage from both Hoisan and standard Cantonese. Even though s/he would read it aloud with Cantonese pronunciation, it would in fact be more easily relatable to spoken Mandarin in lexicon, grammar, and in all respects *other than pronunciation*.

From Classical Chinese to modern written Chinese

Written language always differs from spoken, for it serves quite different functions. But in the case of Chinese, the difference was, until the early part of the 20th century,

extreme. For until then, most written communication, and almost all printed matter, was written in a language called Wényán in Chinese ('literary language'), and generally known in English as Classical Chinese. As noted earlier, it was this language that served as a medium of written communication *for the literate classes*

Classical Chinese was unlikely ever to have been a close representation of a spoken language. It is thought to have had its roots in the language spoken some 2500 years ago in northern China. That language, though still Chinese in the sense that it is ancestral to modern Chinese languages, would have differed quite significantly in sounds, grammar and vocabulary from any form of modern Chinese.

Though Classical Chinese can be regarded as a different language from the modern, it was written in characters that have retained their basic shape to the present day, and these serve to preserve the connection between ancient and modern words whose pronunciation and grammatical context is radically different. While for English, spelling changes (that reflect changes in pronunciation), as well a high degree of word replacement, make Old English texts almost completely opaque to modern readers, ancient Chinese texts continue to look familiar to Chinese readers despite the changes that have taken place in the intervening years. Educated Chinese can read them aloud in modern pronunciation, Mandarin, say, or Cantonese. Without knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of Classical Chinese, they may not fully understand them, but enough words – and more than words, sayings and phrases – have survived to modern times to make the writings of Confucius (5^{th} – 6^{th} century BCE), or the poems of Li Po (8^{th} century AD) superficially accessible to the modern reader of Chinese.

Classical Chinese is still used for certain kinds of formal or ritual writing, eg diplomas and inscriptions, much like Latin in western countries. It has also been a source of words, quotations, allusions, stories and even style that appear in the modern written language, as well as in speech, but relatively few people read the classical language well, and only a few specialists are still able to write it fluently.

Since Classical Chinese was not based on an accessible spoken language, facility in writing it required memorizing large samples to act as models. Once learned, the classical language would tend to channel expression in conservative directions. Citation was the main form of argument; balance and euphony were crucial elements of style. These features did not endear it to the modernizers, and they sought to replace it with a language closer to the modern spoken (as noted in §2). They had a precedent, for all through Chinese history, there had in fact been genres of writing known as Báihuà ('white = plain or vernacular language') that were rich in colloquial elements. Such genres were not highly regarded or considered worthy as literary models, but they were well known as the medium of the popular novels of the Ming and Qing, such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* (also called the *The Story of Stone*), *Monkey* (also known as *Journey to the West*), or the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Báihuà, though it retained classical elements, provided the early model for a more colloquial standard written language.

Because norms within the newly emerging written language varied, and led to problems of consistency and clarity, some advocated a return to Classical Chinese as the written standard, and if it could have shed some of its stylistic affectations (such as the high value put on parallelism of structure and elaborate or archaic diction), Classical Chinese might have developed into a modern written norm much as Classical Arabic has become the written norm of the Arabic speaking world. But Classical Chinese was too closely associated with conservatism and insularity at a time when China was looking to modernize. Nevertheless, a new written norm does not arise overnight, and for at least the first half of the 20th century, a number of different styles across the range of classical to colloquial coexisted and vied for dominance. Following the Chinese revolution, written styles in Taiwan and the PRC diverged. In the PRC, political and other factors favored a more colloquial written style, whereas in Taiwan the influence of classical styles has remained stronger.

Characters

The earliest extensive examples of written Chinese date from late in the second millenium BCE. These are the so-called oracle bone inscriptions (jiǎgǔwén), inscribed or painted on ox bones and the bottom plate, the carapace, of tortoise shells. This early writing made use of characters whose form differs in appearance but which can be directly related to the modern characters (particularly the traditional characters that are still standard in Taiwan). In the Qin dynasty (221 – 206 BC), the script was modified and standardized as part of the reform of government administration. The resulting style, known as the 'little seal' (xiǎo zhuàn) is still used on seals (or 'chops'). At first glance, little seal characters look quite unlike the modern, but a native reader can often discern the basic parts and figure them out.

A script known as lìshū came into extensive use in the Han dynasty (202 BCE – 220 AD). Individual strokes in the lìshū style are described as having "silkworm's head and swallow's tail". It is still used occasionally for writing large characters. The modern script, the kind generally used for printed matter, is based on the kǎishū 'the model script' that has been in use since before the period known as the Southern and Northern Dynasties (5th and 6th centuries). Other varieties of script were developed for handwriting (xíngshū 'running script') and calligraphy (cǎoshū 'grass script').

Traditional and simplified characters

In the past, simpler and more complex versions of characters have often co-existed. In many cases, the more complicated were used for formal correspondence and the simpler, for personal. In the 1950s however, as part of a program to promote literacy in the PRC, a set of simpler characters, most of them based on attested forms, were promoted as a general standard for all printed matter. Singapore adopted the new forms for most purposes, but Taiwan, Hong Kong and most overseas communities kept the traditional forms, and as a result, two types of (formal) characters are now in use in the Chinese speaking world. In Chinese, these are called fántǐzì 'abundant-stroke-characters' and jiǎntǐzì 'simple-stroke-characters', or in English, 'traditional' and 'simplified'. The two types are illustrated below, using the phrase Zhōngguó huà 'Chinese [spoken] language (middle-country speech)':

Traditional	**Simplified**
中國話	中国话
Zhōngguó huà	Zhōngguó huà

The three characters cited illustrate the differences nicely. Many characters have only one form (like zhōng), or show slight differences between the two forms (like huà). Others (like guó) show significant differences but are easily relatable. Relatively few, no more than a few dozen, are completely different, and most of those are commonly encountered. So the differences between the two sets of characters are not as significant as might be imagined. A native speaker sees the relationship between the two fairly easily, and using context, moves from one to the other without much difficulty. Students generally write only one style, but they should be comfortable reading either.

Homophony

Characters represent syllable-length words (or rather, morphemes, the components of compounds). Since in Chinese these units are short, the chance of homophony is relatively high, more so than in English. In English words pronounced the same are often written the same, eg the 'pens' of 'pig pen' and 'ink pen.' But it is also common in English for different words of identical pronunciation to be written differently: 'to, too, two'. Written Chinese is more comparable to the latter case: words with different (and unrelatable) meanings are written with different characters. A syllable such as shi can be written dozens of ways, depending on the meaning, as the famous Chinese linguist Chao Yuen Ren showed in a tour de force whose title was:

施氏食獅史
Shī shì shí shī shǐ.
(Shi) clan eat lion story
The tale of how Shī of the Shì clan ate the lion.

Chao's tale continues for another 100 or so characters, all pronounced shi on one of the four tones. It is written in the very concise prose of Classical Chinese (and given modern sound values when read). Written in modern Chinese, there would be far less homophony; many of the single syllable words would, in fact, be compounds. So the story could probably be read aloud and understood. But Chao's exercise makes the point nicely: characters are units of sound and meaning. Letters are units of sound only.

Transcribing sound in characters

Characters are sometimes used only for their sound values, with the usual meanings ignored. In this way, Chinese characters can be used to transcribe foreign sounds. So just as we can use Roman letters to write Chinese in *pinyin*, Chinese have used characters to write foreign languages, including English. Here is an example from a very simple Chinese English-teaching manual from the Mainland (and therefore written in simplified characters):

艾姆搜普利丝得吐斯衣油厄根
ài-mǔ sōu pǔ-lì-sī-dé tǔ sī-yī yóu è-gēn
I'm so pleased to see you again.

Characters are regularly used for their syllabic value, in this way, to transliterate personal names, names of places, as well as sounds: 沙士比亞 Shāshìbǐyà 'Shakespeare'; 密西西比 Mìxīxībǐ 'Mississippi'; 嘩啦huālā 'splat' *[sound of crashing]*. But because characters can only be used for syllabic units, the match is not usually as good as it would be in an alphabetic system, that can match a symbol to each consonant and vowel sound. A more precise match could be achieved by inserting an alphabetic transcription such as *bopomofo* or *pinyin* (see below) into a character text, but this practice is still rare.

Pictographs, ideographs, logographs.
Simple characters, or the basic components of more complicated ones, can often be traced back to pictorial representations, and for this reason characters are sometimes labeled pictographs**.** The earliest characters, the oracle bone inscriptions, look even more like pictures. But the majority of modern characters do not derive directly from attempts to represent objects pictorially, and even those that do, have become so conventionalized that it is only in rare cases that one can guess the meaning from the form alone. That is not to say that Chinese characters do not have certain aesthetic qualities that can be exploited in poetry and art, or that their pictorial qualities cannot be exploited for language learning as well; it is rather that the pictorial aspects of characters do not necessarily play a significant role in ordinary reading or writing.

The term ideograph has also been applied to Chinese characters, sometimes with the implication that characters allow immediate access to meaning without reference to sound, or without reference to particular words. The fact that Chinese characters were borrowed into other languages such as Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese to represent words that matched in meaning but not sound offer some support for such a notion. Indeed, it is true that the link between character and sound can vary. Cantonese speakers read Chinese with Cantonese sounds, while Mandarin speakers read them with Mandarin (much as Australians or Scots read English texts in their own pronunciation). But regardless of the particular language, understanding of the text is still dependent on linguistic contexts. Even in classical Chinese, the reader has to identify words and contexts that are linguistic, not just in the realm of thought, in order to perceive meaning. So, like pictographic, the term ideographic is not a very suitable characterization either.

Writing systems are better named according to the units that they encode. Thus English is basically phonographic, with letters encoding sounds; but it also has considerable logographic elements (to, too, two; &; $). Chinese writing is primarily logographic (units encode words) but also has syllabo-graphic elements that connect syllables that are similar in sound.

Taibei: Selling New Year scrolls. [JKW 1970]

Representing the sounds of Chinese

While characters do exhibit sound-based connections, the pronunciation of a particular character is not systematically indicated by its form. This can be an advantage, as we noted earlier, for it allows speakers of different regional languages, or even different languages in the case of Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese, to apply quite different sounds to the same graph. But for learners, it creates obvious difficulties. Learners need to be able to symbolize the pronunciation accurately for purposes of keeping track of material and internalizing correct pronunciation. (When Cantonese and speakers of other regional languages learn Mandarin, they need a transcription system for the same reasons.) Of even more importance, an alphabetic system of writing, which can be learned very quickly, speeds up the presentation of spoken language material.

Alphabetic systems for writing Chinese date back at least to the 16th century. Most have made use of Roman letters, and are therefore called Romanizations. We can illustrate some of the systems, using the compound word for 'Chinese language' again:

1. *Wade-Giles*	Chūngkuó huà		ㄓ	=	zh
			ㄨ	=	w
2. *Yale*	Jūnggwó hwà		ㄥ	=	eng
3. *National Romanization*	Jong-guo huah		ㄍ	=	g
			ㄨ	=	w
4. *Zhùyīn Fúhào*	→	→	ㄛˊ	=	ó
5. *Hànyǔ Pīnyīn*	Zhōngguó huà		ㄏ	=	h
			ㄨ	=	w
			ㄚ、	=	à

The Wade-Giles system (named for Thomas Wade, a Professor of Chinese at Cambridge University at the turn of 19th century who invented it, and Herbert A. Giles, a consular officer and later, Wade's successor at Cambridge who incorporated it in his dictionary) was for many years used in most English language publications on China, as well as in library catalogues. It is well known for distinguishing the plain initial consonants from the aspirated (g from k, d from t, zh from ch etc. in the *pinyin* system) by placing an apostrophe after the latter: *kuo* versus *k'uo*, for example, or *chung* versus *ch'ung*. (This is phonetically quite sensible since both sounds are voiceless in Chinese.)

The Yale system grew out of work performed by the War Department during World War II and was used in the Yale textbook series, familiar to several generations of students of Chinese. It is probably the most transparent [for English speakers] of the Romanized transcription systems. National Romanization (Guóyǔ Luómǎzì), a system that had official status in China during the 1930s, incorporates the tone in the spelling – notice there are no tone marks above the vowels – which makes it invaluable for learning and retaining tones. Hànyǔ Pīnyīn is the official system of the PRC and has been accepted by most of the rest of the world, including, recently, Taiwan.

Zhùyīn Fúhào ('transcription of sounds'), the system shown on the right of the others above, is called *Bopo mofo*, colloquially, after the first four letters of its alphabet. It has a longer history than *pinyin*, being based on a system created in 1919, called Zhùyīn Zìmǔ 'transcription alphabet' that was intended to serve as a fully fledged writing system. It was inspired by the Japanese 'kana' system, whose symbols derive from characters rather than Roman letters. *Bopo mofo* symbols have the advantage of looking Chinese and of not suggesting any particular English (or other language's) sound values. In Taiwan, children, as well as many foreign students, learn to read with materials in which *Bopo mofo* is written vertically alongside the character text to indicate pronunciation.

Hànyǔ Pīnyīn

Pinyin ('spelling the sound') was developed and officially adopted by the PRC in the 1950s, and it is now used in textbooks, dictionaries and other reference books, computer

input systems, and on road and shop signs there. In recent years, some schools in China have been encouraging children at certain stages in their education to write essays in pinyin to improve composition and style, and it is not unlikely that its functions will continue to expand in the future.

It is sometimes claimed that pinyin (or any other such system of transcribing the sounds of Mandarin) cannot serve as a fully-fledged writing system because the degree of homophony in Chinese is such that some reference to characters is necessary for disambiguation. This is certainly true in the case of the *shi*-story cited earlier, and it might be true for Classical Chinese in general (if it is read out in modern pronunciation, as it usually is). But it is certainly not true for texts written in colloquial styles. *Anything that can be understood in speech can be written and understood in pinyin*. Many people email successfully in pinyin without even indicating the tones! The question is, using pinyin, how far one can stray from colloquial speech and still be understood. Written styles range from the relatively colloquial to the relatively classical, but if the latter can be understood when read aloud, then presumably they can be understood written in pinyin.

Bǎihuā qífàng, bǎijiā zhēngmíng!
100-flowers together-blossom, 100-schools [of thought] contend
Let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend!
百花齊放，百家爭鳴

4. Key Terms

Peoples Republic of China (PRC)
The Mainland
The Republic of China (ROC)
Taiwan
Hong Kong (Xiāng Gǎng)
Qīng (Manchu) dynasty (1644-1912)
Míng (Chinese) dynasty (1368-1644)
Yuán (Mongol) dynasty (1279-1368)
Chinese
Guānhuà (officials' language)
Mandarin
Guóyǔ (national language)
Pǔtōnghuà (ordinary language)
lingua franca
Classical Chinese (Wényán)
Báihuà
Táiyǔ
Taiwanese Mandarin
Hànyǔ Pīnyīn
dialects
Regional languages: Cantonese; Shanghainese; Fujianese (Hokkien); Kejia (Hakka), etc.

Běijīng (Peking)
Běipíng (Peiping)
Máo Zédōng
Chiang Kai-shek (Jiǎng Jièshí)
Sun Yat-sen (Sūn Yìxiān)
1842
1911
1949
oracle bone inscriptions (jiǎgǔwén))
little seal characters (xiǎo zhuàn)
model script (kǎishū)
traditional characters (fántǐzì)
simplified characters (jiǎntǐzì)
homophony
pictographs
ideographs
logographs
Wade-Giles
Zhùyīn Fúhào (Bopo mofo)

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