

# Beginners' Chinese: a taster course



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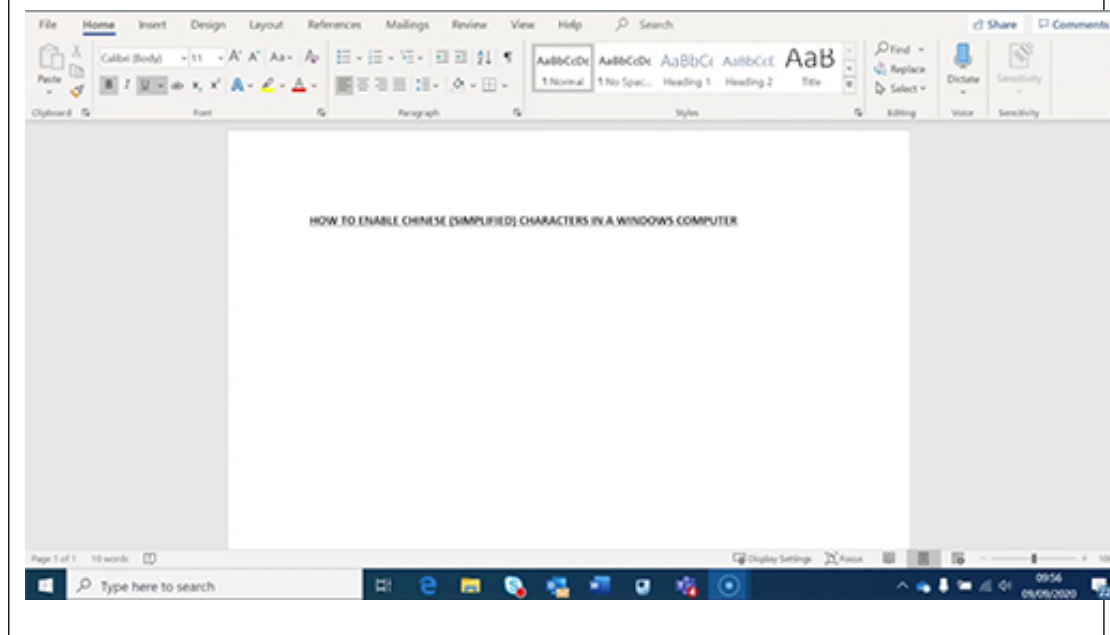
## Introduction

This free course, *Beginners' Chinese: a taster course*, is introductory material for absolute beginners in Chinese. This course concentrates on Mandarin Chinese as a tool for communication, but also provides some insights into Chinese society and culture. It contains a brief introduction to the Chinese language, its scripts and sounds, and how words are formed. The language activities and audio extracts presented here are not meant for a complete course, but are samples to give you a taste of what it is like to learn Chinese. You will hear short conversations where people greet each other and introduce themselves, and learn how to count from one to ten. You'll learn different ways of saying your name and greeting people, as well as give your telephone number.

Before you continue with this course, make sure you have enabled the Chinese font on your computer. Video 1 gives step-by-step instructions on how to do this for both PC and Mac users.

Video content is not available in this format.

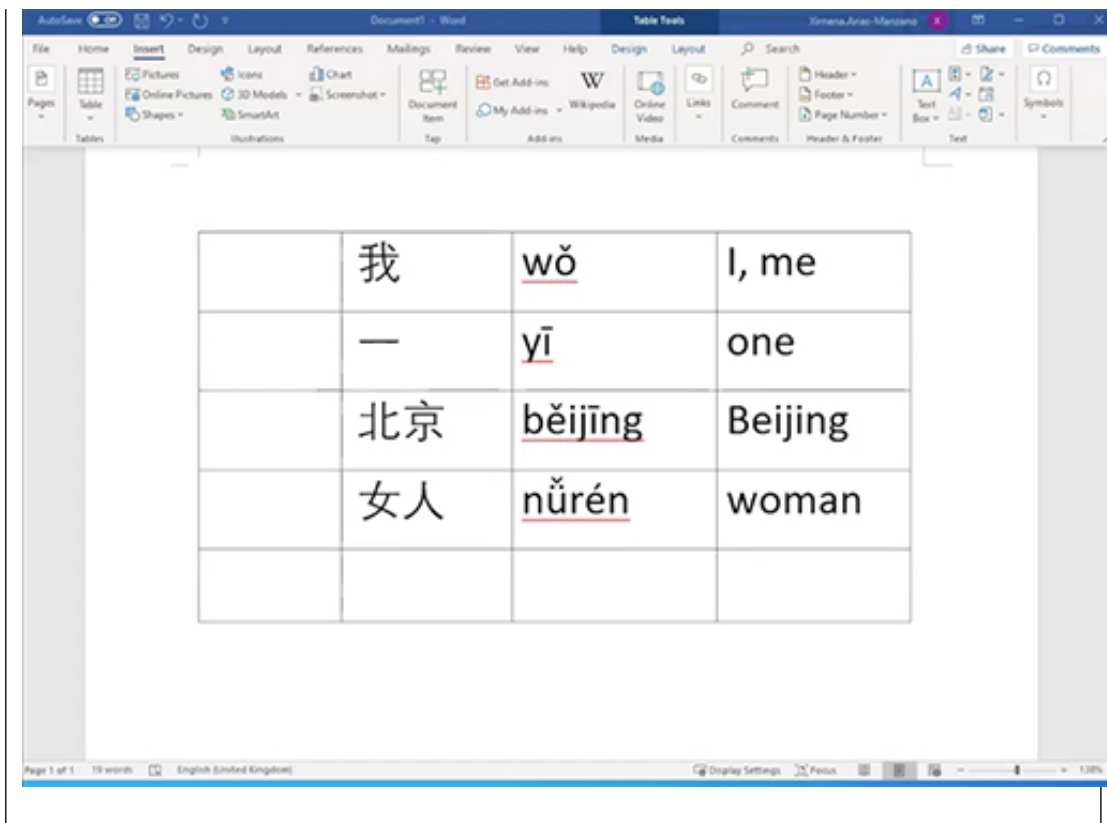
### Video 1



Now watch Video 2 which explains how to type words in Chinese on a computer.

Video content is not available in this format.

### Video 2



我	wǒ	I, me
一	yī	one
北京	běijīng	Beijing
女人	nǚrén	woman

You may wish to download the [Instructions on how to enable Chinese font and type characters](#) for your own reference.

Please note, to revert back to an English (or your primary language) keyboard on a

拼

Windows PC you will need to click on the Chinese character 拼, which appears in the bottom right hand corner of your computer screen next to the date and time and where you will have originally switched from an English to Chinese keyboard. Once you have clicked on this character you will then be given the option to select the English keyboard.

拼

The same rules apply for reverting back to English on a Mac, however the character will be found in the top right hand corner of your computer screen, again in the position where you originally switched your keyboard to Chinese.

This OpenLearn course provides a taster for studying other Chinese short courses at The Open University's [Open Centre for Languages and Cultures](#) and the 15-credit [Learning to teach languages in primary schools \(Beginners Mandarin Chinese\)](#).

## Learning outcomes

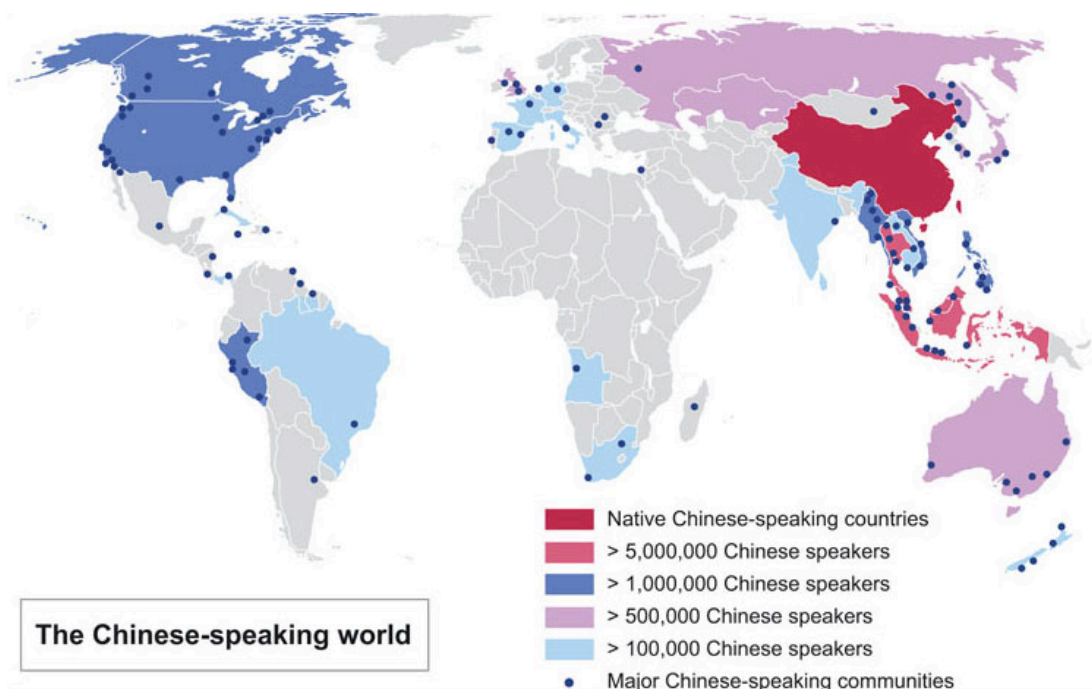
After studying this course, you should be able to:

- demonstrate an awareness of the varieties of the Chinese language
- understand how the sound system of Mandarin Chinese (pinyin and tones) works
- understand that there are simplified and traditional forms of Chinese characters and have an awareness of how they are combined together to form new meanings
- demonstrate basic vocabulary and pronunciation related to greetings, numbers, names and nationalities
- demonstrate a cultural understanding of how professional titles are used to address people.

# 1 The Chinese language

The Chinese language, in its various forms, is spoken by the Han Chinese and is known in China as 汉语 *hànyǔ* (literally, Han language). The Han Chinese constitutes about 94 percent of China's population. About 70 percent of the Han people speak Mandarin Chinese; the remaining 30 percent speak other related Chinese languages or dialects. Speakers of non-Chinese languages (e.g. Mongolian, Tibetan) make up about 6 percent of China's population.

Mandarin Chinese is the official language of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, and one of the official languages of Singapore. It is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Mandarin and other forms of Chinese are spoken by many expatriate Chinese communities, both in Southeast Asia and overseas. The map below shows how the Chinese language has spread around the world.



**Figure 1** The Chinese-speaking world

(Adapted from ASDFGHJ, 'A map of the Sinophone world', 24 January 2009, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:New-Map-Sinophone\\_World.PNG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:New-Map-Sinophone_World.PNG), last accessed 29 May 2009)

## 1.1 Varieties of Chinese

Apart from Mandarin, the other six major varieties of spoken Chinese are Cantonese, Gan, Hakka, Min, Wu and Xiang. The map below shows the areas of China in which they are spoken and by approximately how many people, as well as the parts of China where non-Chinese languages are predominantly spoken.



**Figure 2** Varieties of Chinese

(Adapted from ‘Chinese dialects in China’, 1987, [www.rcl.cityu.edu.hk/atlas/20/A2\\_20.jpg](http://www.rcl.cityu.edu.hk/atlas/20/A2_20.jpg), last accessed 29 May 2009, and Wu Yue, ‘Map of the Sinitic languages’, 2004, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_sinitic\\_languages-en.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_sinitic_languages-en.svg), last accessed 29 May 2009)

There is some debate among linguists about whether the different varieties of Chinese should be regarded as dialects or as languages in their own right. Interpretations depend on how ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ are defined. Furthermore, each dialect group consists of many sub-dialects, several of which are spoken widely enough to be categorised by some linguists as major dialects (or languages) that could justifiably be added to the list above. The samples presented here teach Mandarin Chinese in its standardised modern form. Standard Mandarin Chinese is commonly referred to as 普通话 *pǔtōng huà* (common speech) in the People’s Republic of China, 国语 *guó yǔ* (national language) in Taiwan and 华语 *huá yǔ* (Chinese language) in Singapore. In this course, Mandarin Chinese will simply be referred to as ‘Chinese’.

Chinese is often perceived in the West as a difficult language, mainly because of its different character script and the fact that it is a tonal language – i.e. it uses tones to distinguish meanings. Chinese grammar, on the other hand, is quite simple compared to that of many European languages. There is no conjugation, number agreement or case change, so you only ever have to learn a word in one form.

To start, test your knowledge of the Chinese language with a quiz in Activity 1. You will then move on to learn about it in more depth by exploring pinyin, tones and word formation.

### Activity 1 Chinese language general knowledge quiz

Answer true or false.

1. Mandarin Chinese is the official language of the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan, and one of the official languages of Singapore and the United Nations.

- True  
 False

#### Discussion

True. Mandarin Chinese is the official language of China, Taiwan, one of the official languages in Singapore and one of the six official languages in the United Nations.



---

2. The Han Chinese (who speak **!Warning! SimSun not supported**汉语 hàn yǔ) constitute about 70 percent of China's population.

- True
  - False
- 

#### Discussion

False. The Han Chinese constitute about 94 percent of China's population. About 70 percent of the Han people speak Mandarin Chinese; the remaining 30 percent speak other related Chinese languages or dialects.

---

3. Apart from Mandarin, there is only one more variety of spoken Chinese called Cantonese.

- True
  - False
- 

#### Discussion

False. Apart from Mandarin, the other six major varieties of spoken Chinese are Cantonese, Gan, Hakka, Min, Wu and Xiang.

---

4. Chinese has a pictographic character script and is a tonal language.

- True
  - False
- 

#### Discussion

True. Chinese is often perceived in the West as a difficult language, mainly because of its different character script and the fact that it is a tonal language.

## 1.2 Pinyin

There are various systems for transcribing Chinese sounds into the Roman alphabet. Pinyin was adopted as the official system in the People's Republic of China in 1958, and has since become the standard and most-used form of transcription in schools, the media and elsewhere. This course uses pinyin in the teaching of pronunciation.

Watch the video below to learn more about how pinyin was created.

Video content is not available in this format.

**Video 3**

# 拼音之父

Read the language note below about pinyin sounds and then, in the activity that follows, listen to how each one is pronounced.

## Language note: single finals and initials

Chinese is a vowel-dominated language. In total, there are 35 vowel sounds, known as 'finals' because they occur at the end of syllables. The six vowel sounds you will hear in Activity 2 are called 'single finals' and are written in pinyin as *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* and *ü*. These simple vowel sounds are put together in various combinations to form 29 'compound finals', which are beyond the scope of this course.

There are 23 consonant sounds in Chinese, called 'initials' because they appear at the start of syllables. Here are the 23 initials:

**Table 1 Initials**

b	p	m	f	d	t	n	l
g	k	h	w	y	j	q	x
z	c	s	zh	ch	sh	r	

## Activity 2 Finals and initials

When you listen to the audio track below you will hear six single vowels, known as **finals** in Chinese. Repeat after each sound.

a e i o u ü

You will then combine these vowels with some consonants, known as **initials** in Chinese. Note how similar they sound to some English consonants. Repeat after each sound.

ba pa ma fa de te ne le gu ku hu wo yi

You will then hear some consonants, or **initials**, combined with the final i. Listen and repeat.

ji qi xi zi ci si zhi chi shi ri

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 1**

## 1.3 Tones

Chinese is a tonal language. In Mandarin Chinese, there are four tones (five if you include the neutral tone). Tones are marked in pinyin as follows:

1st tone: ˉ

2nd tone: ˊ

3rd tone: ˋ

4th tone: ˋ

The 1st tone is a high level tone, the 2nd rises from medium to high, the 3rd falls from low medium to low and then rises to high, and the 4th falls from high to low (see Figure 3). The tone marks are put over the single finals a, e, i, o, u and ü. There are some syllables that do not have a tone mark (e.g. some particle words or last syllable in a word), and they are called 'neutral tone'. The neutral tone is low and flat with no stress.



**Figure 3** The tones used in Mandarin Chinese

Each syllable has a definite tone. So syllables with different tones mean different things. For example, 王 *wáng* with the 2nd tone means ‘king’ and is also a common family name, whereas 忘 *wàng* with the 4th tone means ‘to forget’.

### Activity 3 Tones

Listen to the examples of the four tones on the audio track below, and repeat. You can follow the pinyin in Table 2 as you go. Don’t worry about the meaning of the words at this stage.

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 2**

**Table 2** Examples of the four tones in Mandarin Chinese

1	mā	má	mǎ	mà
2	tā	tá	tǎ	tà
3	zhī	zhí	zhǐ	zhì
4	jī	jí	jǐ	jì

## 1.4 Chinese characters

Speakers of different dialects, especially the southern dialects, often cannot understand each other when they speak. However, literate Chinese people can communicate with each other in writing, as they share a common script: 汉字 *hàn zì* (lit. Han characters).

The Chinese character script is believed to have originated from stylised pictures of physical objects, which evolved over the centuries into characters formed from strokes. The total number of Chinese characters is estimated at about 50,000, of which roughly 3000 are used for everyday purposes. This course teaches simplified characters, which were introduced by the Chinese government in the 1950s in an attempt to increase literacy.

Each character in written Chinese represents a syllable. A word in Chinese can consist of one character (e.g. 中 *zhōng*, central), two characters ( 中国 *Zhōngguó*, China) or three

characters ( 中国人 *zhōngguó rén* , Chinese person/people). In Chinese texts, there is no spacing between characters. Traditionally there was no punctuation either, but this has since been adopted.

There is no obvious correlation between how characters are written and how they are pronounced. For example, the following three characters, made up of very different strokes, are all pronounced *jīng*, albeit with different tones: 京 (1st tone) means ‘capital’; 井 (3rd tone) means ‘well’ (as in a water well); and 净 (4th tone) means ‘clean’.

## 1.5 Simplified and traditional forms of Chinese characters

In this section you will learn about traditional and simplified characters and work on some activities.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government introduced a range of ‘simplified characters’ ( 简体字 *jiǎntǐ zì*) in an effort to improve the literacy level in the population. About 2,000 characters have been simplified and the rest of the characters remain the same. It is useful to be aware of traditional forms (sometimes referred to as ‘complex characters’ ) ( 繁体字 **!Warning! Palatino Linotype not supported** *fántǐ zì* ), as they are still used in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other overseas Chinese communities.

In most cases, the simplification of the 2000 characters involved reducing the number of strokes, while also preserving either the overall shape of the character or of one part of the character. Table 3 shows some examples of characters in both simplified and traditional form, and the number of strokes that these forms comprise.

**Table 3 Examples of traditional characters**

		简体字 <i>jiǎntǐ zì</i>	Strokes	繁体字 <i>fántǐ zì</i>	Strokes
xué	to learn	学	8	學	16
yī	medical	医	7	醫	18
mén	[plural suffix to make pronouns such as ‘we’]	们	5	們	9
guó	country	国	8	國	11

Now have a go at identifying simplified and traditional characters in Activity 4.

### Activity 4 Identifying simplified and traditional characters

Open Google Translate in a separate browser and select Chinese (Simplified) on the left side and Chinese (Traditional) on the right side. Then copy and paste the characters from the Simplified column in Table 4 into Google Translate to see how the same word looks in traditional Chinese.

Table 4 Simplified and traditional characters

English	Pinyin	Simplified	Traditional
to love; love	ài	<b>!Warning! not supported</b> 爱	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>
book	shū	<b>!Warning! not supported</b> 书	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>
to meet	jiàn	<b>!Warning! not supported</b> 见	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>

.....

### Answer

Table 4 Simplified and traditional characters (completed)

English	Pinyin	Simplified	Traditional
to love; love	ài	<b>!Warning! not supported</b> 爱	<b>!Warning! not supported</b> 愛
book	shū	<b>!Warning! not supported</b> 书	<b>!Warning! not supported</b> 書
to meet	jiàn	<b>!Warning! not supported</b> 见	<b>!Warning! not supported</b> 見

## 1.6 Word formation

In this section and Section 1.7 you will look at combining characters to form new words. Begin by reading the language note below.

### Language note: word formation

Words in Chinese are formed by one or more characters. For example, when you say 'hello' you use two characters '**!Warning! not supported**nǐ hǎo' **!Warning! not supported**你好 (simplified Chinese). This literally translates as 'you good' and means 'hello' when greeting one person (i.e. not a group). To greet a group of people you use a combination of three characters '**!Warning! not supported**nǐ men hǎo' **!Warning! not supported**你们好 (simplified Chinese), which literally translates to 'you all good' and means 'hello all'.

Another example is the word 'China', which is formed by combining two characters '**!Warning! not supported**zhōng' **!Warning! not supported**中 and '**!Warning! not supported**guó' **!Warning! not supported**国. **!Warning! not supported**中 **!Warning! not supported**zhōng has multiple meanings such as middle, centre, inside. Similarly

**!Warning! not supported** 国 **!Warning! not supported** guó can mean state, country, nation. Combined, '**!Warning! not supported** zhōng guó **!Warning! not supported** 中国' literally translates to 'central kingdom'.

The free Chinese character learning app, Chinese@OU, is a useful resource to help you write, recognise visually and aurally, and memorise the most frequently-used characters, as well as form phrases and sentences in Chinese. Download the app to your mobile device following these [instructions](#) and then explore the word searches in the even-numbered lessons to see how characters form words and expressions. There are several other applications and online tools which you can use to explore the meanings of characters on their own or combined with others and which can help you improve your Chinese vocabulary. The Further reading section at the end of this course includes links to resources which you may find helpful.

## 1.7 How to memorise and combine characters

In Chinese, some characters can look a bit like the objects they represent and so often a good way to memorise the characters is to imagine them pictorially.

For example, the character for a person '**!Warning! not supported** rén' is **!Warning! not supported** 人, which looks like a person walking:



**Figure 4** The character **!Warning! not supported**人, meaning person, looks like a person walking.

To learn how to write this character, [download the Chinese@OU app](#) to your mobile device and go to Lesson 3, writing section.

A second example of how Chinese characters can be turned into an image that relates to its meaning is the word for 'big'. Imagine a person with their arms wide open to signal something is big; the character for big, **!Warning! not supported**大, looks just like that.





**Figure 5** The character ‘!Warning! not supported dà 大’, meaning big, looks like a person standing with their arms wide open.

To learn how to write this character, [download the Chinese@OU app](#) to your mobile device and go to Lesson 6, writing section.

### Activity 5 Word combinations

Based on what you have learned so far in this course, select the correct word combination for the definitions given.

Adult/Big person (*dà rén*)

- 大 + 人
- 大 + 国
- 中 + 国
- 医 + 生
- 学 + 中 + 文
- 我 + 们

We (*wǒ mén*)

- 大 + 人
- 大 + 国
- 中 + 国
- 医 + 生
- 学 + 中 + 文
- 我 + 们

---

China (*Zhōng guó*)

- 大 + 人
  - 大 + 国
  - 中 + 国
  - 医 + 生
  - 学 + 中 + 文
  - 我 + 们
- 

A power (a dominant country) (*dà guó*)

- 大 + 人
  - 大 + 国
  - 中 + 国
  - 医 + 生
  - 学 + 中 + 文
  - 我 + 们
- 

Doctor (*yī shēng*)

- 大 + 人
  - 大 + 国
  - 中 + 国
  - 医 + 生
  - 学 + 中 + 文
  - 我 + 们
- 

Study Chinese (*xué zhōng wén*)

- 大 + 人
- 大 + 国
- 中 + 国
- 医 + 生
- 学 + 中 + 文
- 我 + 们

## 2 Greetings

In this section you will learn how to say some basic greetings in Chinese.

### Expressions used for greetings

- **!Warning! not supported***Nǐ hǎo* **!Warning! not supported**你好 (lit. 'you good/well') is the most commonly used greeting in Mandarin Chinese which can be used throughout the day. It is equivalent to 'hello' in English.

Audio content is not available in this format.



#### Audio 3

- **!Warning! not supported***Nín hǎo* **!Warning! not supported**您好 (lit. 'you good/well') is a polite greeting because 'nín' is the polite form for 'you' (singular), similar to the French pronoun 'vous'. It is used to greet someone you meet for the first time, or who is senior either in terms of age or status. It can be loosely translated as 'How do you do?'

Audio content is not available in this format.



#### Audio 4

- Not too long ago when food was in short supply, the phrase 'Have you eaten?' (**!Warning! not supported***Nǐ chī le ma?* **!Warning! not supported**你吃了吗?) was a common greeting amongst neighbours. An appropriate response is to say '**!Warning! not supported***Chī le*' **!Warning! not supported**吃了 for 'Yes' or '**!Warning! not supported***Méi chī*' **!Warning! not supported**没吃 for 'No'.
- **!Warning! not supported***Zǎo ān* **!Warning! not supported**早安 (lit. morning peace) is a common greeting in the morning in Taiwan.

When parting from people, you say:

- **!Warning! not supported***Zàijiàn* **!Warning! not supported**再见 (lit. again see) meaning goodbye.

Audio content is not available in this format.



#### Audio 5

Note that although there are expressions in Chinese for 'good morning', 'good afternoon', 'good evening' and 'good night', they are not often used. Also,

handshaking is seen as appropriate when greeting someone, however Chinese people do not feel comfortable being hugged or kissed in public.

## Activity 6 Greetings

Listen to these different short expressions and select their English equivalents. You can listen to them as many times as you need to: just click on each one again to repeat it. If it is helpful, you can also look at the pinyin at the same time by clicking on 'Transcript'.

Audio content is not available in this format.



### Audio 6

- Hello (informal)
- How do you do? (formal)
- Goodbye
- None of the above

Audio content is not available in this format.



### Audio 7

- Goodbye
- Thank you/Thanks
- Not at all
- None of the above

Audio content is not available in this format.



### Audio 8

- Hello (informal)
- How do you do? (formal)
- Goodbye
- None of the above

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 9**

- Hello (informal)
- How do you do? (formal)
- Goodbye
- None of the above

### 3 Introducing oneself

In this section, you will learn about Chinese names, how Chinese people address each other and how profession titles are used.

When a Chinese name is given in full, the family name always precedes the given name. To take the former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping as an example, the family name 邓 *Dèng* goes before the given name 小平 *Xiǎopíng*.

It is very common for Chinese people to address each other by their full names, even amongst friends or family. The most common Chinese family names have only one character. Chinese given names typically consist of two characters.

The titles 先生 *xiānsheng* (Mr), 小姐 *xiǎojiě* (Miss) and 女士 *nǚshì* (Madam) are popular in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and since the 1980s have been catching on in mainland China, too, especially in the business sector. They tend to be used on formal occasions when you are unsure of another person's position or profession. The term 太太 *tàitai* (Mrs) is also used to address a married foreign woman but is not an appropriate way to address a married Chinese woman because Chinese women do not change their family names after marriage.

To say 'My name is' you say: **!Warning! not supported** *Wǒ jiào...* **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 我叫...

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 10**

To ask a person's name you can say:

- *Nǐ jiào shénme?* **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 你叫什么?

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 11**

or:

- *Nǐ jiào shénme míngzi?* **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 你叫什么名字?

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 12**

Practice these expressions a few times to consolidate it and then move on to Activity 7.

## Activity 7 Names

### Part A

Listen to the audio track below to hear how these two people say their names, and how they address each other, then answer the following questions.

Audio content is not available in this format.



### Audio 13

What is the woman's full name?

- a) Wang Xiaoying
- b) Wang Jing
- c) Li Xiaoying

### Part B

What is the man's full name?

- a) Wang Xiaoying
- b) Wang Jing
- c) Li Xiaoying

## 3.1 Nationalities

In Chinese, many countries can be identified as they have 'guó **!Warning! not supported** 国' at the end. For example:

- Zhōng guó **!Warning! not supported** 中国 = China
- Yīng guó 英国 = Britain
- Fā guó 法国 = France
- Dé guó 德国 = Germany

There are, however, other countries and cities that do not have 'guó **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 国' at the end, such as:

- Xī bān yá **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 西班牙 = Spain
- Yì dà lì **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 意大利 = Italy
- Lúndūn **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 伦敦 = London
- Běi jīng **!Warning! MS Gothic not supported** 北京 = Beijing

Once you know the name of the country, nationalities in Mandarin Chinese are quite easy to learn. To say the nationality you only need to add the word 'rén' – which, as you've already learned, means 'person' – to the country name.

To find out someone's nationality you would ask:

- **!Warning! MS Gothic not supported**你是哪国人? *Nǐ shì nǎ guó rén?* = Where are you from?

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 14**

The reply to this question would then be:

- **!Warning! MS Gothic not supported**我是中国人 *Wǒ shì Zhōngguó rén* = I'm Chinese.

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 15**

- **!Warning! MS Gothic not supported**我是英国人 *Wǒ shì yīngguó rén* = I am British.

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 16**

- **!Warning! SimSun not supported**我是西班牙人 *Wǒ shì Xībānyárén* = I'm Spanish.

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 17**

Then, if you want to know the specific area in the country someone is from you would ask:

- **!Warning! MS Gothic not supported**你是中国什么地方人? *Nǐ shì Zhōngguó shénme dìfang rén?* = What place in China are you from? (lit. you are China what place person?)

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 18**



- **!Warning! not supported**您是英国什么地方人？ *Nín shì Yīng guó shénme dìfang rén?* = Whereabouts in the UK are you from? (lit. You are UK what place person?)

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 19**

In response to this, you may hear Chinese people say:

- **!Warning! MS Gothic not supported**我是北京人 *Wǒ shì Běijīngrén* = I'm from Beijing (lit. I'm Beijing person).

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 20**

The question **!Warning! MS Gothic not supported**什么地方... *shénme dìfang* means 'What part of'. As you can see, the word order in Chinese differs to that of English, but you will learn more of that as you develop further learning of the language.

Learn more countries and nationalities in Lesson 3 of the [Chinese@OU app](#).

### Activity 8 Names and nationalities

Listen to the audio extract below in which Mr Wang (王先生 *Wáng xiānsheng*) and Miss Li (李小姐 *Lǐ xiǎojiě*) talk about their places of origin. Identify their nationalities and the name of the city you hear, in the order you hear them. Do not worry if you do not understand the whole conversation

Interactive content is not available in this format.



#### Answer

Well done!

中国 Zhōngguó (China) - is first  
 北京 Běijīng (Beijing) - is second  
 英国 Yīngguó (UK/Britain) - is third  
 伦敦 Lúndūn (London) – is fourth

## 3.2 Professional titles and basic professions

Read the culture note and the reflection note that follows. Then reflect on your own culture.

### Culture note: professional titles

China is very much a hierarchical society, where titles are important. Chinese people like to address each other by attaching professional titles or official positions, such as 老师 *lǎoshī* (teacher) or 医生 *yīshēng* (doctor), to a family name. So you might hear someone being addressed as 李老师 *Lǐ lǎoshī* (Teacher Li) or 王医生 *Wáng yīshēng* (Doctor Wang), for example.

### Reflection point ( 想一想 *Xiǎng yi xiǎng* )

In what contexts would you address people by their professional titles in your own culture? 'Minister, could you clarify...'; 'Madam Chairman, it is clear that...'; 'Doctor, could you tell me...'. Can you think of any other titles that you would use in everyday life? Does the use of professional titles indicate respect for some professions above others, or is it just a matter of convention? Do you think that forms of address are becoming less formal?

## 4 Basic numbers

In this section you will learn the basic numbers from 1–10 and how to form more complex numbers from these. You will also learn the hand gestures for these basic numbers.

### The numbers 0–99

!Warning! SimSun not supported 零 *líng* 0  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 一 *yī* 1  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 二 *èr* 2  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 三 *sān* 3  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 四 *sì* 4  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 五 *wǔ* 5  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 六 *liù* 6  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 七 *qī* 7  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 八 *bā* 8  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 九 *jiǔ* 9  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 十 *shí* 10

Once you know the numbers 1–10 in Chinese, it is easy to form the rest of the numbers up to 99. For example:

!Warning! SimSun not supported 十一 !Warning! not supported *shíyī* 11 (ten one)  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 十二 !Warning! not supported *shí'èr* 12  
 (ten two)  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 二十 !Warning! not supported *èrshí* 20 (two ten)  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 三十 !Warning! not supported *sānshí* 30  
 (three ten)  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 四十 !Warning! not supported *sìshí* 40 (four ten)  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 二十一 !Warning! not supported *èrshíyī* 21 (two ten one)  
 !Warning! SimSun not supported 二十二 !Warning! not supported *èrshí'èr* 22  
 (two ten two)

When you come to read Chinese, you will notice that Chinese people frequently write down numbers in Arabic numerals (0, 1, 2, etc.) – a habit that has become increasingly widespread in recent years. The numeral '0' is used particularly often because the Chinese character for zero (!Warning! SimSun not supported 零) is so complicated.

In the next activity you will practise saying the numbers from zero to ten.

### Activity 9 Numbers

Listen to the numbers from 0 to 5 in Chinese. After each number, pause and repeat.

- 0 !Warning! SimSun not supported 零 *líng*
- 1 !Warning! SimSun not supported 一 *yī*
- 2 !Warning! SimSun not supported 二 *èr*

- 3 **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 三 sān  
 4 **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 四 sì  
 5 **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 五 wǔ

Audio content is not available in this format.



#### Audio 21

Now listen to numbers 6-10 in Chinese. After each number, pause and repeat.

- 6 **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 六 liù  
 7 **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 七 qī  
 8 **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 八 bā  
 9 **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 九 jiǔ  
 10 **!Warning! SimSun not supported** 十 shí

Audio content is not available in this format.



#### Audio 22

### Good and bad numbers

As in most cultures, numbers have specific connotations in Chinese. For instance, Chinese regard eight as a lucky number because it sounds very similar to the word for 'get rich' (*fā*) or 'good fortune' in Cantonese. More importantly, eight lies at the heart of an ancient Chinese belief system, built around an eight-sided diagram called 八卦 *bā guà*. It has often been seen as providing a guide to life and has been applied to contexts as diverse as urban planning and diagnosis in traditional Chinese medicine. Because eight is a lucky number, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games opened at 8 p.m. on the 8th day of the 8th month in 2008! Four, on the other hand, is not a good number in Chinese culture as 四 *sì* sounds similar to the word 死 *sǐ* meaning 'death' or 'to die'.

### Activity 10 Phone numbers

Telephone numbers are read out digit by digit. Listen to this telephone number. Can you write down the number you hear? Listen as many times as you want.

Audio content is not available in this format.



**Audio 23**

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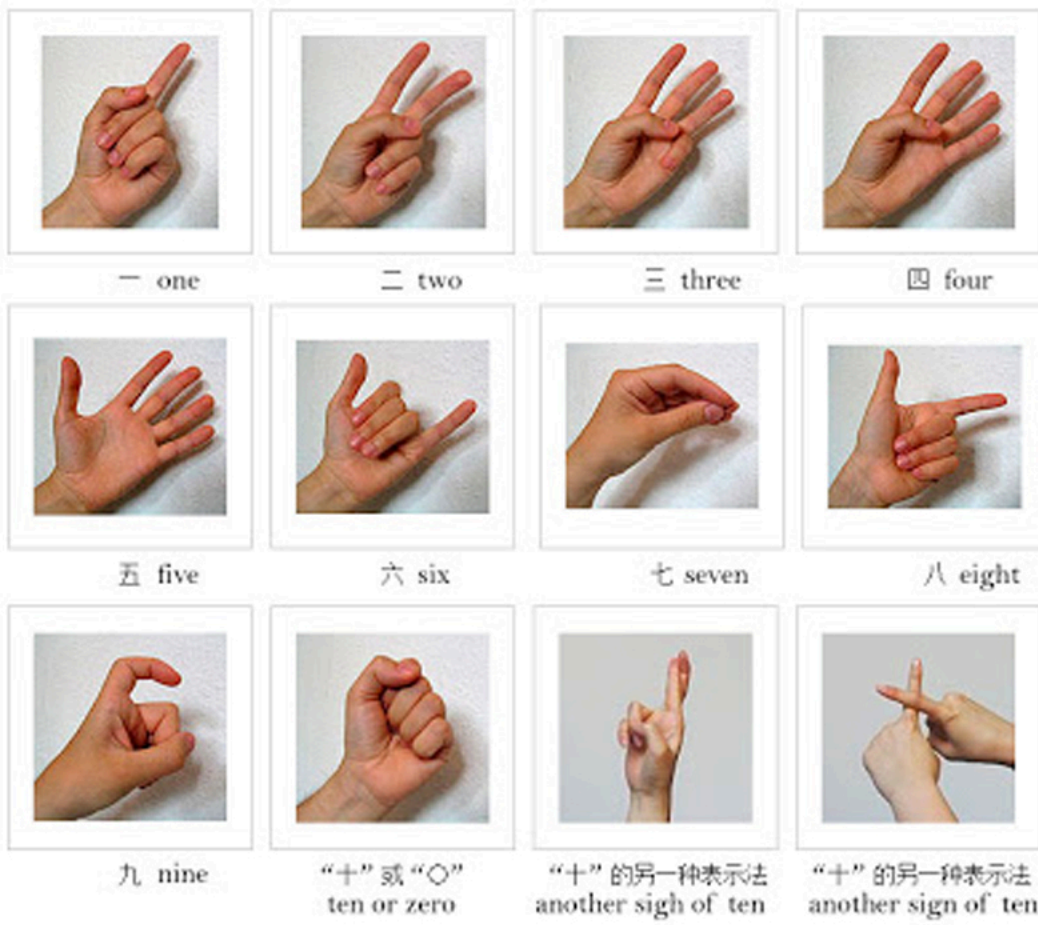
**Answer**

021 8549 3677

In some northern dialects, when saying telephone numbers, the number one is usually pronounced *yāo* to avoid confusion between the numbers one (*yī*) and seven (*qī*). Telephone numbers are always given digit by digit in Chinese: e.g. 77 would be 'seven seven', rather than 'double seven'.

**Culture note: hand gestures**

In Chinese there are special hand gestures for each number from 1 to 10. You can learn them and practice by copying those shown in Figure 6. Give it a try and have fun with numbers.



**Figure 6** Hand gestures for numbers one to ten.

## Conclusion

We hope you enjoyed this short taster course. You should now have some understanding about the structure of the Chinese language, the pronunciation of Mandarin Chinese, pinyin and characters and a few cultural practices of the use of professional titles and lucky numbers. Now that you have learned how to greet, say your name, nationality and numbers in Chinese, you may wish to progress your learning further by following The Open University's [Chinese language and cultural courses](#).

## Further reading

Here you can find some additional resources on Chinese language.

- [How to enable Chinese font and type characters](#)
- [A simple explanation of Chinese characters](#)
- Chinese@OU app:
  - [Instructions for download](#)
  - [Why is an app an ideal way to learn a new language?](#)
- [Learn Chinese: Words related to education and learning](#)
- [A taste of Mandarin Chinese language and culture](#)



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Figure 3: courtesy of Fernando Rosell-Aguilar and Ana Sánchez-Forner

Figure 4: [lukasRychvalsky](#) from Pixabay

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Figure 6: (c) unidentified

Video 3: The Father of Pinyin: Copyright Guardian News & Media Ltd 2020  
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