Travelers should always check with their nation's State Department for current advisories on local conditions before traveling abroad.
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Introduction

Learning any language is enhanced by some knowledge of the cultural customs and beliefs of its native speakers. Developing an awareness of and a sensitivity to a language’s subtleties are inherent to acquiring true fluency. The following “Notes” for Pimsleur’s Mandarin 1 are meant to provide you with an introduction as to how the language and the culture are intertwined.

The Mandarin Language

Mandarin is standard spoken Chinese, used by the government, in the schools, and on radio and TV broadcasts. Although there are eight major Chinese dialects, Mandarin is native to approximately seventy percent of the population and is the only dialect that has a corresponding written form of the language. Chinese who are educated through at least the primary grades speak Mandarin as well as local dialects. However, due to the size of China and the ethnic diversity of its inhabitants, hundreds of other dialects are spoken in different areas. The dialects spoken today are based more on geography than on ethnicity. For instance, residents of Shanghai will speak wu. In some parts of China, particularly the central and southern areas, education and official business are transacted in the locally dominant language. Although people from different parts of China may not understand one another’s spoken language, they use the same basic set of characters for writing.
Today’s Mandarin is closely based on “northern speech” which was the lingua franca of the ruling class, spoken in Beijing, the capital during the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. After the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1912, the new Republic government decided to retain Mandarin as the “National Language,” guo yu in Chinese. The Communists, who defeated the Nationalists in 1949, continued this policy, but they changed the name and coined the term pu tong hua or “common speech” for “Mandarin.” This is the word for Mandarin used throughout mainland China. In Hong Kong, however, as in Taiwan and most overseas communities, guo yu, the older term, continues to be used.

Chinese Characters

Traditionally, Chinese characters are divided into six different categories. It is commonly thought that every Chinese character is a picture, or “pictograph,” but only a few hundred of the several thousand characters are true pictographs. However, most of these are now written in such a way that it is difficult to immediately guess their meaning. There is also a very small group of characters called “ideographs” or “ideograms,” which represent ideas or objects directly. An example would be the character for blade. It is based on the pictograph for knife with the addition of an extra stroke marking the blade.
Ideograms and pictographs can be combined to form associative compounds, for instance, doubling the pictograph for tree to mean woods. A fourth category is comprised of phonetic loan characters. There is also a fifth category with a very small number of modified cognates, characters that have taken on different forms through orthographic and semantic changes. However, by far the most significant category is the so-called phono-semantic compounds, meaning the characters combine phonetic as well as semantic clues. These represent about 90% of the characters in use today.

**Traditional & Simplified Characters**

In the 1950s, in order to promote literacy, the Chinese government decided to “simplify” the existing characters by reducing the number of strokes necessary to create them. By 1964, a list of 2,238 simplified characters was created. Further simplification was briefly adopted, then quickly abandoned in the 1970s.

Presently, simplified characters are used in mainland China and Singapore. Hong Kong, Taiwan, and most overseas Chinese communities continue to use the traditional characters.
**Tonality**

Chinese is a monosyllabic language with an abundance of homonyms. The tone with which a syllable is pronounced helps to determine its meaning. Each tone has a name which describes the relative pitch of the main vowel. In this way, several meanings can be assigned to any one syllable, depending on the tone with which it is pronounced. For example, when pronounced using a falling-rising tone, the word *nar* means “where.” However, when this word is pronounced with just a falling tone, *nar*, it means “there.”

There are four basic tones in Mandarin: high level, rising, falling-rising, and falling. In addition, there is a “soft” sound which is used for the second syllable of certain compound words, as well as particles, words that convey grammatical and other meanings. The soft tone is also known as the neutral tone since its pitch contour is determined by the preceding tone.

Here is an example of one sound with several possible meanings, depending on the tone with which it is pronounced:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1\textsuperscript{st} tone (High)</th>
<th>2\textsuperscript{nd} tone (Rising)</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td><em>shi</em> - “poem”</td>
<td><em>shi</em> - “ten”</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3\textsuperscript{rd} tone (Falling-rising)</th>
<th>4\textsuperscript{th} tone (Falling)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>shi</em> - “history”</td>
<td><em>shi</em> - all the forms of “to be”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Remember that Chinese is rich in homonyms, which means a single syllable can take many different written forms and convey different meanings.

Tone Change

Although each Chinese syllable standing alone has a specific tone, in the flow of speech the tone of a syllable can change depending on the tone of the following syllable. In some Chinese dialects, tone change is common, and there are complex rules governing it. In contemporary Mandarin, however, it is less common than in other dialects, and there are only a few rules regarding tone change to remember. The first rule governs falling-rising (3rd) tones when they are spoken in sequence:

1. When two falling-rising (3rd) tones occur together, the first falling-rising tone becomes a rising (2nd) tone. The second remains a falling-rising (3rd) tone.

   For example, *hen* (“very”) and *hao* (“good”) are both falling-rising (3rd) tones by themselves, but when spoken together as *hen hao*, the first word changes to a rising (2nd) tone, while the second keeps its original falling-rising (3rd) tone.

2. When three falling-rising tones are spoken one after the other, the first two become rising (2nd) tones, while the third remains a falling-rising tone.
3. When four falling-rising tones occur one after the other, the first three change from falling-rising tones to rising (2\textsuperscript{nd}) tones, while the fourth remains a falling-rising (3\textsuperscript{rd}) tone.

In contemporary Mandarin, tone change is also associated with two specific characters. The first of these is \textit{yi} or “one.”

1. The character \textit{yi} is a high level (1\textsuperscript{st}) tone when it is by itself or at the end of a word.

2. When \textit{yi} comes before a falling (4\textsuperscript{th}) tone, it changes to a rising (2\textsuperscript{nd}) tone, for example, \textit{yi} (2\textsuperscript{nd}) \textit{yue} (4\textsuperscript{th}) (“one month”).

3. When \textit{yi} comes before any of the three remaining tones (high, rising, or falling-rising), it changes to a falling (4\textsuperscript{th}) tone.

The second character associated with tone change in contemporary Mandarin is \textit{bu} (“no” or “not”).

1. When \textit{bu} stands alone, it is a falling (4\textsuperscript{th}) tone.

2. The character \textit{bu} changes tone in only one combination. When it comes before another falling (4\textsuperscript{th}) tone, it changes to a rising (2\textsuperscript{nd}) tone.

3. When combined with all the other tones, \textit{bu} remains a falling 4\textsuperscript{th} tone.
Traditional Language Beliefs

Just as the number thirteen is traditionally regarded as unlucky in the West, the Chinese number four, si, is seen as ominous, because it is very similar to the pronunciation of the word for “death.” For this reason, you may not find a fourth floor in some Chinese-speaking communities. The only difference in this case is that “four,” si, is pronounced with a falling tone, while the word for “death,” si, is pronounced with a tone that falls and rises again.

Conversely, the number eight, ba, is regarded as lucky, since it shares the same ending sound with the character meaning “to prosper,” fa.

The number nine, jiu, carries a positive meaning as this word sounds exactly like the Chinese word meaning “long-lasting,” jiu. These two words are represented in writing by two different characters, but when spoken, the distinction is made only through context.

Color Symbolism

Colors tend to be associated with different meanings in different cultures. It’s often useful to be aware of these different connotations.

In Chinese culture, the color red traditionally implies good fortune or good cheer. It is customary to use this color when decorating for such traditional occasions as the
celebration of a wedding or a birth. For this reason, brides wear red, babies are clad in red, and red is used most often when decorating for the annual festivals. However, in today’s China, many people are adopting more typically Western styles of dress. For instance, many brides are combining Eastern and Western traditions, choosing to wear a white gown to the wedding ceremony, and then changing into a traditional red gown for the wedding banquet.

In the West, the prevalent color seen at a funeral is black, but the main color seen at funerals in China is white, the Chinese traditional color of mourning.

Names and Titles

As in many other Asian cultures, in China the society or group is valued more highly than the individual. Your importance is measured by your value to the group, rather than by those qualities which distinguish you from others.

This can be seen in the way a person is named in Chinese. The most important element of the person’s name is thought to be the family of which he or she is a member, and so the family name is spoken first. The given name, which sets the person apart even from others within the same family, is the final element. For example, in the name Wang Zhuo Hua, Wang is the family name, or surname, and Zhuo Hua the given name. Some surnames have a specific meaning: Wang, a very common Chinese surname, means “king.”
The given name is represented by either one or two one-syllable characters. A child’s given name is usually chosen very carefully, to represent the parents’ hopes for and expectations of the child. In the given name Zhuo Hua, Zhuo means “outstanding” or “remarkable,” while Hua can mean “magnificent” or “extravagant.”

Westerners are usually referred to by a phonetic representation of their names. Japanese and Korean names are pronounced according to their corresponding forms in Chinese characters.

Children usually take their fathers’ family names; on rare occasions the mother’s family name may also be used. Most family names are written using single characters. There are a few two-character last names in use: among these, Situ and Ouyoung are two of the most common.

**The Concept of mian zi — “Face”**

Language is not an isolated phenomenon, but a vibrant, flexible form of communication loaded with social and cultural information. Chinese culture is structured around such values as honor, loyalty, and respect. In fact, the respect with which a person’s community regards him or her can serve as an important part of that person’s identity. In Mandarin, this is often referred to as mian zi, or “face.” Here are some common phrases illustrating this concept:
you mian zi, “to have face,” means to be shown respect in a certain social situation. For example, when attending a banquet, those seated near the host at the head of the table can be said “to have face,” you mian zi.

Similarly, gei mian zi, “to give face,” means to show someone the respect due him or her. When you attend a formal dinner, the host and hostess might greet you by saying, “Thank you for giving face,” which is equivalent to saying, “Thank you for coming.”

diu lian, “to lose face,” means “to lose dignity.” For example, you are thought to lose face if you are the only one of a certain group who is passed over for a promotion or who fails to receive an invitation to a sought-after event.

Compliments

Modesty is seen as an essential virtue in Chinese culture. This humility is shown by some typical responses a Chinese person will give when complimented. For example, a woman who is told ni zhen piao liang (“You are really very beautiful”) could answer, na li? This literally means, “Where is it?” Used in this way, it is the same as saying, “Where do you get that?”

Another common response to a compliment might be, kua jiang le! This means something like, “Excessive praise!” and it’s used to say, “You’re exaggerating,” or “You’re flattering me.” Either of these can be used as a
polite, modest response to almost any compliment. Some more Westernized people may also answer simply, *xie xie ni* or “thank you” when complimented, but this is less common.

**Chinese Cuisine and Tea**

A traditional Chinese saying, “Food is the first necessity of the people,” is reflected in the great variety of Chinese food and its importance in traditional celebrations. There are eight schools of cuisine, each associated with a particular geographic region: *Beijing, Guandong, Sichuan, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hunan, Anhui,* and *Fujian.*

The staple of a Chinese meal is *fan* or cooked rice. In the agricultural south, the *fan* may be rice or rice products. In Northern China, noodles, dumplings, and other staples made from wheat flour are the basis of the daily diet. The meat and / or vegetables that accompany the *fan* are called *cai,* or accompanying dishes.

The custom of drinking tea is also an important part of Chinese culture. The Chinese were the first to discover the tea leaf. A proverb states that it is “better to be deprived of food for three days, than tea for one.” When a guest arrives, it is traditional that a cup of tea will be brewed for him or her. The preparation of tea is regarded as an art form; the method of brewing it and the utensils used are very important.
People throughout the country drink tea daily, often in a local tea house, where one may meet informally with friends or associates, or hold a banquet or reception.

Chinese Zodiac

The Chinese have a system of astrology dating back thousands of years. The Chinese zodiac differs from the Western in that each sign represents an entire year, rather than one month.

According to ancient Chinese legend, Buddha summoned all the animals. He honored those who came by naming a year for them. Thereafter, the characteristics of each animal were given to people born in its year.

The twelve year cycle begins with the Year of the Rat, shu; followed in succession by the Year of the Ox, niu; Tiger, hu; Rabbit, tu; Dragon, long; Snake, she; Horse, ma; Goat, yang; Monkey, hou; Rooster, ji; Dog, gou; and Boar, zhu.

Here is the list of animals associated with each year, along with a list of the qualities traditionally associated with each.

Anyone born during the Year of the Rat is expected to be imaginative, charming and generous, with a tendency to be quick-tempered and somewhat critical. Recent Years of the Rat have been 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984, 1996, and
2008. The next one will be in 2020. Among famous people born in the year of the Rat are William Shakespeare and George Washington.

The Year of the Ox follows. Someone born during an Ox year is both intelligent and perceptive, as well as one who inspires confidence. Napoleon and Vincent Van Gogh were born in the year of the Ox.

A person born in the Year of the Tiger is traditionally courageous and considerate of others, as well as stubborn and emotional. Marco Polo and Mary, Queen of Scots were born in the Year of the Tiger.

If a person is born in the Year of the Rabbit, he or she will be affectionate and obliging, successful in the business world despite being shy. Some well-known people born in this year were Confucius, Albert Einstein, and Rudolph Nureyev.

A Dragon is a perfectionist who is full of vitality and enthusiasm. Pearl Buck, Joan of Arc, and Sigmund Freud were all born in the Year of the Dragon.

Someone born in the Year of the Snake is wise and beautiful, with a good sense of humor. Famous Snakes were Charles Darwin, Abraham Lincoln, and Edgar Allan Poe.

If you were born in the Year of the Horse, you will be intelligent, hard-working, and very independent. Some
famous Horses were Rembrandt, Chopin, and Teddy Roosevelt.

Someone born in the Year of the Goat will be charming and artistic, but be relatively uncomfortable in a leadership role. Among famous people born in this year were Michelangelo and Mark Twain.

A person born in the Year of the Monkey is clever and witty, with a gift for detail. Famous people born in this year were Julius Caesar, Leonardo da Vinci, and Harry Truman.

A Rooster is shrewd and outspoken, as well as extravagant. Rudyard Kipling, Enrico Caruso, and Groucho Marx were all born in this year.

Someone born in the Year of the Dog is loyal and honest, although demanding of those around him or her. Famous Dogs were Benjamin Franklin and George Gershwin.

A person born in the Year of the Boar is sincere, tolerant, and honest, with an ability to carry out difficult goals. Albert Schweitzer and Ernest Hemingway were born in this year.

Hospitality

During your travels, you may find yourself invited to dinner in a Chinese home. Here are some customs which relate to hospitality and correct behavior as a dinner guest.
It is both appropriate and polite to bring a small gift such as a bottle of wine or a tea set. However, it’s best not to bring four of anything, as the number four, *si*, is considered unlucky because it is similar to the word meaning death, *si*. Also, a timepiece of any kind would be inappropriate since the words *song zhong*, meaning “give clock,” are very similar to the words meaning “attend someone’s funeral.”

When greeting your host or hostess, you can say *ni hao*, a greeting which means “you (are) good,” or “you (are) well.” A Chinese “hello,” therefore, is a well-wishing hello. *ni hao ma*, or “How are you?” is used by relatives, friends, or acquaintances as an expression of concern, and not as a casual greeting.

As in the West, it’s considered rude to immediately begin eating when served. Rather, it’s polite to wait until everyone has been seated and all of the dishes have been served. Once this has been done, it’s customary for the host or hostess to say, *qing*. This is similar to the American expression, “Please start.”

At a more formal dinner party, a toast is frequently offered before the food is served. The person offering the toast could say, *gan bei* or “dry the cup.” Another common toast is *zhu ni jian kang*, meaning, “I wish you health.”

If you have finished while others are still eating, you should say *qing man yong* (“Please, slowly eat”) meaning, “Take your time, enjoy your dinner.” After this you can leave the table.
When you are leaving the home of your host and hostess, they may say to you, *man zou!* This literally means, “Slowly walk!” and in this situation, it’s like saying, “Have a safe trip home!”

**Chinese Festivals**

**Chinese New Year**

Chinese festivals are based on the traditional lunar calendar. The Chinese New Year, known as the Spring Festival or *chun jie*, is the most important festival of the year and usually occurs between January 21\(^{st}\) and February 19\(^{th}\), according to the Western solar calendar. The entire family is present and a great deal of preparation is involved in cooking special foods which have a symbolic value. Dumplings, *jiao zi*, are considered lucky because they resemble traditional Chinese gold ingots and will be a part of the northern Chinese meal, while a southern household will have a multi-course banquet with more meat served than usual. The New Year celebration ends with the Lantern Festival on the 15\(^{th}\) day of the new year. Colorful paper lanterns are lit, some with riddles on them. People eat sweet dumplings made from sticky rice.
On the eve of the Chinese New Year, the family stays up through the night to watch fireworks which will scare away demons and bad luck. In rural China, or in a traditional household, an elaborate meal will be laid on the family altar table and offered to the family’s forbearers accompanied by incense, paper money, and fruit. People will also kowtow to the ancestors for blessing the family throughout the year.

**Pure and Bright Day**

Another important festival is *qing ming*, or “Pure and Bright Day,” which is celebrated around April 5th. Families visit cemeteries to honor their ancestors and beautify their graves. As this festival occurs in spring, it is also a day for sporting contests, kite flying, and other outdoor activities.

**Dragon Boat Festival**

The festival of *duan wu* is celebrated between late May and early June. The legend connected with this day has to do with the great ancient poet Qu Yuan, who lived more than 2000 years ago in the Kingdom of Chu in southern China. As legend has it, the poet was deeply patriotic. However, maligned by jealous courtiers, Qu Yuan was banished from Chu. Upon learning that Chu had fallen to a rival army, he threw himself into the Miluo River in present-day Hunan province. The people of Chu rushed to the river to try to save him, but it was too late. They threw bamboo shafts filled with rice as a sacrifice to him, so that the fish would
eat the rice and not the poet’s body. So on this day, people throw rice dumplings into a river to recreate the sacrifice. It is also customary to eat these dumplings called zong zi, which are made from glutinous rice, red beans, or pork and even salted duck egg yolks and wrapped in reed leaves.

Today, the celebration also includes dragon-boat races to commemorate the “people’s poet.” Dragons are regarded as supernatural creatures and symbols of good luck. The dragon-shaped boats are similar to canoes. Teams then race the “dragons” to mark the festival of duan wu.

**Mid-Autumn Day**

Mid-Autumn Day, zhong qiu, is the most important holiday after the Chinese New Year. It is celebrated on the 15th day of the eighth month on the lunar calendar. In Chinese culture, the full moon symbolizes “completeness, perfection, reunion.” On this day, people eat round “moon cakes” and fruits with a round shape, such as watermelons, oranges, or grapefruits. Traditionally, a person exchanges moon cakes with his or her friends, as well as other gifts. The gift of a moon cake has a ritual significance to the Chinese which is similar to the exchange of Christmas gifts in the West.
Proverbs

“The sky is high, the emperor is far away.” – shan gao huang di yuan. The Chinese routinely include such sayings in their everyday conversation and have done so since ancient times. This proverb means that a powerful figure is far away, and one can relax and enjoy a measure of freedom.

Many of these sayings are four to eight characters long. Often they contain literary allusions. As such, they may be difficult to understand for the uneducated, and can be nearly incomprehensible to a foreigner.

Many can be traced to Chinese classics and are didactic in nature. They are often called set expressions. The following is simply a small selection of the many examples of Chinese set expressions:

**Proverb:** yi ren de dao, ji quan sheng tian.
“When one man finds the way to success, even his chickens and dogs ascend to heaven.”

**Meaning:** When a man is promoted to a position of authority, all his friends and relatives benefit.

**Proverb:** guo he tan shi.
“Feeling stones while crossing a river.”

**Meaning:** Feeling out the situation as one goes.
Proverb: *gua tian li xia.*
“Never pull on your shoes in a melon patch; never adjust your cap under a plum tree.”

**Meaning:** Don’t act suspiciously if you want to avoid being suspected.

Proverb: *yi bu deng tian.*
“One step, ascend heaven.”

**Meaning:** This is said of someone who has a meteoric rise in fame or fortune.

Proverb: *lai er bu wang fei li ye.*
“Come and not go not polite.”

**Meaning:** It is impolite not to reciprocate.

Proverb: *sheng bai nai bing jia chang shi.*
“Victories, defeats, are a general’s ordinary things.”

**Meaning:** Another victory or defeat doesn’t mean much, it’s only one part of a whole; par for the course.

Proverb: *zuo chi shan kong.*
“Sit, eat, mountain empty.”

**Meaning:** Sit idle and eat, and in time your whole fortune will be used up.
**Proverb:** *yi luan ji shi.*
“Use egg to strike rock.”

**Meaning:** To grossly overestimate one’s own strength.

**Proverb:** *tu qiong bi xian.*
“Map unrolled, dagger revealed.”

**Meaning:** Someone’s real intention is revealed in the end.

**Proverb:** *Zhang guan Li dai.*
“Zhang’s cap on Li’s head.”

**Meaning:** To confuse one thing with another.

**Proverb:** *hu jia hu wei.*
“A fox assumes a tiger’s prowess.”

**Meaning:** To bully others by flaunting one’s powerful connections.

**Proverb:** *lu si shei shou.*
“You never know at whose hand a deer will die.”

**Meaning:** There is no way to predict who will prevail in the end.
Questions

In Mandarin, there are three ways to ask yes / no questions: by using *ma*, a spoken question word, at the end of the question, or by using a verb / negative form of the verb combination. *ma* is more often used, especially in conversation, as it is perceived as a faster way to pose a question. For example, you can ask either *ni xiang he cha ma*? – meaning, “Would you like to drink tea?” – or *ni xiang bu xiang he cha*? –“You would / wouldn’t like to drink tea?” Either form is equally correct. The simplest way, however, is to just raise the tone of your sentence. Usually, this is done to express surprise: “You want to drink tea?”

Currency

Currency in China is called *renminbi*, or the “people’s currency,” the *yuan* being the standard unit of *renminbi*. Only in recent years has the government allowed *renminbi* to be taken out of the country and exchanged for foreign currency.
Transportation

For most of the Chinese, travel is done on bikes, buses, trains, or on foot, although increasingly more and more people own cars. In fact, China has overtaken the United States as the world’s largest automobile market. The government has created a network of highways that will eventually link the major cities. Domestic air travel is also increasingly becoming available. To attract customers airlines often offer steeply discounted airfares.

Communication

Communication systems exist in the major cities and in some less urban areas. All TV channels are operated by the government; local stations as well as radio stations must have official approval. The telephone system is also government owned and operated and continues to expand. Computers, fax machines, electronic mail, and other modern forms of communication are commonplace. Text messaging is far more popular in China than in the United States.

Education

In 1978, China adopted an education policy that mandates compulsory education for nine years. This policy requires students to finish primary school and middle school. Each family is charged a fee per term to send a child to school. Thereafter, students who wish to pursue further
education must pass rigorous exams for the high school level and beyond. Entrance to a national university or college requires passing an exam which takes place every July. Due to the exam’s difficulty and the harsh weather in that month, students have nicknamed it “Black July.” Most of the students who complete a higher education are trained as specialists in fields such as engineering and the sciences in order to further China’s development.
To learn a language is to have one more window from which to look at the world.

Chinese proverb
For more information,
call 1-800-831-5497
or visit us at Pimsleur.com