

Learning Chinese: myths and misconceptions:

'We must distinguish Mandarin and Cantonese. These are separate languages!'

(Professor of Linguistics, University of York, January 2015)

'Which variety of Chinese do you speak? Cantonese. What a shame. I only know how to say a few things in Mandarin. I guess we can't communicate then.' (Professor of Linguistics, King's College London, July 2011)

'What are all those wiggly signs? Can you read them?' (Student, Sherborne School, September 2001)

'Tones? Can you even change your voice?' (Student, Sherborne School, February 2001)

These quotations from previous conversations reflect some common misconceptions about Chinese. As China is gaining international prominence, many Westerners are taking a strong interest in its language and culture. However, in my first encounter with foreigners who are interested in learning Chinese, they always say something along the lines above which reflects a total ignorance of the sociolinguistic situation in China and in the Sinosphere in general. In this article, I intend to debunk some popular myths about the Chinese language and clarify some issues that may prove important to your future learning of Chinese.

First of all, it is widely held that Chinese consists of two mutually unintelligible and exclusive varieties, Cantonese and Mandarin, and it is disheartening to see this type of belief even in some prominent academic linguists (see the first two quotations above). The idea that Chinese is bidialectal is both an underestimation and overestimation of the sociolinguistic situation in the Sinosphere: Chinese consists of tens of thousands of regional varieties, which have been classified into seven macrovarieties (Mandarin, Yue (Cantonese), Min, Wu, Xiang, Gan, Hakka), and within each family there are countless sub-varieties with microvariations. For a snapshot of the dialectal distribution and complexity in China, take a look at this:

<https://youtu.be/znmgQ-C9zTo>

The dialectal density of China is easily on a par with some of the dialectally densest regions in the world (Italy, Germany, India), and given how enormous China is (one of the biggest countries in the world), there are easily thousands (if not millions) of dialects. It is certainly not true that there are only two forms of Chinese. Secondly,

mutual unintelligibility between Chinese dialects may well be largely correct, though it must be said that degrees of intelligibility are not an exact science and are highly dependent on the general level of education/literacy of the speaker. It is by no means inconceivable that a highly educated/literate Chinese can understand another dialect, especially if it is closely related to his/her native variety and is carefully and emphatically pronounced. Moreover, the main differences between Chinese dialects which impede communication are down mainly to the differences in phonology. It has been proven by leading linguists (e.g. Wang Li 王力) that while Chinese phonology can differ dramatically from one dialect to another, the amount of grammatical variation is comparatively minuscule (though not insignificant) as Chinese dialects share a lot of grammatical properties in common and there have been attempts to reconstruct pan-Sinitic grammar (e.g. Thurgood and La Polla (2003)). Lastly and most importantly, it is well-established in sociolinguistics that the definitions for 'languages' and 'dialects' should be based on [sociopolitical considerations rather than grammatical properties](#) (see Chambers and Trudgill (1998)). A classic and famous dictum is that 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy' i.e. languages are official varieties whereas dialects are vernaculars. From this perspective, China definitely has an official *lingua franca* in the form of standard Mandarin commonly termed as *putonghua* (普通话)/*guoyu* (国语)/*hanyu* (汉语) which is widely taught in schools and used in public media, and this superstrate arches over regional varieties which are confined to particular regions for colloquial purposes. This is a classic diglossic configuration which is very widely attested throughout multilingual societies. The idea that Chinese consists of two mutually exclusive languages is utter nonsense.

As so many Westerners have been fooled into thinking that Mandarin and Cantonese are separate languages, they often think that they have to decide from the outset which one to learn and once they are down one route they cannot possibly go back, which is far too sharp a dichotomy, since, apart from my objections above, my experience in teaching Chinese tells me that Westerners come to learn Chinese for a wide variety of reasons, some, predictably, for professional purposes like wanting to communicate with Chinese clients/colleagues and/or move and settle in China, but there are also other reasons like wanting to watch Chinese (especially Cantonese) movies, improve familial relationships, score Chinese boy/girlfriends (!) etc. It makes sense to learn Mandarin, as it is the official variety used throughout the Sinosphere, but the demand for other dialects, especially Cantonese, is also significant, since Cantonese, like most other dialects, has acquired its own vernacular culture and many foreigners are curious about what 'Canto' is e.g. 'Cantopop', 'Cantomovie', 'Canto-TV' etc:

<https://youtu.be/9a8mG4wYvzk>

It is highly recommended that students/clients make known their desires for learning Chinese and negotiate with their teachers accordingly. And there is no such thing as 'no turning back' so feel free to learn all Chinese varieties if you like (though it might just take you a bit of time...!), and there are plenty of [resources](#) for this.

Finally, many Westerners, despite their tremendous desire to learn Chinese, are daunted by the prospect of actually doing it, since there are many properties in Chinese that look like nothing on earth (hence the comments above the script and tones above). My experience in Chinese language and linguistics indicates that it is by no means impossible for foreigners to master Chinese and get fluent in it. The two things that are most off-putting are the script, which is hieroglyphic and non-alphabetic, and the tones, which are fully grammatical and essential for lexical production. With regards to the first hurdle, I have taught many students who tell me that they only want to learn how to **speak and understand and cannot be bothered with reading/writing**, and I have had a lot of success in getting my students to acquire oral and communicative proficiency without the ability to read/write. Reading and writing in Chinese are indeed specialized skills and do require a lot of effort from the learner, but it is perfectly possible to communicate in Chinese without being able to read or write it (though obviously if one wants to go further with it, one will have to master reading/writing, but that is a consideration for advanced learners). One can certainly make a lot of progress in Chinese without having to worry about reading/writing at all, which is why many pedagogical manuals contain separate sections dedicated to the acquisition of Chinese characters while keeping the main substance on Chinese grammar codified in western alphabet (Mandarin *pinyin*, Cantonese *jyutping* etc). The second obstacle, namely tones, is unavoidable, since Chinese is a fully tonal language and all its lexical items come with specialized tonal contours that need to be mastered in order to be understood. However, this amounts to little more than pure memorisation, albeit a pretty large quantity to memorise. I have had a lot of success in teaching foreign students Chinese tonal contours, which can be mastered through clear and systematic practice, as illustrated in the following video:

<https://youtu.be/HJFG98o7aLM>

I always make sure that my students learn the tones accompanying each character as part of their acquisition of vocabulary either in Mandarin *pinyin* or

Cantonese *jyutping*. Vocabulary learning is a tedious bore, but it is the same in all languages. Chinese requires a different type of learning, namely the memorisation of tones, but this requires nothing more than just sheer effort and practice, which applies to the learning of all foreign languages. Other than these deceptively insuperable difficulties, Chinese grammar is very accessible to foreigners now, as there is plenty of excellent pedagogical material that has been compiled by leading experts, a sample of which can be found on [my website](#). The popular opinion that Chinese is impossible to learn is a myth that needs to be taken out of foreigners' minds.

All in all, I hope to have provided bits of linguistic information that can serve as disambiguation for the status of Chinese in modern China and beyond, and the message here is a positive one. Chinese is both much more complex and much more straightforward than most people think, since there is a sophisticated sociolinguistic system and grammatical description which permit a clear and systematic acquisition of Chinese. It is by no means dead-easy, but not impossible either. There is absolutely no need to be inhibited by the nature of our language, but first one has to stop thinking that Chinese is a two-faceted (Cantonese/Mandarin) horrible beast. It is an enticing creature waiting for you to explore.