



China

PHRASEBOOK & DICTIONARY

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China





Note: Language areas are approximate only. For more detail see the relevant introduction. The external borders of India have not been authenticated and may not be correct.

china – at a glance

China is home to a mind-boggling 1.3 billion people, who live in such contrasting environments as the fast-paced modern cities of Shànghǎi and Hong Kong, the mountains and forests of the southwest, and the rolling steppes of Inner Mongolia. So it's little wonder that China is also home to a cacophony of languages – more than 200, and counting – and to countless dialects and subdialects.

China's languages are traditionally classified into seven main groups: Gan, spoken in Jiāngxī and adjoining areas; Hakka, spoken across a number of areas but particularly in the south and southeast; Mandarin, spoken in the north, central and western provinces, but with speakers right across the country; Min, which has speakers in Fújiàn and Taiwan; Wu, spoken on the east coast; Xiang (also called Hunanese), mainly spoken in Húnán province; and Yue (also known as Cantonese), a language of the Guǎngdōng area. These are all Sinitic languages within the Sino-Tibetan language family and each one has numerous regional dialects. More than two-thirds of Chinese speakers, for example, speak various dialects of Mandarin. The linguistic variety doesn't stop there, however. Outside these major groups are the many non-Sinitic languages of China's ethnic minorities, including Mongolian and Uighur.

In the early 1900s Chinese authorities sought to reinforce national unity with the promotion of the Běijīng dialect of Mandarin as 'Modern Standard Chinese', mandating its use in education and for official purposes. This is now the official national language of China, as well as one of the official languages of the UN.

did you know?

- The writing system common to China's main Sinitic languages (Mandarin and Cantonese) contains more than 50,000 different characters, and this number continues to grow. However, a mere 3000 or so are all you need to read a local newspaper or to make it past senior high school in China.
- Of the more than 80 languages and dialects 'discovered' around the world in recent decades, 30 are native to China. Linguists agree that there are many more yet to be formally documented. Meanwhile, Unesco has listed more than 100 Chinese languages and dialects as in danger of becoming extinct; some of these have fewer than 50 remaining speakers.
- In the lead-up to the 2008 Olympics, Běijīng officials established a committee to rid the city of 'Chinglish', the often perplexing and amusing results of locals' attempts to translate Chinese into English. The committee had replaced more than 4000 occurrences of the offending prose on signs with accepted 'standard' translations. Authorities could only do so much, though, and you can still find fine examples of Chinglish in private businesses throughout the city.