

中文

MANDARIN FOR SOCIAL LIFE

# Foundations

中文 · 入门基础

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Tones, pinyin, and warm manners — the small kit that turns sounds into **connection**. Get these right and everything after feels easy.

LESSON 0 OF 6

## 01 How Mandarin Sounds 声调

Mandarin is a **tonal** language: the same syllable means different things depending on the pitch you ride it on. There are four tones plus a light, toneless neutral. Don't be intimidated — locals will love that you try, and context carries you most of the way.

### The four tones (+ neutral) 四声

The classic teaching example is the syllable *ma*. Same letters, four different pitches, four totally different words.

<b>ā</b> <i>Tone 1 · high-flat</i>	<b>á</b> <i>Tone 2 · rising</i>	<b>ǎ</b> <i>Tone 3 · dip-rise</i>	<b>à</b> <i>Tone 4 · falling</i>	<b>a</b> <i>Neutral · light</i>
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CHINESE	PINYIN (TONES)	ENGLISH	NOTE
妈	<i>mā</i>	mother	Tone 1 — high and flat, like holding a note
麻	<i>má</i>	hemp	Tone 2 — rising, like asking "huh?"
马	<i>mǎ</i>	horse	Tone 3 — dips down then rises
骂	<i>mà</i>	to scold	Tone 4 — sharp falling, like a firm "No!"
吗	<i>ma</i>	(question word)	Neutral — light, quick, no stress

#### TIP — SING IT, DON'T STRESS IT

Think of tones as melody, not difficulty. Tone 1 is a flat hum, Tone 2 is the rise of a question, Tone 3 is a little valley, Tone 4 is a sharp downward chop. Exaggerate at first — you'll naturally settle into a more natural version with practice.

### Tricky pinyin sounds 拼音

Pinyin uses the Roman alphabet, but a few letters don't sound like English. Learn these and your pronunciation jumps instantly.

CHINESE	PINYIN (TONES)	ENGLISH	NOTE
请	<i>qǐng</i>	please	<b>q</b> = soft "ch" with a smile (like "cheese")
谢	<i>xiè</i>	thanks	<b>x</b> = soft "sh" said with the tongue forward
中	<i>zhōng</i>	middle / China	<b>zh</b> = "j" in "jungle", tongue curled back
吃	<i>chī</i>	to eat	<b>ch / sh</b> = retroflex, tongue curled (no vowel after)
菜	<i>cài</i>	dish / food	<b>c</b> = "ts" as in "cats"
早	<i>zǎo</i>	early	<b>z</b> = "ds" as in "kids", but light
人	<i>rén</i>	person	<b>r</b> = a buzzed "r" between English "r" and "zh"
女	<i>nǚ</i>	woman	<b>ü</b> = say "ee" then round your lips

#### INFO – TONE 3 SANDHI

When two third tones meet, the first becomes a rising second tone. So *nǐ hǎo* ( , hello) is actually said *ní hǎo*. Your ear will pick this up naturally — just know it isn't a typo.

## 02 Writing — Characters vs Pinyin 汉字

Good news: **you do not need to write Chinese characters to make friends or date.** Pinyin is your learning tool, and your phone types characters for you. Reading a few common ones helps, but speaking is what builds connection.

### Simplified characters vs pinyin 简体字

Mainland China and Singapore use **simplified** characters (the ones in this book); Taiwan and Hong Kong use **traditional**. Pinyin is the romanized spelling with tone marks — it's how you'll learn to say everything. When you text, you'll type pinyin and your keyboard converts it to characters automatically.

CHINESE	PINYIN (TONES)	ENGLISH	NOTE
我	wǒ	I / me	One of the few characters worth recognizing
你	nǐ	you	Everyday "you"
好	hǎo	good	Shows up everywhere — , ?
中国	zhōngguó	China	Literally "middle country"
台湾	táiwān	Taiwan	Slightly more relaxed dating culture

### Measure words — the " " note 量词

Chinese counts nouns with a little "measure word" between the number and the thing. The all-purpose one is *ge* ( ). When in doubt, use and you'll be understood.

CHINESE	PINYIN (TONES)	ENGLISH	NOTE
一个	yí ge	one (of something)	The default measure word — works almost anywhere
一个人	yí ge rén	one person	number + + noun
两杯	liǎng bēi	two cups / glasses	bēi for drinks — useful at a bar

#### TIP — LET YOUR PHONE DO THE WRITING

Install a pinyin keyboard. You type *nihao*, it offers . You never have to memorize strokes to send a charming message. Focus your energy on saying things out loud.

## 03 Politeness & Pronouns 礼貌

Mandarin has **far less honorific layering** than Japanese or Korean — there's no maze of formal verb endings. Warmth comes mostly from your tone of voice and a generous sprinkle of (please) and (thank you).

### Pronouns & the polite "you" 您

CHINESE	PINYIN (TONES)	ENGLISH	NOTE
我	wǒ	I / me	Same word for subject and object
你	nǐ	you	Default, friendly — use this with peers
您	nín	you (polite)	For elders, bosses, service staff — respectful
他 / 她	tā / tā	he / she	Same sound, different character — easy to say
我们	wǒmen	we / us	Add 们 to make a pronoun plural

### The two magic words 请 · 谢谢

CHINESE	PINYIN (TONES)	ENGLISH	NOTE
请	qǐng	please / go ahead	Also "to treat" — 请客 = my treat
谢谢	xièxie	thank you	Second syllable neutral and light
不客气	bú kèqi	you're welcome	Literally "don't be polite"
不 bú don't 客气 kèqi be polite			
不好意思	bù hǎoyisi	excuse me / sorry	Soft, friendly — for small bumps & getting attention
不 bù not 好意思 hǎoyisi at ease / sense of shame			
对不起	duìbuqǐ	I'm sorry	Stronger apology, for real mistakes

### CULTURAL NOTE — WARMTH OVER FORMALITY

Because Mandarin skips the heavy honorific system, your **energy** does the work that grammar does elsewhere. A genuine smile, a soft *bù hǎoyìsi* to open, and a sincere *xièxie* read as polite and likeable. Use for anyone clearly older or in a position of respect, and you'll come across as a gentleman.

## 04 Survival Phrases & Backchannel 日常用语

These are the lines that get you through any room. The second table — **backchannel** — is the secret sauce: little sounds that show you're listening and make conversation flow.

### Ten survival phrases 救命十句

CHINESE	PINYIN (TONES)	ENGLISH	NOTE
你好	<i>nǐ hǎo</i>	hello	Said níhǎo (tone-3 sandhi)
你 <i>nǐ</i> you 好 <i>hǎo</i> good			
再见	<i>zàijiàn</i>	goodbye	Literally "see again"
再 <i>zài</i> again 见 <i>jiàn</i> see			
是的	<i>shì de</i>	yes / that's right	Or just <i>duì</i> = "correct"
是 <i>shì</i> be / yes 的 <i>de</i> (particle)			
不是	<i>bú shì</i>	no / it's not	Chinese has no single word for "yes/no"
不 <i>bú</i> not 是 <i>shì</i> be			
我不懂	<i>wǒ bù dǒng</i>	I don't understand	Honest and disarming
我 <i>wǒ</i> I 不 <i>bù</i> not 懂 <i>dǒng</i> understand			
你会说英语吗?	<i>nǐ huì shuō yīngyǔ ma?</i>	Do you speak English?	A friendly escape hatch
你 <i>nǐ</i> you 会 <i>huì</i> can 说 <i>shuō</i> speak 英语 <i>yīngyǔ</i> English 吗 <i>ma</i> (question)			
这个多少钱?	<i>zhège duōshao qián?</i>	How much is this?	Essential for bars & shops
这个 <i>zhège</i> this 多少 <i>duōshao</i> how much 钱 <i>qián</i> money			
请再说一遍	<i>qǐng zài shuō yí biàn</i>	please say it again	Polite "come again?"
请 <i>qǐng</i> please 再 <i>zài</i> again 说 <i>shuō</i> say 一遍 <i>yí biàn</i> one time			
没问题	<i>méi wèntí</i>	no problem	Easygoing and positive

CHINESE	PINYIN (TONES)	ENGLISH	NOTE
没 <i>méi</i> no / not have 问题 <i>wèntí</i> problem			
麻烦你了	<i>máfan nǐ le</i>	sorry to trouble you	Gracious — earns you goodwill
麻烦 <i>máfan</i> trouble 你 <i>nǐ</i> you 了 <i>le</i> (particle)			

### Backchannel — sound like a native listener 附和

CHINESE	PINYIN (TONES)	ENGLISH	NOTE
嗯	<i>èn / èn</i>	mm / yeah	Soft hum that says "I'm with you"
是吗?	<i>shì ma?</i>	oh really?	Shows interest, invites more
是 <i>shì</i> be / so 吗 <i>ma</i> (question)			
真的?	<i>zhēn de?</i>	really?!	Genuine surprise — great for stories
真 <i>zhēn</i> true 的 <i>de</i> (particle)			
对对对	<i>duì duì duì</i>	yeah, exactly!	Warm agreement — repeat for emphasis
哈哈	<i>hāhā</i>	haha	Said out loud and typed — keeps it light

#### TIP — BACKCHANNEL IS CHARM

Dropping an *en* or *?* at the right moment makes you feel like a great conversation partner even when your vocabulary is small. People remember how you made them feel, not how many words you knew.