Pīnyīn Review

Pīnyīn (拼音, literally "combine sounds") was invented in the 1950s by the government of the People's Republic of China. It is a standardized transcription system for representing the sounds of standard Mandarin.

There are several other transcription systems of Chinese in use today. In America, the most common alternative to *pīnyīn* is the Wade-Giles system, which is still used in most library catalogs (although the Library of Congress will be changing over to *pīnyīn* in the next few years). In Taiwan, the system 注音符號 *zhùyīn fúhào* (commonly known as ㄅㄆㄇㄈ *bo-po-mo-fo*) remains the most common.

Pīnyīn is now the official United Nations transcription of Chinese. In the United States, it is commonly used in Chinese language instruction, and is also increasingly used in newspapers, academic writing, and in popular culture.

Pīnyīn is not inherently better than any other transcription system, but its increasing popularity and widespread use make it the most important system to know.

Pīnyīn is *not* a spelling system designed to make Chinese sounds easy or natural for English speakers (or French speakers or Thai speakers, for that matter) to pronounce by just looking at the letters. Rather, *pīnyīn* is a transcription system which unambiguously represents the standard pronunciation of any Mandarin syllable. To use *pīnyīn*, it is necessary to understand the special value that the letters have within the *pīnyīn* system.

Note also that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between *pīnyīn* letters and Mandarin sounds. For example, some single sounds are represented by two letters (**ng**, **zh**, etc.); some single letters represent two sounds (e.g. **o**); one letter can represent different sounds in different contexts (e.g. **i**, **u**); and some letters do not represent any sounds (e.g. **w**, **y** in some cases). But, when combined into syllables, the symbols become unambiguous if you understand the rules.

Chinese syllables are usually described as having three parts: (1) an *initial* consonant; (2) a *final* consisting of vowels and ending consonants; (3) a *tone*. We will look at the *pīnyīn* representations of these three parts.

The INITIALS of Mandarin in *pīnyīn*:

b	**p**	**m**	**f**		*labials* (produced with the lips)
d	**t**	**n**		**l**	*dentals* (produced with the tongue tip at the root of the upper teeth)
z	**c**		**s**		*alveolars* (produced with the tongue tip just behind the upper teeth)
zh	**ch**		**sh**	**r**	*retroflexes* (produced with the tongue tip curled up toward the roof of the mouth)
j	**q**		**x**		*palatals* (produced with the flat center of the tongue against the roof of the mouth)
g	**k**		**h**		*velars* (produced with the root of the tongue against the back of the roof of the mouth)

A syllable may also have no initial consonant, in which case it is said to have the *zero initial.*

All 21 of these symbols represent distinct consonants in Mandarin. Depending on your native

language, you may have difficulty distinguishing some of them.

English speakers often have difficulty distinguishing the retroflexes (**zh ch sh**) from the palatals (**j q x**), since both sound similar to English sounds like ***j****eep*, ***ch****eese,* ***sh****irt.*

Cantonese speakers often have difficulty distinguishing the alveolars (**z c s**) from the palatals (**j q x**), since Cantonese does not distinguish these sounds (e.g. *sik* and *shik* are both valid pronunciations of the word 'to eat').

Speakers of non-Mandarin dialects and of many Mandarin dialects often have difficulty distinguishing the retroflexes (**zh ch sh**) from the alveolars (**z c s**). Pronouncing retroflexes as alveolars is one of the most recognizable features of southern dialects of Mandarin, such as that spoken in Taiwan, in which someone might say *wǒ sì zōngguórén* instead of *wǒ shì zhōngguórén*.

Additionally, some speakers of southern dialects may have difficulty distinguishing **n** and **l**, or distinguishing **f** and **h** before **u**. They may therefore confuse *nán* with *lán,* or *hú* with *fú.*

The FINALS of Mandarin in *pīnyīn*:

i_2, i_3	**e**	**a**	**ei**	**ai**	**ou**	**ao**	**en**	**an**	**eng**	**ang**	**er**	
i	**ie**	**ia**			**iou**	**iao**	**in**	**ian**	**ing**	**iang**		**(y-)**
u	**uo**	**ua**	**uei**	**uai**			**uen**	**uan**	**ong**	**uang**		**(w-)**
ü	**üe**						**ün**	**üan**	**iong**			**(yu-)**

The pronunciation of these finals is mostly straightforward (but see below for an explanation of **i_2, i_3**). What is complicated about the finals are a number of *pīnyīn* spelling rules, which affect many of the finals in the chart:

• When **ü** appears after palatals **j**, **q**, **x**, it is written *u*. (When it appears after **n** or **l** it is still written *ü*.) Examples: 覺 **j**+**üe** = *jue*; 去 **q**+**ü** = *qu*; 選 **x**+**üan** = *xuan*; 女 **n**+**ü** = *nü*; 綠 **l**+**ü** = *lü*

• When **i**, **u**, and **ü** occur without an initial and there is no following vowel, they are written *yi, wu*, and *yu* respectively. Examples: 一 **Ø**+**i** = *yi*; 五 **Ø**+**u** = *wu*; 雨 **Ø**+**ü** = *yu*; 因 **Ø**+**in** = *yin*; 雲 **Ø**+**ün** = *yun*

• When **i**, **u**, or **ü** occur without an initial but with another vowel following, these three sounds are written *y*, *w*, and *yu* respectively. Examples: 研 **Ø**+**ian** = *yan*; 忘 **Ø**+**uang** = *wang*; 圓 **Ø**+**üan** = *yuan*

• When **uo** appears after labials **b**, **p**, **m**, **f**, it is written *o*. Compare 波 **b**+**uo** = *bo* and 多 **d**+**uo** = *duo*.

• When **uei** appears after an initial, it is written *ui*. Compare 對 **d**+**uei** = *dui* and 為 **Ø**+**uei** = *wei*.

• When **iou** appears after an initial, it is written *iu.* Compare 六 **l**+**iou** = *liu* and 有 **Ø**+**iou** = *you.*

• When **uen** appears after an initial, it is written *un*. Compare 春 **ch**+**uen** = *chun* and 文 **Ø**+**uen** = *wen.*

Three different sounds are written with the letter **i**:

• After alveolars **z**, **c**, **s**, the letter **i** represents an alveolar vowel. Example: 字 **z**+**i_2** = *zi*

• After retroflexes **zh**, **ch**, **sh**, **r**, the letter **i** represents a retroflex vowel. Example: 吃 **ch**+**i_3** = *chi*

• Everywhere else, the letter **i** represents the normal sound associate with this letter. Example: 你 **n**+**i** = *ni*

English speakers may have difficulty distinguishing **ü** (which does not occur in English but is found

in French and German) from **u**, especially since because of spelling rules **ü** is often written *u*. The general rule is: if you see *u* after *j*, *q*, *x*, pronounce it **ü**; if you see it anywhere else, pronounce it **u**.

Speakers of many dialects (including Taiwan Mandarin) may have difficulty distinguishing **in** from **ing**, as in the difference between 今 *jīn* and 經 *jīng*. (This difference is similar to that found between English *sin* and *sing*.) Some speakers of other dialects may also have difficulty distinguishing **en** from **eng**.

The TONES of Mandarin in *pīnyīn*

1st tone (high level)	2nd tone (high rising)	3rd tone (low dipping)	4th tone (falling)	neutral tone
ˉ	ˊ	ˇ	ˋ	(no mark)

Mandarin is commonly said to have four tones. In fact, standard Mandarin has five. The fifth or *neutral tone* is short and light. Unstressed particles (such as 的 *de*, 了 *le*, 呢 *ne*, 嗎 *ma*) are always pronounced in the neutral tone. Unstressed syllables of words are also pronounced in the neutral tone, while in other Mandarin dialects they may retain their full stress and original tone. (For example, 喜歡 *xǐhuan* in standard Mandarin but *xǐhuān* in many Mandarin dialects.)

The tone mark is always placed over the *main vowel*. If there is more than one vowel, you can identify the main vowel as the vowel that can be prolonged when uttering the syllable; or as the vowel which is *not* **i**, **u**, or **ü**. (In syllables such as *dui* or *liu*, the main vowel is actually the unwritten **e** and **o** respectively; in these cases the tone mark goes over the last vowel: *duì*, *liù*).

PRACTICE

Write *pīnyīn* for the following characters.

zh vs. **z**:

找 _____ 早 _____ 葬 _____ 张 _____ 至 _____ 自 _____

ch vs. **q**:

全 _____ 船 _____ 常 _____ 强 _____ 吃 _____ 起 _____

s vs. **sh** vs. **x**:

死 _____ 少 _____ 实 _____ 洗 _____ 小 _____ 象 _____

i vs. **i**$_2$ vs. **i**$_3$:

离 _____ 字 _____ 词 _____ 几 _____ 事 _____ 比 _____

iou and **uei** (with and without initials):

又 _____ 就 _____ 六 _____ 水 _____ 为 _____ 贵 _____

in vs. **ing**:

心 _____ 民 _____ 请 _____ 明 _____ 亲 _____ 兴 _____

u vs. **ü**:

努 _____ 女 _____ 路 _____ 出 _____ 录 _____ 绿 _____

ON YOUR OWN

Identify which sounds and spellings give *you* the most trouble. In terms of sounds, listen to the course tapes as the vocabulary lists are read aloud, and try to pick out the sounds you have trouble distinguishing. Work on identifying them without looking at your textbook, then check your answers.

For spelling problems, it is important to become familiar with reading and writing *pīnyīn*. When you learn vocabulary, cover over the characters and read the *pīnyīn* aloud for practice. Then check yourself

against the tape. If you pay attention to *pīnyīn* transcriptions, you will gradually acquire an instinct for which combinations of letters are possible and which are not. Once the impossible combinations start looking strange to you, you will be less likely to produce nonexistent *pīnyīn* syllables.