

## The Chinese writing system 中文

Chinese is written with characters which are known as 漢字 [汉字] (hànzi). The characters were originally pictures of people, animals or other things, but over the centuries they have become increasingly stylised and no longer resemble the things they represent. Many characters have been combined with others to create new ones.

Until the early 20th century, Classical Chinese, 文言 (wényán), was the main form of writing in China. It was standardised during the late Han Dynasty (25-220 AD) and was also used in Korea, Japan and Vietnam before they developed their own writing systems.

In Classical Chinese most words were monosyllabic and written with a single character. However, during the 1920s a new form of written Chinese modelled on spoken Mandarin was developed. Most Chinese publications since then have been written in this form, which is known as 白話 [白话] (báihuà), though Classical Chinese constructions and especially proverbs are still used to some extent.

In spoken Chinese, words are made up of one, two or more syllables. Each of the syllables is written with a separate character. Each character has its own meaning, though many are used only in combination with other characters.

Every character is given exactly the same amount of space, no matter how complex it is. There are no spaces between characters and the characters which make up multi-syllable words are not grouped together, so when reading Chinese, you not only have to work out what the characters mean and how to pronounce them, but also which characters belong together.

### How many characters?

The Chinese writing system is an open-ended one, meaning that there is no upper limit to the number of characters. The largest Chinese dictionaries include about 56,000 characters, but most of them are archaic, obscure or rare variant forms. Knowledge of about 3,000 characters enables you to read about 99% of the characters used in Chinese newspapers and magazines. To read Chinese literature, technical writings or Classical Chinese though, you need to be familiar with at least 6,000 characters.

## Usage

Characters can be used on their own, in combination with other characters or as part of other characters. [Click here](#) to see how this works for the character for horse: 馬

## Strokes

Chinese characters are written with the following twelve basic strokes:



A character may consist of between 1 and 64 strokes. The strokes are always written in the same direction and there is a set order to write the strokes of each character. In dictionaries, characters are ordered partly by the number of strokes they contain.

一	二	三	心	玉	竹	見	金	面	骨
1 stroke yī one	2 strokes èr two	3 strokes sān three	4 strokes xīn heart	5 strokes yù jade	6 strokes zhú bamboo	7 strokes jiàn to see	8 strokes jīn gold	9 strokes miàn face	10 strokes gǔ bone
魚	黃	鼎	鼻	齒	龍	龠	簡	識	覺
11 stroke yú fish	12 strokes huáng yellow	13 strokes dǐng cauldron	14 strokes bí nose	15 strokes chǐ tooth	16 strokes lóng dragon	17 strokes yuè flute	18 strokes jiǎn simple	19 strokes shì knowledge	20 strokes jué to feel
鐵	鞞	體	鱣	鬣	厩	龔	鸚	鬱	魚魚
21 stroke tié steel	22 strokes jiān saddle-cloth	23 strokes tǐ body	24 strokes shàn sturgeon	25 strokes hóng school	26 strokes yǎn scar	27 strokes nóng head cold	28 strokes yīng parrot	29 strokes yù luxuriant	30 strokes xiān fresh
灑	龍龍	麤	齧	龔	雷	龔	龍龍		
31 stroke yàn billowing	32 strokes tà flight of dragon	33 strokes cū rough	35 strokes yà lacking teeth	36 strokes nàng blocked nose	39 strokes bīng ice	48 strokes tà to	64 strokes zhé talkative		

## Notes

The 39-stroke character (3 x thunder) means "the sound of thunder" and is always written doubled (轟轟). The 48-stroke character (3 dragons) means "the appearance of a dragon walking".

## Homophones

There are approximately 1,700 possible syllables in Mandarin, which compares with over 8,000 in [English](#). As a result, there are many homophones - syllables which sound the same but mean different things. These are distinguished in written Chinese by using different characters for each one.

Not all the following characters are pronounced with the same tone, so to Chinese ears they sound different. To Western ears however they all sound the same. These syllables can be distinguished in speech from the context and because most of them usually appear in combination with other syllables.

傍	幫	梆	邦	榜	膀	綁	膀	傍	棒	磅	鎊
bāng	bāng	bāng	bāng	bǎng	bǎng	bǎng	bǎng	bàng	bàng	bàng	bàng
near	to help	watchman's wooden clapper	nation, state, country	list of names	tablet, plaque	to tie up	shoulder	to depend on, to draw near	stick, club, cudgel	pound (lb), pound (£)	pound (£)

If you look closely, you will notice that some of the characters above have parts in common. These parts give you a clue to how to pronounce the characters.

### More examples of homophones

It is even possible to write a text in Chinese using on one sound, pronounced with different tones, of [course](#). This is exactly what Chinese linguist, Zhao Yuanren, did when he wrote the "Story of Shi Eating the [Lions](#)" using nothing but the sound 'shi'. The story makes sense in written form, but is impossible to understand when read aloud.

You can see and hear the story on:

<http://www.yellowbridge.com/onlinelit/stonelion.html>

## Compound words

Chinese verbs and adjectives generally consist of one character (syllable) but nouns often consist of two, three or more characters (syllables):

電腦	飛機	大學	收音機	貓頭鷹	精神分裂症
computer	aeroplane	university	radio	owl	schizophrenia
(electric brain)	(flying machine)	(great learning)	(receive sound machine)	(cat-headed eagle)	(split mind disease)

[More examples](#)

## Simplified characters

In an effort to increase literacy, about 2,000 of the characters used in China have been simplified. These simplified characters are also used in Singapore, but in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Malaysia the traditional characters are still used. Here are some examples (simplified characters in red):

語語 見見 間間 銀銀 飯飯 魚魚 紅紅

[More examples](#)

Chinese characters, with some modifications, are also used in written [Japanese](#) and [Korean](#), and were once used to write [Vietnamese](#).

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## Sample text in Chinese

繁體中文字 (Traditional Chinese characters)

人人生而自由，在尊嚴和權利上一律平等。他們賦有理性和良心，並應以兄弟關係的精神互相對待。

简体中文字 (Simplified Chinese characters)

人人生而自由，在尊严和权利上一律平等。他们赋有理性和良心，并应以兄弟关系的精神互相对待。