
***Chinese
Phrases***
FOR
DUMMIES®

by Dr. Wendy Abraham



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The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"You mean, 'wo', 'ta', 'baba', and 'mama' are all words in the Mandarin dialect? My gosh, Alice, our baby's been speaking Chinese the last few weeks!"

Introduction



Globalization has made familiarity with other people, cultures, and languages not only preferable in the 21st century, but also essential. With the help of the Internet, reaching out and touching someone on the other side of the world has become as easy as the click of a mouse. And yet, nothing quite beats the excitement of a face-to-face encounter with someone who hails from the other side of the globe in his or her own language. Communication in cyberspace doesn't even come close.

Whether you're going around the world for business, getting ready to study overseas, interested in frequenting Chinatown, befriending a Chinese-speaking classmate or coworker, or just plain curious about China, *Chinese Phrases For Dummies* can help you get acquainted with enough Chinese to carry on a decent conversation on any number of topics. You won't become fluent instantly, of course, but this book helps you greet a stranger, buy a plane ticket, order some food, and even adopt a baby. This book also gives you some invaluable cultural tips so that you can not only rattle off those newly acquired words and phrases, but also back them up with the right behavior at the right time.

I design this book to help guide you toward the successful use of one of the most difficult languages on earth. I hope this book makes studying Chinese fun.

About This Book

The good news is that you can use *Chinese Phrases For Dummies* anytime, anywhere. No mandatory class sessions, no exams, and no homework assignments to dread. Need to get to a business meeting after you arrive in a new town? Just turn to the chapter on

travel to find out how to haggle for a plane ticket, determine the price, and get to the airport on time. Have to make a sudden trip to the doctor? Turn to the chapter on health and figure out how to tell your caregivers exactly what ails you.

The beauty of this book is that it can basically be all things to all people. You don't have to memorize one chapter before moving on to the next, if what the second chapter deals with what you really need. Read as much or as little as you want, as quickly or as slowly as you like. Whatever interests you is what you can focus on. And remember: You're discovering a language that simultaneously represents one of the world's oldest civilizations and one of today's fastest growing economies.

Note: If you've never taken Chinese before, you may want to read Chapters 1 and 2 before you tackle the later chapters. They give you some of the basics that you need to know about the language, such as how to pronounce the various sounds.

Conventions Used in This Book

Pay attention to a couple of conventions that can help you navigate this book's contents:

- ✓ Chinese terms are set in **boldface** to make them stand out.
- ✓ Pronunciations and meanings appear in parentheses immediately after the Chinese terms. The pronunciations are in *italics*.

This book uses the *pinyin* (*literally*: spelling the way it sounds) romanization of Chinese words. What does that mean? Well, if you go to China, you see signs in Chinese characters, but if you look for something in English, you may be hard pressed to find it. Whatever signs you see in roman letters are in pinyin, the romanization system developed by the Communists in the 1950s, so seeing pinyin in this book is good practice for you.

Something else to keep in mind as you begin to understand Chinese is that many of the English translations you see in this book aren't exactly literal. Knowing the gist of what you hear or see is more important instead of what individual words in any given phrase mean. For example, if you translate "horse horse tiger tiger" literally into Chinese, you have the phrase meaning "so so." You're not actually talking about animals. Whenever I give a literal translation, I preface it with "*literally*" in italics.

Foolish Assumptions

Some of the foolish assumptions I made about you while writing *Chinese Phrases For Dummies* are

- ✔ You don't know any Chinese, except for maybe a couple of words you picked up from a good kung-fu movie or the word "tofu," which you picked up while grocery shopping.
- ✔ Your goal in life isn't to become an interpreter of Chinese at the United Nations. You just want to pick up some useful words, phrases, and sentence constructions to make yourself understood when speaking Chinese.
- ✔ You have no intention of spending hours and hours memorizing Chinese vocabulary and grammar patterns.
- ✔ You want to have fun while trying to speak a little Chinese, like at your local Chinese restaurant.

Icons Used in This Book

The cute little icons in the left-hand margins highlight the kind of information you're looking at and can help you locate certain types of information in a hurry. This book's five icons are



The bull's-eye appears wherever I highlight a great idea to help make your study of Chinese easier.



This icon serves as a reminder about particularly important information concerning Chinese.



The icon acts as a stop sign in your mind. It warns you something you need to avoid saying or doing so that you don't make a fool of yourself.



This icon clues you in on fascinating bits of information about China and Chinese culture. Knowledge of a culture goes hand in hand with knowledge of a foreign language, so these icons help light the way as you embark on your journey.



This icon highlights various rules of grammar that may be unusual. Even though this book doesn't focus primarily on grammar, by paying attention to these little grammatical rules as they pop up can only enhance your successful execution of the language.

Where to Go from Here

Chinese is often considered one of the toughest languages in the world to master. Don't worry. The good news is that you're not trying to master it. All you want is for people to understand you when you open your mouth. All you have to do now is turn to whichever chapter piques your curiosity and keep practicing your favorite Chinese phrases when you're with your family and friends in Chinatown.

Chapter 1

I Say It How? Speaking Chinese

.....

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting a handle on basic Chinese sounds
 - ▶ Perfecting the four basic tones
 - ▶ Practicing Chinese idioms
 - ▶ Understanding basic Chinese phrases and gestures
-

Time to get your feet wet with the basics of Chinese. This chapter gives you the guidelines that help you pronounce words in standard Mandarin (the official language of both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan) like a native speaker and helps you get a handle on the four tones that distinguish the Mandarin dialect. After you have the basics down, we show you how to construct basic Chinese phrases.

But before you dive in, here's a bit of advice: Don't be intimidated by all the tones! When studying a foreign language, don't worry about making mistakes the minute you open your mouth.

The Written Word: Yikes! No Alphabet!

With so many distinct dialects in Chinese, how do people communicate with each other? The answer lies in . . . (drum roll) . . . the written word.

Say you see two Chinese people sitting next to each other on a train traveling from Canton to Shanghai. If the Cantonese speaker reads the newspaper out loud, the guy from Shanghai won't have a clue what he's saying. But if they both read the same newspaper article silently to themselves, they could understand what's going on in the world. That's because Chinese characters are uniform all across the country.



Chinese words are written in beautiful, often symbolic configurations called *characters*. Each character is a word in and of itself, and sometimes it's a part of a compound word. It makes no difference if you write the characters from right to left, left to right, or top to bottom, because you can read and understand them in any order.

During the Han dynasty, a lexicographer named Xu Shen identified six ways in which Chinese characters reflected meanings and sounds. Of these, four were the most common:

- ✔ **Pictographs:** These characters are formed according to the shape of the objects themselves, such as the sun and the moon.
- ✔ **Ideographs:** These characters represent more abstract concepts. For example, the characters for “above” and “below” each have a horizontal line representing the horizon and another stroke leading out away above or below the horizon.
- ✔ **Complex ideographs:** Combinations of simpler characters, such as the sun and moon together which mean “bright.”

✔ **Phonetic compounds:** Also called *logographs*, these compound characters are formed by two graphic elements — one hinting at the meaning of the word and the other providing a clue to the sound. Phonetic compounds account for more than 80 percent of all Chinese characters.

No matter which type of character you see, you won't find any letters stringing them together like you see in English. So how in the world do Chinese people consult a Chinese dictionary? In several different ways.

Because Chinese characters are composed of several (often many) strokes of the writing brush, one way to look up a character is by counting the number of strokes and then looking up the character under the portion of the dictionary that notes characters by strokes. But to do so, you have to know which radical to check under first. Chinese characters have 214 *radicals* — parts of the character that can help identify what the character may signify, such as three dots on the left-hand side of the character representing water. Each radical is itself composed of a certain number of strokes, so you have to first look up the radical by the number of strokes it takes to write it, and after you locate that radical, you start looking once more under the number of strokes left in the character *after* that radical to locate the character you wanted to look up in the first place.

You can always just check under the pronunciation of the character (if you already know how to pronounce it), but you have to sift through every single character with the same pronunciation first, according to which tone the word is spoken with — first, second, third, or fourth. And because Chinese has so many homophones, this task isn't as easy as it may sound (no pun intended). For example the word pronounced “ma” if spoken with a first tone, means “mother,” with a second tone it means “hemp,” with a third tone it means “horse,” and with a fourth tone it means “to scold.” So if you're not careful you can scold your mother and call her a horse.

I bet you feel really relieved that you're only focusing on spoken Chinese and not the written language about now.

Pinyin Spelling: Beijing, Not Peking

To spell the way it sounds . . . that's the literal meaning of **pīnyīn**. For decades, Chinese had been transliterated in any number of ways. Finally, in 1979, the People's Republic of China officially adopted **pīnyīn** as its official romanization system. After the adoption, U.S. libraries and government agencies diligently changed all their prior records from other romanization systems into **pīnyīn**.

Keep in mind the following quick facts about some of the initial sounds in Mandarin when you see them written in the relatively new **pīnyīn** system:

- ✓ **J:** Sounds like the “g” in “gee whiz.” An “i” often follows a “j.” “**Jī kuài qián?**” (*jee kwee chyán*) means “How much money?”
- ✓ **Q:** Sounds like the “ch” in “cheek.” You never see it followed by a “u” like in English, but an “i” always follows it in **pīnyīn**, possibly before another vowel or a consonant. **Qīngdǎo** (*cheeng daow*) beer used to be spelled “ch’ing tao” or “Tsingtao.”
- ✓ **X:** The third letter that’s often followed by an “i.” It sounds like the “sh” in “she.” One famous Chinese leader, **Dèng Xiǎopíng** (*dung shyaw peeng*), boasted this letter in his name.
- ✓ **Zh:** Unlike “j,” which often precedes a vowel — making it sound like you’re opening your mouth — “zh” is followed by vowels, which make it sound like your mouth is a bit more closed. Take **Zhōu ēnlái** (*joe un lye*), for example, the great statesman of 20th-century China. When you say his name, it sounds like Joe Un-lye.

- ✓ **Z:** Sounds like a “dz.” You see it in the name of the PRC’s first leader, **Máo Zédōng** (*maow dzuh doong*), which used to be spelled Mao Tse-tung.
- ✓ **C:** Pronounced like “ts” in such words as **cài** (*tsye; food*) or **cèsuǒ** (*tsuh swaw; bathroom*).
- ✓ **B, D, and G:** In the past, the sounds made by these three letters were represented by P, T, and K, respectively, and the corresponding *aspirated* initial sounds (like in the words “pie,” “tie,” and “kite”) were written as “p’,” “t’,” and “k.” Today, the letters “P,” “T,” and “K” represent the aspirated sounds.

Sounding Off: Basic Chinese Sounds

Don’t worry about sounding like a native speaker the first time you utter a Chinese syllable — after all, who does? But the longer you procrastinate becoming familiar with the basic elements of Chinese words, the greater your fear of this unique language may become.



The main thing to remember about the Chinese language is that each *morpheme* (the smallest unit of meaning in a language) is represented by one syllable, which in turn consists of an initial sound and a final sound, topped off by a tone. This applies to each and every syllable. Without any one of these three components, your words may be incomprehensible to the average Chinese person. For example, the syllable “**mā**” is comprised of the initial “m” and the final “a,” and you pronounce it with what’s called a first tone. Together, the parts mean “mother.” If you substitute the first tone for a third tone, which is written as “**mǎ**,” you say the word “horse.” The following sections break up the three parts and give each their due.

Starting off with initials

In Chinese, initials always consist of consonants. Table 1-1 lists the initials you encounter in the Chinese language.

Table 1-1 Chinese Initials		
<i>Chinese Letter</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>English Example</i>
b	baw	bore
p	paw	paw
m	maw	more
f	faw	four
d	duh	done
t	tuh	ton
n	nuh	null
l	luh	lull
g	guh	gull
k	kuh	come
h	huh	hunt
j	gee	gee
q	chee	cheat
x	she	she
z	dzuh	“ds” in suds
c	tsuh	“ts” in huts
s	suh	sun
zh	jjir	germ
ch	chir	churn
sh	shir	shirt

<i>Chinese Letter</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>English Example</i>
r	ir	"er" in bigger
w	wuh	won
y	yuh	yup



The initials **-n**, **-ng**, and **-r** can also appear as finals (see the next section for more on finals), so don't be surprised if you see them there.

Ending with finals

Chinese boasts many more consonants than vowels. In fact, the language has only six vowels all together: **a**, **o**, **e**, **i**, **u**, and **ü**. If you pronounce the vowels in sequence, your mouth starts off very wide and your tongue starts off very low. Eventually, when you get to **ü**, your mouth becomes much more closed and your tongue ends pretty high. You can also combine the vowels in various ways to form compound vowels. Table 1-2 lists the vowels and some possible combinations.

<i>Chinese Vowel</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>English Example</i>
a	ah	hot
ai	i	eye
ao	ow	chow
an	ahn	sonogram
ang	ahng	angst
o	aw	straw
ong	oong	too + ng

(continued)

Table 1-2 (continued)

<i>Chinese Vowel</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>English Example</i>
ou	oh	oh
e	uh	bush
ei	ay	way
en	un	ton
eng	ung	tongue
er	ar	are
i	ee	tea
ia	ya	gotcha
iao	yaow	meow
ie	yeh	yet
iu	yo	leo
ian	yan	Cheyenne
iang	yahng	y + angst
in	een	seen
ing	eeng	going
iong	yoong	you + ng
u	oo	too
ua	wa	suave
uo	waw	war
ui	way	way
uai	why	why
uan	wan	want
un	one	one
uang	wahng	wan + ng

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