

Mandarin pronunciation guide

Pinyin

Pinyin (lit. 'spell-sound') is the standard romanisation of Chinese script. (Most Chinese can't read Pinyin well, if at all - if you're going for visual communication, show them the characters.)

Pinyin is roughly phonetic, but some sounds are not as you might expect:

c – like ts in bets	ao – like ow in how	iu – like yo in yoga
h – like ch in loch	e – as in her	ou – as in dough
q – like ch in cheap	i – as in magazine	u – as in rule
x – like sh in sheep	ia – like ya in yard	ua – like wa
z – like ds in beds	ian – like yen	uai – like why
	iao – like yow in yowl	ui – like way
ai – as in aisle	ie – like ye in yes	

Tones

For the more ambitious. Mandarin is a tonal language – the same combination of consonants and vowels uttered in a different tone can have a totally different meaning. (Well, the same combination of consonants and vowels uttered in the same tone can have a totally different meaning too, but never mind that.) There are four tones:

First tone (high): ā. A high, level tone (sing the vowel; a relatively long sound).

Second tone (rising): á. Rises sharply from middle register and increases in volume, shorter than the first tone; like a surprised 'what?'

Third tone (falling then rising): ǎ. Starts low, then falls lower before rising again to a point slightly higher than the starting point.

Fourth tone (falling): à. Starts high then drops sharply. Sounds a bit aggressive – like an emphatic 'no'.

The easiest way (the only way, really) to get the hang of tones is to have a fluent Chinese speaker coach you. If you have time to spare in Kunming and you feel like learning, the travel agents on the third floor of the Kunhu offer free Mandarin lessons (at least, they used to).

