

Pronunciation guide

The Chinese sound system is made up of syllables, which consist of an 'initial' sound (a consonant), a 'final' sound (vowel), and a tone.

Initials

There are 21 initials (consonants): **b p m f, d t n l, z c s, zh, ch, sh, r, j, q, x** and **g, k, h**.

Some are pronounced very similarly to the way they sound in standard English:

b p m f d t n l g k h

In Chinese,

- x** is pronounced as the sh as in **sheet**
- q** is pronounced as the ch as in **cheese**
- c** is pronounced as the ts as in **its**.
- z** as the ds in **beds**
- s** as the s in **see**
- j** as the j in **jeep**

The sounds **zh, ch,** and **sh** are similar to **z, c,** and **s** respectively, but are pronounced by curling the front of the tongue over and pressing it into the roof of the mouth. Another retroflex sound is **r**, as in **ring**.

Vowels

There are six vowels in Chinese: **a o e i u ü**. Other compound vowels are made up by combining these six vowels in one way or another. For example,

- ai** as **i** in **lie**
- ou** as **o** in **go** is made up of o + u.

Here are some examples of how these vowels sound:

- a** as the **a** in **father**
- o** as the **o** in **or**
- e** as the **e** in **her**
- i** as the **ea** in **tea** (except after zh, ch, sh, z, c, s, when it is unstressed)
- u** as the u in **flute**
- ü** similar to French **tü**.

Tones

Chinese is a tonal language. This means that the same sounds will have a different meaning with different tones.

The first tone is written -. It tells us to keep our voice on the same level.

The second tone / tells us to make our voice rise.

The third tone ˇ tells us to drop our voice down and then up again.

The fourth tone \ tells us to let our voice drop

Neutral (no tone) means flat with no emphasis.

The nature of learning a language

Learning a new language is a slow and cumulative process. Students need frequent exposure to a new language. Making it meaningful and relevant to their lives is important. A wide range of techniques and technologies will help active learning – for example, using print, audio, video and Internet). The ideas here are just a starter – this resource is not intended to represent a thorough approach to learning Chinese.