

Language

The notion of a single Chinese language is misleading. China has several major dialects (or regional languages) which may be related but are all highly distinctive. Mandarin is the official spoken language and is known as *putonghua* (common speech) within China. It is spoken by approximately 70% of the population, although it may always be their first language. It is the language that is spoken around Beijing.

Cantonese is the other major dialect and is spoken mainly in the south. It is also spoken by many members of China's overseas communities. Dialects spoken in the south-east and south-west are Wu, Min, Hakka, Gan and Xiang.

There are also non-Chinese based languages spoken in other parts of China. Uighur, a Turkish based language, is spoken in Xinjiang province. Tibetan, a language based on the ancient Indian Brahmi script, is the main language in Tibet. In Inner Mongolia the language is based on ancient Turkish.

Chinese has a large number of words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings. Tones are used to differentiate between the words; for example, *ma* can mean mother, hemp, horse or scold, depending on the tone used. In Mandarin there are four tones – flat, rising, falling-rising and falling. The Chinese language has no tenses or plurals so the pronunciation of words does not change. There are no definite (the) or indefinite (a) articles in the Chinese language either.