

Lesson 1

Lesson One explains the four tones in Chinese.

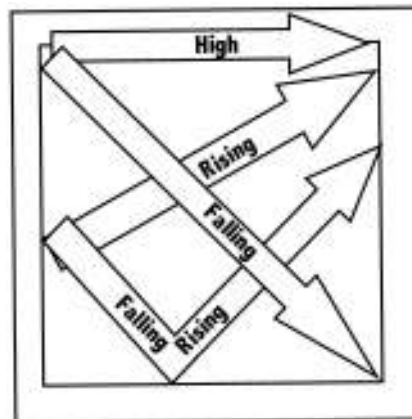
Welcome to the first podcast for chineselearnonline.com. We hope that by following along on our daily podcasts, we can help you improve your Chinese one lesson at a time. Our series focuses on Mandarin Chinese which is the official language of China and Taiwan as well as one of the official languages of Singapore. Together it is spoken by some 874 million people around the world which makes it the most spoken language in the world. English in comparison is spoken by only around 309 million people around the world (source: www.ethnologue.com)

The written Chinese language does not use a phonetic alphabet as we do in English, so to make things easier for you, this website uses pinyin, which is the standard form used to transcribe Chinese sounds into a Latin script. Pinyin will be used in all transcripts of dialogues and new vocabulary that is introduced in the actual lessons.

The Chinese written script uses a traditional (still used in Taiwan) as well as a simplified (used in mainland China) system of characters. Where the two differ, both are included in the script below (simplified followed by traditional - s/t).

Chinese is a tonal language. Since many words and concepts are monosyllabic, Mandarin uses 4 tones to distinguish between them. In fact, if you took out all the tones, there would only be around 400 words left in the entire language! The four tones are as follows:

- high tone: the tone starts high and stays constant
- rising tone: the tone rises from middle to high
- falling rising tone: the tone starts in the middle falls, then rises up
- falling tone: the tone starts high and then falls abruptly



Listen to Kirin's pronunciation of the word zhu using the four tones. Notice the tone marks used below, above the 'u' to indicate which tone is being used to pronounce it. Tones marks like this will be used to indicate which tone should be used. The Chinese characters are also shown (simplified / traditional)

- zhū high tone. Meaning: pig 猪 / 豬
- zhú rising tone. Meaning: bamboo 竹
- zhǔ falling rising tone. Meaning: cook 煮
- zhù falling tone. Meaning: live 住

The best way to get a feel for the tones is to listen to how Chinese speakers say them. Over time you may also notice that sometimes in the middle of speech tones can change depending on where they are being sandwiched. This is why it is important to listen carefully to how Kirin says the words in the podcast and to repeat them in the same manner.

More examples

- qǐ falling rising tone 起
- tīng high tone 听 / 聽
- kàn falling tone 看
- lái rising tone 来 / 來

Background on Pinyin:

The system of transcribing Chinese into English that we are using here is called Pinyin (literally means “spell sound” in Chinese). It was developed in China in the late 1950s. It is based on English pronunciation so in general what you see written is what it sounds like. It is used today in China to teach elementary students how to pronounce words correctly and how to write essays before they have acquired enough Chinese characters to be able to do so.

Background on Chinese characters:

The origins of the Chinese written language date as far back as 10th century BC. At that time, Chinese characters were pictograms representing actual objects or actions. Over time, characters were added to represent sounds of words rather than illustrating actual objects. This caused a gradual shift in Chinese from pictorial to more stylistic and phonetic. Each character today represents one syllable in spoken Chinese.

In the 1950s, when the People’s Republic of China was formed, it was decided that the writing system needed to be simplified to increase the literacy rate of the population. Many characters were rewritten using less strokes or replaced altogether. Today, simplified Chinese is the official writing system in mainland China while Taiwan and other communities continue to use the traditional method. Both versions will be used in the Premium lesson notes on our website here.