

十一

So where were the rickshaws  
there were taxis and busses  
clothes looked just like mine  
there were no them or us's  
I learned 1,2,3,4  
now as "yi, er, san, si"  
and those things I called chopsticks  
were really "kuaizi"



## Chapter 11 - Speaking Chinese – Watch Your Tone

The word “Putonghua” refers to the standard spoken dialect of Chinese. Putonghua actually means, “the common language.” In the West, we traditionally referred to Putonghua as Mandarin. I will use the two words interchangeably.

There is no alphabet in written Chinese. There are, however, phonetic “alphabets” which have been created to help people pronounce standard Chinese (Putonghua) correctly. When Chinese emigrated to other countries, many transliterated their names using no system at all. I have seen the surname, 謝, written as Xie, Shie, Shieh, Hsieh, Sye, and Zia. The most accepted form of phonetic alphabet for Putonghua today is called 拼音 Pīnyīn (Lit. “spell sound”). In Pinyin there are 21 initial sounds and 37 final sounds. An “initial” sound is a consonant or a combination of consonants at the beginning of most syllables. Some syllables don’t start with a consonant sound so those words have no initials. “Finals” are the end sounds of all syllables. They are composed of either vowels, combinations of vowels, or vowels ending with a consonant or consonants. In the word “tang”, “t” would be the initial and “ang” would be the final. Most of the sounds are pretty easy to pronounce, but a few need practice to get right.

The hardest part of learning to speak Mandarin, for most people, are the “4 tones”. Tones are a way you change the tone of your voice to alter the word you are saying. We do this in English sometimes to show emphasis. If I told my wife that I was planning to bring Xí Jìn Píng 习近平 home for dinner tonight, she would probably say the word “who” in the equivalent of a second tone in Chinese. In English, a “2<sup>nd</sup> tone” indicates surprise or disbelief. If I asked Cristy if she wanted to eat bugs tonight, she would probably answer with an emphatic “no” which is similar to a 4<sup>th</sup> tone in Chinese. A “4<sup>th</sup> tone in English” often suggests anger or adamance. But, in Chinese, tones are not used in the same way.

Every Chinese syllable has a tone. Most syllables can be pronounced in a variety of tones. In Chinese, there are lots of homonyms. Many people know that in Mandarin, there are 4 basic tones. What they don’t know is, in addition, there are also half 3<sup>rd</sup> tones, half 4<sup>th</sup> tones, and neutral tones; not to mention tones which change (for a variety of reasons.) After teaching Chinese for more than 20 years, I came to believe that the best way to learn tones was not through memorization, but rather through mimicry. It’s great if you can find a native speaker of Mandarin with standard pronunciation who you can attempt to mimic. It’s even better if they will agree to correct your pronunciation and your tones until you get them right.

Using the wrong tone can totally change the meaning of what you are attempting to say. If, in English, I see you after being away from you during the summer and notice that you’ve been working out and are looking healthy and strong, I might say to you, “Wow,

you're looking fit." You would probably smile and say "thanks." If on the other hand, I were to misspeak and instead of saying "fit", I say "fat" as in "Wow, you're looking fat!", you might be upset. All I did was miss one vowel. A missed tone for a Chinese word can be every bit as significant. The difference between the words "mother" (mā) & "horse" (mǎ) is that one is a 1<sup>st</sup> tone the other, a 3<sup>rd</sup> tone.

Try repeating this with a Putonghua speaker:

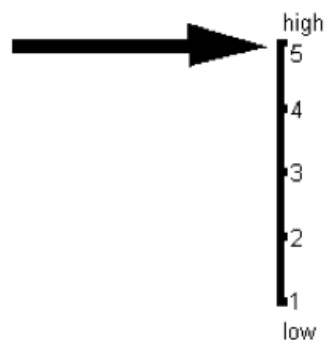
妈妈起码， 马慢， 妈妈嘛马

妈妈起码 **māma qí mǎ** (Mom rides a horse)

马慢 **mǎ màn** (The horse is slow)

妈妈嘛马 **māma mà mǎ** (Mom curses the horse)

**Finding your own range:** Try **saying** (and sustaining) the syllable "ma" at lowest level of your voice range. This will vary from person to person. We will call this level your level 1. Now trying doing the same thing at the highest level of your voice range. We will call the highest point on your voice range level 5. Your normal level of speech would be level 3.



The **1<sup>st</sup> tone** begins at level **5** and ends at level **5**. Try saying 妈 **ma** and 汤 **tang**, in first tone.

The **1<sup>st</sup> tone** is indicated by a level line **over** a vowel (*usually the first vowel*). ( — )



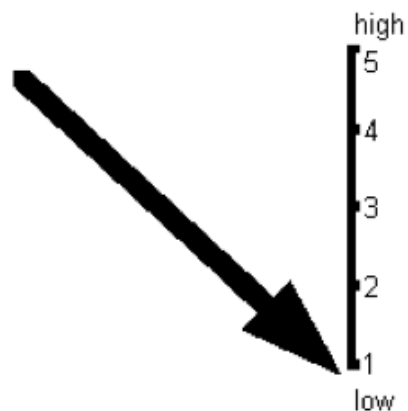
The **2<sup>nd</sup> tone** begins at level **3** and rises to level **5**. Try saying 麻 **ma** and 糖 **tang** in second tone.

The **2<sup>nd</sup> tone** is indicated by an ascending line (bottom left to top right) **over** a vowel. ( / )



The **3<sup>rd</sup> tone** begins at level **2**, goes down to level **1** and then rises to level **4**. Try saying 马 **ma** and 躺 **tang** in the third tone.

The **3<sup>rd</sup> tone** is indicated by a **v** over a vowel (usually over the first vowel). ( v )



The **4<sup>th</sup> tone** begins at level **5** and descends to level **1**. Say 骂 **ma** and 烫 **tang** in fourth tone.

The **4<sup>th</sup> tone** is indicated by a descending line (top left to bottom right) over a vowel. ( \ )

I once went into a restaurant in Taiwan in the winter time hoping for a bowl of hot soup. I asked the waitress, 你有没有糖? “Nǐ yǒu méiyǒu táng?” (I meant to say, Do you have “soup”?) She replied, 我们这里没有糖。 “Wǒmén zhèlǐ méiyǒu táng.” ( We don’t have “candy” here.) I pointed to the menu and proudly asked 这是不是糖? “Zhè shì bùshì táng?” (Isn’t this “soup”?). She laughed and said, “You didn’t say 汤 tāng (soup), you said 糖 táng (candy). We don’t sell candy at our restaurant.”