

Writing Chinese Languages

Chinese characters across languages: intelligibility, literacy, and language policy

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Chinese characters are often described as a writing system that enables communication across spoken-language differences. But how far does this claim extend? These notes address questions that often come up when teaching Chinese writing in a writing systems course, distinguishing language background, writing conventions, and language policy in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Macao, and Taiwan.

1 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. To what extent is writing in Chinese characters mutually intelligible across readers with different linguistic backgrounds?
2. Can a Putonghua speaker tell whether someone is writing in Hakka, Min, Xiang, or Wu?
3. Does a text become unintelligible to such a reader when the writer is a speaker of a non-Sinitic language such as Bai, Yi, or Jingpo?
4. Is literacy in Chinese characters taught anywhere in China without Mandarin also being taught?
5. What research examines writing among people who are not proficient in Mandarin?

A useful starting point: a writing system does not automatically make every text intelligible to every reader. Intelligibility depends on which language is being represented, which conventions the writer uses, what readers have learned, and whether readers share the relevant vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.

2 BACKGROUND

Languages in China vs. Chinese (Sinitic) languages

In the context of Chinese linguistics, we have to differentiate *languages in China* and *Chinese/Sinitic languages*. The former include both

1. minority languages (少数民族语言 *shǎoshù mínzú yǔyán*, lit. ‘minority ethnic languages’), such as Bai, Yi, and Jingpo, and
2. Chinese/Sinitic languages (汉语方言 *Hànyǔ fāngyán*, lit. ‘Han-speech dialects’), such as Mandarin, Hakka, Min, Cantonese, Xiang, Wu, etc.

Standard Modern Chinese (普通话 *Pǔtōnghuà*, lit. ‘common speech’), the lingua franca in Mainland China, is only one variety of Mandarin, based on Northern Mandarin speech. Scholars outside of China usually use “Mandarin” or “Mandarin Chinese” to refer to it. To avoid ambiguity, these notes use **Putonghua** (= Modern Standard Chinese = a variety of Northern Mandarin) instead of Mandarin.

“The Chinese writing system” is not a homogeneous notion

Most literature assumes that the Chinese writing system refers to Chinese characters (simplified 汉字 or traditional 漢字). How Chinese characters were used historically is another complicated issue, so these notes focus on their contemporary use. Three situations should be kept separate:

1. standardized writing of Putonghua in Chinese characters;
2. informal or locally conventionalized use of Chinese characters to represent other Sinitic varieties; and
3. writing systems for non-Sinitic languages, which may use scripts other than Chinese characters.

Because regional politics deeply shape language policies and practices, Mainland China, Hong Kong/Macao, and Taiwan are discussed separately.

3 MAINLAND CHINA

Scope note. This section draws on the author’s familiarity with Mainland China and on personal observations. Specific claims about policy and educational practice should be checked against current official documents and empirical research.

Minority languages

The government has standard writing systems for some minority languages, and these are not Chinese characters. Original official documents for these writing systems are often not accessible from outside Mainland China.

Other Chinese languages

For Chinese languages such as Hakka, Min, Wu, and Cantonese, the government does not have formal official standards for writing them, but people in different regions may have their own informal ways to write them. The absence of an official standard does not mean that people never write these languages; writing practices vary across communities, genres, platforms, and individual writers.

Hakka. Anyuan Hakka speakers receive no formal education on how to write Hakka. Some bilingual speakers of Anyuan Hakka and Putonghua sometimes type Anyuan Hakka using simplified Chinese characters on social media platforms such as Douyin (Chinese TikTok) or WeChat. This is not standardized and not always intelligible, even to other Anyuan Hakka speakers. For example, they would type 吾戏 to mean ‘(I’m) not going’ for Anyuan Hakka /m̩2.ɕi4/. In Putonghua, the first character reads /u2/, meaning ‘I’ (in Classical Chinese), and the second character 戏 /ɕi4/ means ‘play’. The characters thus represent unrelated meanings in Putonghua and Anyuan Hakka. The principle seems to be to find characters officially used for writing Putonghua that sound similar to the Anyuan Hakka words, regardless of what they mean in Putonghua.

The example illustrates three points:

- A character string can be meaningful to the writer while being difficult for a reader who does not know the local variety.
- The meanings of characters in Putonghua do not necessarily match the meanings of the words they represent in another Sinitic variety.
- Informal character-based writing can depend on local knowledge and individual conventions rather than a shared standard.

Scope note. The transcription and character choices are an illustrative personal example, not a claim about a standardized Anyuan Hakka orthography.

Wu, Min, and Cantonese. Wu speakers from Shanghai-adjacent areas, Min speakers from Hainan Island and Shanghai-adjacent areas, and Cantonese speakers from Guangzhou, all fluent in Putonghua, report that they have no formal writing systems for their varieties. These are informal observations, not a representative survey.

There is, however, literature written in Shanghai Wu, for example the novel *Blossoms* (繁花 *Fánhuā*, 2013) by Jin Yucheng, adapted into the TV series *Blossoms Shanghai* (2023), directed by Wong Kar-wai, with Mandarin and Shanghainese versions. So it is possible to write and read Wu in Chinese characters, though a reader's understanding depends on familiarity with the variety and the text's conventions.

Cantonese speakers also have some informal (though not standardized) references for writing Cantonese, such as character pronunciation dictionaries like 广州话正音字典 *Guǎngzhōuhuà Zhèngyīn Zìdiǎn* (Zhan Bohui, ed., 2002), and many Cantonese songs have lyrics written in Chinese characters.

Summary

People in Mainland China have

1. official standard writing systems for some minority languages;
2. simplified Chinese characters for writing Putonghua; and
3. no official writing systems for other Chinese languages such as Wu or Hakka, though speakers of these languages may use Chinese characters to write their varieties in their own informal ways.

The third category matters most for mutual intelligibility: without shared conventions, character-based writing does not guarantee that readers can identify the language or understand the text.

4 HONG KONG AND MACAO

In Hong Kong, the language policy after 1997 is called 两文三语 *liǎng wén sān yǔ*, lit. ‘two written languages, three spoken languages’, usually translated as “biliteracy and trilingualism”: written Chinese and English, and spoken Cantonese, Putonghua, and English. Written Chinese in Hong Kong uses traditional characters.

Written Cantonese is also widely used in Hong Kong, in lyrics, advertising, and informal digital communication, and its conventions are more visible and socially established than informal writing of local varieties in Mainland China. It is not, however, an officially standardized written form, and not every Cantonese word has one universally used character.

The situation in Macao may share features with Hong Kong, but it should be investigated separately rather than assumed to be identical.

5 TAIWAN

In Taiwan, languages other than Taiwan Mandarin have official status and institutional support for writing. For example, the Hakka Basic Act makes Hakka one of Taiwan's national languages, and the Ministry of Education's *Dictionary of Taiwan Hakka* writes Taiwan Hakka in traditional Chinese characters. Corpus resources such as the

Taiwan Hakka Corpus give writers and readers a more shared basis than is available where conventions are entirely informal.

Indigenous languages in Taiwan also have recognized status, and there are writing systems for a number of them; the Council of Indigenous Peoples' online dictionary covers 16 Indigenous languages. The details differ by language and community.

6 QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q. *Can a Putonghua speaker tell whether someone is writing in Hakka, Min, Xiang, or Wu?*

A. In Mainland China, this question rarely arises, because people basically don't write in Hakka, Min, Xiang, or Wu. When people informally use Chinese characters to write non-Putonghua Chinese varieties, a monolingual Putonghua speaker is unlikely to be able to tell which variety it is. They will know it is not Putonghua and thus must be some Chinese language or dialect, but there is no way to tell which one. Even a bilingual speaker of Putonghua and another Chinese variety finds it difficult. A Hakka speaker can try reading the characters aloud to see whether they sound like Hakka, and so can rule Hakka in or out more confidently than a non-Hakka speaker, but still cannot tell whether a string of characters is written in Min or Cantonese.

In Taiwan, readers who have learned standardized Hakka or Min writing conventions may be better able to recognize texts written according to those conventions, depending on their education and language experience.

Key point: shared characters do not guarantee shared pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, or writing conventions.

Q. *Is the text nonsensical to a Putonghua reader when the writer is a Bai, Yi, or Jingpo speaker?*

A. It depends on the language and script being used, not simply on the writer's identity. Bai, Yi, and Jingpo have their own writing systems, and the official contemporary ones are not Chinese characters, so a reader literate only in Chinese characters cannot read them. But a multilingual Bai, Yi, or Jingpo speaker may also write in Putonghua with Chinese characters. The more precise question is: *which language is being written, in which script, and what literacy does the reader have?*

Q. *Is literacy in Chinese characters taught anywhere in China without Mandarin also being taught?*

A. Not in contemporary mainstream education in Mainland China, because Putonghua is taught everywhere as a matter of national policy. Putonghua and standard (simplified) Chinese characters are required in schools, government, and broadcasting, and are extensively promoted, while the public use of Chinese dialects is limited; see the 2025 draft revision of the Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language. This is a broad characterization: policy documents establish official goals, not what happens in every school or community.

Given the officially recognized multilingualism in Taiwan, there might be places where literacy in Chinese writing is taught for Hakka or Min without Taiwan Mandarin, but this is an empirical question that needs further fact-checking.

Q. *Is there research on writing among people who are not proficient in Mandarin?*

A. A good place to start is research on Hong Kong and Taiwan. In Hong Kong, writing is taught and not everyone is proficient in Mandarin. For example, Yeung et al. (2017) studied writing among Hong Kong schoolchildren: three of the participating schools used Putonghua and one used Cantonese as the language of instruction for Chinese-language lessons, but the majority of the participants spoke Cantonese at home and in their daily lives. This shows

why language of instruction, home language, spoken proficiency, and literacy should be measured separately.

Scope note. Yeung et al. (2017) is an entry point, not a direct study of people with low Mandarin proficiency. Check its research questions, participants, and measures before citing it for that claim.

7 TAKE-HOME POINTS

1. **A shared script is not a shared written language.** Chinese characters can represent different pronunciations, words, and grammatical structures across Sinitic varieties.
2. **Intelligibility depends on conventions and experience.** Readers need knowledge of the language being represented and of the writer's practices, not only of individual characters.
3. **Writing practices are socially and politically situated.** Standardization, schooling, language policy, publishing, and online communication shape which practices are visible and learnable.
4. **Do not infer the language from the writer's identity alone.** Identify the language, script, orthography, and intended audience first.
5. **Literacy is multidimensional.** Knowledge of Chinese characters, proficiency in Putonghua, spoken proficiency in a local language, and literacy in that language are related but distinct abilities.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. What evidence would you need to measure mutual intelligibility between readers with different language backgrounds?
2. How could an experiment distinguish character recognition from knowledge of the language represented?
3. If a writer uses characters mainly for sound, is the result best described as Chinese writing, Hakka writing, or a mixed practice?
4. How might education policy affect which language varieties people learn to write?

8 RESOURCES

Policy

- 国家通用语言文字法（修订草案） *Guójiā Tōngyòng Yǔyán Wénzì Fǎ (Xiūdìng Cǎo'àn)*, draft revision of the Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language (2025), in Chinese:
<https://npcobserver.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Law-on-the-Standard-Spoken-and-Written-Chinese-Language-Draft-Revision.pdf>
- 兩文三語：香港語文教育政策研究 *Biliteracy and trilingualism: A study of Hong Kong's language education policy* (City University of Hong Kong Press, 2020), preview:
https://www.cityu.edu.hk/upress/pub/media//catalog/product/files/9789629375683_preview.pdf
- Hakka Basic Act (Taiwan), English translation:
<https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=D0140005>

Writing Chinese languages in characters

- 中国语言资源保护工程汉语方言用字规范 *Zhōngguó Yǔyán Zīyuán Bǎohù Gōngchéng Hànyǔ Fāngyán Yòngzì Guīfàn* ‘Character standard for Chinese dialects in the Chinese Language Resources Protection Project’ (Ministry of Education and the China Language Resources Protection Research Center, 2017; draft for discussion), covering about 3,500 dialect characters across ten dialect groups: <http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A19/tongzhi/201704/W020170405307025943395.pdf>
- 现代汉语方言大词典 *Xiàndài Hànyǔ Fāngyán Dà Cídiǎn* ‘Great dictionary of modern Chinese dialects’ (Li Rong, chief ed.; Jiangsu Education Publishing House, 1993–), a multi-volume series of local dialect dictionaries: <https://search.worldcat.org/title/54523603>. Digitized volumes are collected at <https://github.com/ZWolken/Great-Dictionary-of-Modern-Chinese-Dialects/tree/main>; check copyright status before redistributing.
- Shi Zhongmou, “Introducing the *Guangzhoubhua Zhengyin Zidian*” (in Chinese): https://home.eduhk.hk/~cmsi/tm_item2_1/item2_3_3.pdf
- *Blossoms Shanghai* (TV series, 2023): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blossoms_Shanghai

Taiwan

- Taiwan Hakka Corpus (Hakka Affairs Council, with National Chengchi University): <https://corpus.hakka.gov.tw/#/>
- Dictionary of Taiwan Hakka (Ministry of Education, Taiwan): <https://hakkadict.moe.edu.tw/introduction/>
- Online Dictionary of Indigenous Languages (Council of Indigenous Peoples, Taiwan; 16 languages): <https://e-dictionary.ilrdrf.org.tw/home>

Minority languages in Mainland China

- 中国少数民族语言系列词典丛书 *Zhōngguó Shǎoshù Mínzú Yǔyán Xiliè Cídiǎn Cóngshū* Series of dictionaries of minority languages in China: <https://search.worldcat.org/search?q=se%3AZhongguo%20shao%20shu%20min%20zu%20yu%20yan%20xi%20lie%20ci%20dian%20cong%20shu>
- 语保工程采录展示平台 *Yǔbǎo Gōngchéng Cǎilù Zhǎnshì Píngtái* ‘Data Collection, Recording, and Display Platform for the Chinese Language Resources Protection Project’ (registration requires a Mainland China phone number; access requirements may change): <https://zhongguoyuyan.cn/index>

Research

- Yeung, P.-S., Ho, C. S.-H., Chan, D. W.-O., & Chung, K. K.-H. 2017. A simple view of writing in Chinese. *Reading Research Quarterly* 52(3): 333–355. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.173>