

MANDARIN

COUNTRY: China

POST: Peking

Chinese is a two-tiered language, consisting of an unspoken literary language that can only be read or written, and a "common" spoken language that can also be written.

Written Chinese was in existence in the 17th century B.C. and contained the same principles of character composition as today. The graphic unity of the language over two millennia has given Chinese perfect comprehensibility, a characteristic unique to that language.

Mandarin has more than 42,000 characters, at least 10,000 of which are listed, classified and explained. The principles for the formation of Chinese characters are the following:

1) "Pictograms" that give the shape of an object or some of its features. For example: 日 the sun; 月 the moon; 人 a man; 木 a tree.

2) "Symbols" or action indicators that show the meaning of an action, movement or gesture. For example: 一 one; 二 two; 上 high; 下 low.

3) The "semantic compounds" derived from a combination of two or more simple characters ("ideograms" or "symbols") creating a new character the meaning of which is a result of the addition or synthesis of these various elements. Ex: 明 sun (window) and moon = clear, clarity, light.

4) The "ideophonograms" or "sound-formers," so called because each character consists of a semantic part and a phonetic part. For example, 洋 ocean is composed of 氵 meaning "key" of the water and 羊, which means "sheep" but which is used here as a phonetic for the pronunciation of the character "ocean".