

As part of its language reform, the People's Republic of China has endeavoured to simplify more than 1,700 characters and has officially adopted a new phonetic alphabet called "Pinyin".

From the beginning of the 20th century, the written language has been geared increasingly to the spoken language. Between 70 and 75% of the Chinese population *per se* speaks Mandarin today, so called because it formerly served as the common language of the Mandarins, for the civil servants of the imperial government who were posted to or who travelled throughout the provinces of the Empire.

In the spoken language, every character or word represents a meaning and a sound that corresponds to a syllable. Every syllable has a tone that phonic composition makes it possible to differentiate between the identical syllables.

Ex.: mā	high-sounding tone	mother
má	tone rises from low to high	hemp
mǎ	low-high tone	horse
mà	low tone	abusive

Chinese has virtually no forms to distinguish between nouns, verbs, genders, number and person as in our European languages. Auxiliary terms are used to express the plural and the auxiliary "liao" meaning "finished, completed" indicates the past. But the general meaning of the sentence must be considered to determine whether it is in the present or future.