

# The Chinese Language: Its Nature and History

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China Institute  
“Teach China”  
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- Outline:
1. Preliminaries
  2. The shape of Chinese words
  3. “Dialect”
  4. Writing
  5. Grammar
  6. How Chinese language is written down
  7. Consequences for civilization

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- the contrast persists in longer words:

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*qīfu* 欺負 ‘to mistreat’  
*qífú* 祈福 ‘to pray for good fortune’  
*qǐfú* 起伏 ‘ups and downs in life’  
*qìfù* 棄婦 ‘abandoned wife’

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<i>yīshī</i>	医师 ‘doctor’	<i>yǐshì</i>	以是 ‘therefore’
<i>yīshí</i>	依实 ‘in accordance with the facts’	<i>yìshì</i>	意识 ‘mentality’
	衣食 ‘clothing and food’	<i>yìshí</i>	一时 ‘a period of time’
			异时 ‘diachronic’
		<i>yìshǐ</i>	驿使 ‘courier’
<i>yíshī</i>	遗失 ‘to lose’	<i>yìshì</i>	异事 ‘a strange matter’
	遗诗 ‘posthumous poetry’		译释 ‘translate and explain’
<i>yìshì</i>	仪式 ‘ceremony, ritual’		逸士 ‘scholar who withdraws from civilization’
	一世 ‘one generation’		

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*jiāncháyuán* 监察员 ‘supervisor’

*jiǎncháyuán* 检查员 ‘inspector’

*jiǎncháyuàn* 检察院 ‘procuratorate’

*qiānzǎi yìshí* 千载一时 ‘once in a thousand years’ (said of  
an opportunity or achievement)

*qiánzài yìshí* 潜在意识 ‘subconscious’

*xiānxī wúyí* 纤悉无遗 ‘to be detailed and without  
omissions’ (of reports)

*xiánxí wǔyì* 娴习武艺 ‘to be skilled at martial arts’

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- practice listening to oneself helps

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## 5. Grammar

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  - ii. parts of speech determined by syntax

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  - no tenses or conjugations
  - no visible distinction between the same word used in different parts of speech

## 5c. Isolating typology

- no “derivational morphology”
- i.e., words do not change form with change in meaning
  - English: book/books; mouse/mice (plural of nouns)
  - English: see/sees/saw/seen (forms of verb)
  - seeing (participle and verbal noun)
  - sight (noun)
- Chinese has:
  - no plurals or declensions
  - no tenses or conjugations
  - no visible distinction between the same word used in different parts of speech
  - parts of speech are determined by syntax

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Its charm comes from *the ‘little-knownness’* of the pattern [= *the fact that* the pattern *is little known*].

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The story of Little Japan being fed to crocodiles has been ‘*little-knownly*’ passed down to the present day [= *without becoming widely known*].

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Yoga-like circumlocution is often needed in English translation.

## 5d. Compositional word-structure

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bull	<i>gōngniú</i> 公牛	‘male’ + <i>niú</i> ‘ox’
cow	<i>mǔniú</i> 母牛	‘female’ + <i>niú</i> ‘ox’
steer	<i>yānniú</i> 阉牛	‘castrated’ + <i>niú</i> ‘ox’
calf	<i>xiǎoniú</i> 小牛	‘young’ + <i>niú</i> ‘ox’
heifer	<i>xiǎomǔniú</i> 小母牛	‘young’ + ‘cow’
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! ?	<i>niú</i> 牛	<b>[general word]</b>

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- technical terminology often easier to figure out in Chinese than in English

## 6. How Chinese Language is Written Down

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- (morpheme: meaningful unit of language, not nec. oral language)

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*dī* in *dǎdī* 打的 ‘to take a taxi’ (from English *taxi*, loaned into

Cantonese as [tɪk˥˩si˥˩]), written 的士, read in northern

Mandarin as *dīshì* (among other things), abbreviated as *dī*)

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*i.* Competition between phonetic loanwords and calques (“loan translations”):

English	phonetic	calque	meaning of calque
vitamin	<i>wéitāmìng</i>	<i>wéishēngsù</i>	‘essential substance for protecting life’
hormone	<i>hé’ěrméng</i>	<i>jīsù</i>	‘essential substance for stimulation’
engine	<i>yǐnqíng</i>	<i>fādòngjī</i>	‘machine for starting activity’
motor	<i>mǎdá</i>		
microphone	<i>màikèfēng</i>	<i>huàtǒng</i>	‘tube for words’
tank	<i>tǎnkèchē</i>	<i>zhuāngjiǎchē</i>	‘vehicle bearing armor’

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  - elaborate civil service examination system, requiring command of texts and handwriting (!)

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  - heavy Chinese borrowing of Japanese coinages after 1890
    - coinages were chiefly translations of Western terms
    - impossible to recognize in Chinese by form or sound

## One page re-cap...

### Consequences for civilization

- (i) continuity of non-phonetic script
  - burden of history?
- (i) expensive to learn
- (ii) unified script => display of political authority
- (iii) vehicle of cultural exchange

End

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