

PVMA Article #8

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Pinyin Pronunciation

Many clients and colleagues ask me how to pronounce the Chinese herbs I prescribe (as do our staff members when fumbling over names like Du Huo Ji Sheng Tang while invoicing clients), so what follows is a discussion of the current system of romanization for Chinese characters – Hanyu Pinyin.

In order for Westerners to pronounce and discuss Chinese characters, a system of romanization is necessary. In this process, the sound of a character is converted into roman letters, to approximate how that character is spoken in Chinese. Mandarin is the dialect chosen as the pronunciation standard. Over the years, several romanization systems have emerged. The most recent system, which was adopted by the United Nations in 1977 and the International Organization for Standardization in 1979, is called pinyin (used in China since 1958). It is important to note, however, that the Wade-Giles system (created in 1859) is still used in a vast number of publications; the Wade-Giles spelling Tao (instead of the pinyin Dào) is one example of this system.

In Mandarin, every word also contains four possible tones, which are approximated using accent marks over certain vowels in the word. (These tones are often omitted, however, in publications and product labels.) Using the vowel “e” as an example:

First Tone ē (flat tone: begins high and is held steady)

Second Tone é (crescendo: begins in the midrange and rises)

Third Tone ě (decrescendo-crescendo: begins lower middle range, drops before rising)

Fourth Tone è (decrescendo: begins high and drops down sharply)

Pinyin pronunciation is taught in terms of initials and finals rather than consonants and vowels. An initial is the first consonant beginning a word. A final is any combination of vowels and consonants in the rest of the word. Several of the English pronunciations are only approximate as there is no real equivalent to the spoken Chinese sound. The pinyin initials and finals are as follows (from the Chinese herbal formulary *Formulas & Strategies* by Dan Bensky and Randall Barolet, Eastland Press Inc. 1990); the underlined letters indicate approximate pronunciation.

Initials (Consonants):

b as in “obstinate”

c as in “its”

ch as in “chair” with the tongue on the palate

d as in English, but not as voiced

f as in English

g as in English, but not as voiced

h between “how” and “chutzpah”

j as in English, but with the tip of the tongue on the lower teeth

k as in English, but more strongly aspirated

l as in English

m as in English

n as in English

p as in English, but more strongly aspirated

q	as in “ <u>ch</u> air”, but with the tip of the tongue on the lower teeth
r	as in “ <u>r</u> apid”, but with the tongue on the palate
s	as in English
sh	as in English, but with the tongue on the palate
t	as in English, but more strongly aspirated
w	as in English, but softer
x	as in “ <u>sh</u> e”, but with the tip of the tongue on the lower teeth
y	as in English, but softer
z	as in “ <u>p</u> ads”
zh	as in “ <u>j</u> ar”, but with the tongue on the palate

Finals (Vowels and Vowel/Consonant combinations):

a	as in “ <u>f</u> ather”
ai	as in “ <u>r</u> ye”
an	as in “ <u>J</u> ohn”
ang	as in the German “ <u>ang</u> st”
ao	as in “ <u>c</u> ow”, but less fused
e	as in “ <u>s</u> of <u>a</u> ”
ei	as in “ <u>b</u> ay”
en	as in “ <u>f</u> un”
eng	as in “ <u>l</u> ung”
er	as in “ <u>f</u> ar”
i	as in “ <u>b</u> e” unless after a c-, ch-, s-, sh-, z-, or zh- when it sounds like “ <u>burr</u> ”
ing	as in “ <u>r</u> ing”
iu	as in “ <u>yo-yo</u> ”
o	as in “ <u>maudlin</u> ” (other sources: begin the sound as “ <u>book</u> ” and end in “ <u>so</u> ”)
ong	as in “ <u>hung</u> ” (other sources: as in “ <u>owe</u> ” with ng added at the end)
ou	as in “ <u>m</u> ow”, but less fused
u	as in “ <u>m</u> oon” unless after a j-, q-, x-, l-, n- when it sounds like “ <u>knew</u> ”
ua	as in “ <u>gu</u> ava”
uai	as in “ <u>qu</u> iet”
uan	as in “ <u>qu</u> antity”
uang	as in “ <u>qu</u> antity”, but with a guttural ending
ui	as in “ <u>qu</u> ay”, but slightly shorter
un	between “ <u>done</u> ” and “ <u>twin</u> ” unless after a j-, q-, x-, y-, l-, n- when it’s like “ <u>june</u> ”
uo	as in “ <u>war</u> ”

Diphthongs that are pronounced as expected from their respective vowels are not listed.

See <http://www.pinyinpractice.com/history.htm> for more information on pinyin. Click the "More" button and select "Speaking Chinese" to practice the sounds (choose Lessons, then Pinyin: The Sounds).

See <http://zhongwen.com/> for information on written Chinese characters, their genealogy, and their meaning. As an example, the characters for pīnyīn suggest *hand together* (put together, spell) + *speak* (sound) = *join together sounds* (phoneticize, spell, transliteration).