

Language

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After the Kuomintang (KMT; Nationalist Party) fled China for Taiwan in the late 1940s, it promoted Mandarin Chinese as the official language for the island. At the time, however, few Taiwanese could speak it. The main languages of Taiwan then were Hokkien, usually referred to as 'Taiwanese' (also called *Minnanhua*, a name that emphasises its roots in southeastern China, where it is also spoken), and Japanese. Hakka, another Chinese language, is also spoken in some areas, and Taiwan's aboriginal tribes have their own languages, which belong to a completely separate language family to Chinese.

Although Taiwanese is often referred to as a 'dialect' of Mandarin, the two are in fact separate languages and are not mutually intelligible. Relatively little has been written in Taiwanese beyond Christian religious material, due in part to the efforts by the authorities during the Japanese colonial era (1895–1945), and later by the KMT, to suppress the language. Despite these years of suppression, the Taiwanese language has endured, and today at least half

the population prefers to speak Taiwanese at home, especially in the south and in rural areas. It's too soon to know whether the government's recent creation of a Hakka-language TV station will succeed in helping revive the use of Hakka.

Travellers to Taiwan can get by without having to even attempt any Taiwanese. Virtually all young and middle-aged people speak Mandarin. Many older people also know Japanese as a result of the 50-year Japanese occupation of Taiwan.

Although Taiwan's students are required to study English, few actually learn to speak it. As a result they tend to read and write English much better than they can speak it so if you need to communicate in English try writing your message down. The reason for this is that students learn English from textbooks, without any opportunity for conversation. Introductory English now begins in junior, rather than secondary school, and classes have begun to focus more on the spoken language. This shift is too recent to have had any noticeable effect on the proliferation of spoken English.

MANDARIN

TONES

Mandarin, Taiwanese and Hakka are all tonal languages – by altering the voice's pitch within a syllable, the meaning of a word is completely changed. Getting your tones wrong can have embarrassing consequences – *wǒ gǎnmào*, for example, means 'I've caught a cold', while *wǒ gān mǎo* means 'I copulate with cats!' Mandarin has four tones, while some of the other Chinese languages have as many as nine. For example *ma*, has a number of meanings in Mandarin depending on which tone is used:

high tone	<i>mā</i>	'mother'
rising tone	<i>má</i>	'hemp' or 'numb'
falling-rising tone	<i>mǎ</i>	'horse'
falling tone	<i>mà</i>	'scold' or 'swear'

There is also a 'neutral' tone, which is usually not indicated by a tone mark.

Mastering tones is tricky for the untrained Western ear, but with discipline it can be done. Try practising the following tongue-twister: *Māma qí mǎ. Mǎ màn. Māma mà mǎ.* (Mother rides a horse. The horse is slow. Mother scolds the horse.)

Don't let yourself be discouraged by the language. Apart from the problem of tones, Mandarin is not especially difficult to master. Most people in Taiwan are very friendly and will praise your linguistic skills if you manage to say even a few words in one of the island's languages.

CHARACTERS

The greatest difficulty associated with the language is its written form: Chinese characters. To borrow from a Chinese proverb, it can take a lifetime and a little bit more to learn how to read and write Chinese. The reason for this is that, unlike most languages, written Chinese does not employ an alphabet. This has led many to the false conclusion that Chinese characters represent a system of 'idea-pictures' or ideograms; in reality, the vast majority of characters consist of a phonetic element and another element called the 'radical', which provides a semantic clue to the meaning.

Some dictionaries list more than 55,000 characters, but many of these entries are no longer used or they are variants. The 2400 most frequently used characters account for 99% of most texts. A further complication in learning to read Chinese is that some 20% of characters have more than one pronunciation.

The sounds represented by Chinese characters are each one syllable long, but few Mandarin words are monosyllabic. As a result, many characters cannot stand alone as words, much as the prefix 'im-' in 'impossible' is a unit of meaning, but not a complete word in itself.

Taiwan doesn't use the system of 'simplified' characters that was progressively introduced in China after the communist takeover. Instead, Taiwan has retained the use of traditional characters, which are also found in Hong Kong and in many Chinese communities abroad.

ROMANISATION

Romanisation is the rendering of non-Roman alphabet languages, such as Arabic,

Mandarin, Thai or Russian, into a form that can be read or spoken by anyone familiar with the Roman alphabet (ie a, b, c etc) and the sounds it represents. Contrary to popular belief, it is entirely possible to Romanise Mandarin, but travellers to Taiwan are unlikely to encounter much Romanisation other than for names of people, places and streets. Unfortunately, Taiwan's approach to Romanisation has been slapdash, resulting in the island's road signs and maps displaying a veritable Babel of Romanisation systems, and even outright misspellings. There are many tales of signs exhibiting a variety of spellings for the same street – even at the same intersection!

Further complicating the matter is the fact that, until recently, Taiwan tended to use the Wade-Giles Romanisation system, which most native English speakers find counterintuitive due to the use of apostrophes to represent phonetically related sounds (such as 'b' and 'p', written in Wade-Giles as *p* and *p'* respectively). This explains why English has the spelling *Taoism* for what would be represented in most other systems as *Daoism*. Although there are sound linguistic reasons for this approach, the problems for the uninitiated are obvious. To make matters worse, the apostrophes are often routinely omitted, making it impossible even for those few who are familiar with the Wade-Giles system to be able to read it reliably. Without the apostrophes, for example, what is written *Kuting* could be pronounced 'Kuting', 'Guting', 'Kuding' or 'Guding'. Although Taiwan officially switched to the less ambiguous MPS2 Romanisation system in 1986, implementation was spotty and halfhearted, resulting in perhaps even more ambiguity and confusion than before.

The good news is that after years of complaints from foreigners Taiwan has finally begun to take steps to correct its use of Romanisation. The bad news is that the new signs tend to be in one of two different Romanisation systems: Hanyu Pinyin, which is used in China (and has become the international standard for Mandarin), and Tongyong Pinyin, a home-grown alternative born in the late 1990s of the desire to help differentiate Taiwan from China. Although advocates of Tongyong Pinyin often claim that the systems are 85% the same, in reality

only about half of place names are spelled the same way in the two systems.

The major differences between the two systems are as follows:

HANYU PINYIN	TONGYONG PINYIN
zh-	jh-
q-	c-
x-	s-
-ü*	-yu
-ui	-uei
-iu	-iou
wen	wun
weng	wong
feng	fong
jióng/qióng/sióng	jiyong/ciyong/siyong
zi/ci/si	zih/cih/sih
zhi/chi/shi/ri	jihh/chih/shih/rih

*ü is written u (ie without the umlaut) when no ambiguity would result. Thus, *ju*, *qu*, *xu*, and *yu* should be pronounced as if they were written *jü*, *qü*, *xü*, and *yü*.

Although the central government has declared Tongyong Pinyin to be Taiwan's official Romanisation system for both Hakka and Mandarin (but not for Taiwanese), it left local governments free to make their own choices. Taipei has selected to use Hanyu Pinyin and has applied the system consistently. In times of budget constraints, however, most local governments have priorities other than putting up new signage for the benefit of foreigners, so progress toward standardisation in any form of Pinyin is slow in most of the country.

Taipei has also introduced a system under which major roads have been assigned numbers. Although this 'nicknaming' system might at first glance seem like a boon to visitors to the city, don't bother asking for directions to '4th Boulevard', because no-one in Taipei knows what streets the numbers are supposed to match. This system is best ignored.

To sum up the situation, signage in Taiwan can be found in MPS2, Wade-Giles (which most people also use inaccurately for spelling their names), Hanyu Pinyin (mainly in Taipei), Tongyong Pinyin (mainly on highway signs and at train stations), plus a range of other possibilities employed with varying degrees of inaccuracy.

Given such a range, what is the poor traveller to do? When something written in

Romanisation doesn't seem to make sense, a few guidelines can help you make an educated guess as to what is actually being referred to. Anything with *x*, *q* or *zh* will be in Hanyu Pinyin. Anything with *jh*, *iou* or *uei* will be in Tongyong Pinyin. Anything with *r* used as a vowel (eg *shr*) will be in MPS2.

If you're going to learn only one Romanisation system, your best bet is to learn Hanyu Pinyin and study a few of the most common differences (such as those listed below) to help you navigate through the other systems you'll likely encounter.

The following Hanyu Pinyin conversion could fairly safely be assumed where different systems are used:

WRITTEN	HANYU PINYIN
c	q
ch	zh/q/j/ch
jh	zh
k	g
p	b
s	x
t	d
ts/tz	z/c
h (at the end of a syllable)	– (no letter)

For example, Chihpen and Chihben are sometimes seen for Zhiben, and Kueishan for Gueishan/Guishan.

More Info on the Internet

For a list of Taiwan's city names, street names, and names of railroad stations in Hanyu Pinyin and traditional spellings, see www.romanization.com.

For loads more information on Chinese characters, Pinyin and Romanisation, including a full comparison of the main Chinese Romanisation systems, check out www.pinyin.info.

If you'd like more information on the ins and outs of Chinese characters there are many suitable books on the subject listed at www.pinyin.info/readings/. 'The Ideographic Myth' at www.pinyin.info/readings/texts/ideographic_myth.html is an extract from *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* by John DeFrancis (University of Hawai'i Press, 1984). DeFrancis gives an interesting and detailed history of the widely-held belief that Chinese characters are ideographic (ie pictorial) in nature.