

People > Essential Mandarin Phrases



A few words can take you a long way.

Just like using chopsticks, you could get through your adoption trip without speaking a word of Chinese. But you'll be missing out on some great experiences, and even just a little interaction can make your journey so much more enjoyable. With just a few phrases and some basic vocabulary, you'll be able to handle yourself in a surprising number of situations, and earn significant goodwill.

A few words about words

There is actually no single spoken language called "Chinese." While the characters are understood everywhere in the country (and even used for a major part of Japanese communication,) there are two major spoken languages used in China - and numerous regional dialects.

- Southeast China, Hong Kong, and emigre Chinatowns the world over have traditionally spoken what you've heard called Cantonese.
- The northern parts of China, as well as Taiwan, use Mandarin.

You don't need to worry about this as a 21st-Century traveler. The central government has put strong emphasis on universal Mandarin instruction, and most TV and radio stations broadcast in that language. Almost everyone you are likely to encounter will know basic Mandarin, even in South China.

More importantly, as your child grows up, the resources she'll have to access her birth culture will be formatted in Mandarin. This tongue has now displaced French as the #2 foreign language option in American schools, and is being supported with an ever-increasing range of instructional products.

Surprisingly fast to pick up, or, "if a billion people can do it, so can you"

- There aren't as many sounds in Mandarin as there are in English
- The subject-verb-object construction is the same as English
- No verb tenses, no word genders (none of the stuff that frustrated you in high school Spanish class)
- No special treatments for social status or foreign words (that you need to worry about, anyway)
- "Tones" look challenging on paper, but actually come to you quickly. As long as you try, you'll be understood
- You don't have to study the written characters to speak the words

Have fun

Knowing even a few words and phrases will help you get much more out of your trip. Smiles from grandparents walking by in the park, a little extra help from a shopkeeper, getting the gist of an overheard conversation at a restaurant, and understanding an ad on TV can all make your experience in China more enjoyable.