

Heritage Voices: Language – Mandarin

About the Mandarin Language



Mandarin was originally the language spoken by Chinese officials, most of whom came from Beijing. The word Mandarin comes, via Portuguese, from the Sanskrit word *mandari* (commander). The Portuguese used the term to refer to both the Chinese people and their language (Omniglot, 2010). Today Mandarin is the official language of government, the media, and education in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan and one of the four official languages of Singapore.

There are approximately 870 million Mandarin speakers (Omniglot, 2010). Mandarin is known as *pǔtōnghuà* (common language) or *běijīnghuà* (Beijing language) in the PRC, *guóyǔ* (national language) in Taiwan, and *huáyǔ* (Chinese language) in Singapore and Malaysia.

Mandarin is within the Mandarin dialect group, one of the seven major dialect groups in the Chinese language family. The northern varieties of Chinese are known as Mandarin dialects. These dialects are spoken by more than two-thirds of the Chinese people. Almost all of the Mandarin dialects are mutually intelligible (Ramsey, 1987).

Written Chinese is based on spoken Mandarin and is known as *hànyǔ* or *zhōngwén*, which is a logographic writing system. In modern Chinese there is an average of eleven strokes per character. The configurations of these strokes are complex (Chen, 1999).

In order to eliminate mass illiteracy, the Chinese government has actively simplified Chinese traditional characters since October 10, 1949. Figure 1 contrasts traditional and simplified characters. Currently, simplified Chinese characters are adopted in the PRC and Singapore, while in Taiwan and Hong Kong traditional characters are used.

Traditional characters	語	見	間	銀	飯	魚	紅
Simplified characters	语	见	间	银	饭	鱼	红
English	Language	See	Middle	Silver	Meal	Fish	Red

Figure 1: Traditional and Simplified Chinese Characters

Mandarin in the United States



In the United States, the use of the term “Chinese” is generally assumed to mean Mandarin, which seems quite natural since Mandarin is the official language of the PRC and Taiwan. The percentage of schools in the U.S. offering Chinese, although still low, increased at both the elementary and secondary levels. In 2008, Chinese was taught at 3% of elementary schools and 4% of secondary schools with language programs (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009).

The survey of Chinese immigrants and international students in the U.S. conducted by Wiley et al. (2008) indicates that among the respondents Mandarin is used often, is highly regarded, and is seen as a resource to be preserved despite high levels of multilingualism and multidialectism. About 99% of respondents from mainland China, 96.1% of respondents from Taiwan, and 65.3% of respondents from Hong Kong report that they speak Mandarin well or very well (Wiley et al., 2008). By the mid-1990s, about eight out of ten pupils in community-based heritage Chinese schools in the U.S. were being taught in Mandarin (Lai, 2004).

Spotlight on Mandarin Speakers in the U.S.



This section describes the experiences of three Mandarin speakers from the same family:

Dr. Shuhan Wang and two of her three children, Alex and Paula.

Shuhan Wang (left) and family: Paula, Jennifer, Ying, and Alex

Shuhan Wang



Dr. Shuhan Wang grew up in a diglossic family environment in Taiwan, where her father spoke Mandarin and her mother spoke primarily Taiwanese, Mandarin, and Japanese with her family and childhood friends. The maid at her home spoke only Taiwanese.

The language of instruction at school at that time was Mandarin. Thus, Shuhan is fluent in Mandarin and Taiwanese, with rudimentary knowledge of Japanese.

Shuhan came to the United States in the 1970s to pursue an advanced degree at an American university. In the early 1980s, she started to get involved in Chinese heritage language schools. She served as a language instructor at a Chinese school at Columbia University for one-and-a-half years. Later she and her husband moved to Delaware, where her children started to go to Chinese school on weekends. She became more involved in one of the local Chinese heritage language schools—Chinese School of Delaware—first as a teacher, then as the dean, and finally as the principal of the school.

Shuhan's experience in Chinese language schools aroused her interest in second, foreign, and heritage language education in the United States. Later she obtained a Ph.D. in Educational Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. Her dissertation focused on intergenerational transmission of language and culture. Shuhan was a certified Chinese teacher and has rich Chinese teaching experiences in K-16 settings. In 1998, she started to work at the State of Delaware Department of Education as a foreign language coordinator/supervisor. In 2006, she became Executive Director of Chinese Language Initiatives at the Asia Society. In 2009, she took the position as Deputy Director with the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) of the University of Maryland, also serving as Co-Principal Investigator for [STARTALK](#), a federally funded project promoting the study and teaching of critical languages.

Shuhan has placed a lot of emphasis on her children's heritage language maintenance. When her children were young, she stayed home for almost ten years to ensure that they would grow up as bilingual and bicultural individuals. She read them Chinese books, exposed them to Chinese culture, observed Chinese customs at home, and sent them to Chinese schools. About her three children, who are now grown, she notes that they are "from one family, with three experiences." Her children's different "rites of passages" illustrate that heritage language and culture maintenance is a complex process, involving both environmental and internal factors that are deeply personal. While she acknowledges that her children's Chinese language proficiency continues to be a work in progress, all of them have developed a strong sense of self-identity and cultural heritage.

Alex Wang



Shuhan's son, Alex, was born in the United States. He learned Mandarin before English because his parents spoke primarily Mandarin at home. It was a big change for Alex when he went to Kindergarten and started to use English more and more. Alex code-switched a lot when talking to his older and younger sisters. For example, he and his sisters often said to each other: "Can you 'pei' (accompany) me to basement?"

Alex was required to go to Chinese school on weekends until 4th grade, when he refused to go. On the mornings of the Chinese school day, he hid, so that his mother could not find him and had to leave for school because she was the principal and had to be there early. Alex recalled that the reason he did not want to go to Chinese school was that he wanted to resemble other kids. It seemed unfair to him that he had to go to Chinese school on weekends, while other kids did not need to. When Alex reached adulthood, he started to think about his heritage and identity and tried to re-identify with his Chinese heritage. He went to Boston College for his undergraduate study, where he found more diversity than in Delaware, and he hung out with many Asian students. He even took one Chinese class. However, he found himself in an awkward situation in the class: His listening and speaking proficiency was much higher than that of most of the other students who had learned Chinese for one semester, but his reading and writing were worse than other students. He did not feel comfortable in the class and did not take another Chinese class in college. Instead, he took French classes, where his level of proficiency resembled that of other students.

Alex went to France to teach English for one year; after he came back, he thought about teaching English in another country. It occurred to him that China might be a good place for him. He chose Shenzhen, a coastal city adjacent to Hong Kong, where he survived on his household Mandarin—he could order food in restaurants and ask for directions; however, he did not have enough vocabulary to talk about politics and other topics. People in China got confused when they found out that Alex could not read Chinese. Alex started to joke around that he was illiterate. After a one-year stay in Shenzhen, Alex said that his Mandarin proficiency was even better than that of his two sisters, who used to speak Mandarin more fluently than he did. Alex has noticed a language and cultural shift in his family. When he was young, his parents primarily ate Chinese food and spoke Mandarin at home; now they eat both Chinese and Western food and speak a mixture of Mandarin and English.

Alex described his relationship with Mandarin as follows:

"Mandarin played a central role in my development and early life. It reminds me of home, and it's always comforting when I'm walking down the street or in restaurants and I hear people speaking it...my ears prick up, and it's a fun little exercise to try and guess where they're from. These days I use it less, for obvious reasons (living in the states, going to grad school, etc.), but it comes in handy every now and then. My Mandarin is not advanced enough for me to claim fluency (and thus open doors for jobs, opportunities, etc.), and I'm illiterate in it. English is the language I operate in on a daily basis. In graduate school, I'm forced to learn a new "language" (in the context of art), which I'm currently grappling with, so returning to Mandarin hasn't been at the top of my priorities just yet. Hopefully I will have the opportunity to revisit Mandarin in the future, as I feel it would certainly be a very enriching endeavor."

Paula Wang



Shuhan's youngest daughter, Paula, has code-switched between Mandarin and English since she was old enough to talk, because her parents spoke Chinese at home and she responded in English or a mixture of English and Chinese. When she was very little, she would even confuse some Chinese words with English. According to Paula, she was an obedient child and went to Chinese school as her parents requested.

When asked whether she wanted to go, she replied that, of course, a child would rather play outside on a Sunday than go to Chinese school. But reflecting on her experience, she is happy she was forced to go. Paula believes that her Chinese school's curriculum would benefit from improvement; however, she did enjoy the Chinese culture classes such as martial arts, cooking, and ribbon dance that were implemented while her mom was the principal. She was even head of the dragon one year during a Chinese New Year celebration. Ultimately, Paula believes that speaking Mandarin at home was the most helpful way to improve her proficiency. However, when they were little, her siblings and she avoided speaking Mandarin at home. She remembers that when she was young and her family went on trips, her mother required them to keep quiet unless they used Mandarin. Most of the time, they would just keep quiet.

Paula has been to Taiwan several times and China once recently. She recalls that when she was in China, it was difficult to speak Chinese regularly during the first week. She would occasionally forget words or not know how to translate words during conversations. Her looks also confused people. She has darker skin, so some Chinese people asked her whether she was Chinese or not. Paula then had to tell them that she was American-born Chinese. After the first week, she noticed that her Mandarin was improving, and it was easier to converse with people. She even translated for the group of people with her when they watched a tea-pouring show.

Paula regards being bilingual in Mandarin and English as very important to her. It is not only a good skill to have but also helps with her identity formation. In college, although she majored in Physics, she earned a minor in Chinese and Asian Studies. She expresses her interest in taking more Chinese courses in her spare time so she can improve her speaking, listening, writing, and reading ability. Now when she picks up the phone to talk to her parents, she begins with "wei" instead of "hello."

About the Author: Dr. Na Liu



Dr. Na Liu received her Ph.D. in language education and language policy from Arizona State University in May 2010. Her research interests include Chinese heritage language education, minority education, education in English as a second language, and language policy. Na was once a language teacher in Chinese heritage language schools, and she currently works at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC.

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The Heritage Voice (Mandarin) Profile was prepared by Dr. Na Liu for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC.

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