

Approximate Mandarin Pronunciation Guide

We are hesitant to present a Mandarin Pronunciation Guide because it cannot be accurate. All it can do is approximate sounds. Furthermore, if you have gone through many such Pronunciation Guides (in other books) you may have noted that they oftentimes represent the same sound in different ways. For example, one book may represent the correct pronunciation for “wo” (I, me) as “wah” while a second book states it as “wa” and a third book as “wor”. Different Mandarin speakers sometimes pronounce the same sounds and syllables differently. Additionally, with books that are not accompanied with audio, the reader is oftentimes left to wonder how to correctly pronounce even the Pronunciation Guide! We firmly believe that languages cannot be effectively taught just by a book! Nor can they be effectively taught just by audio cassettes or CDs! Languages, and especially Chinese and Asian languages, must be a combination of both visual and audio, and even the Pronunciation Guide to be correctly understood must utilize this combination.

We have provided this Pronunciation Guide for “diehard” students who believe they need it (that a language book is not complete without one). Yet we believe the Sounds & Tones Pronunciation Guide (which follows this), you will find much more beneficial!

Initials:

b	“burr”	
c	“sir”	NOTE: This is probably the hardest sound in Mandarin Chinese!
d	“dumb”	
f	“fun”	
g	“go”	
h	“how”	
j	“jeep”	. . . but with the tongue forward.
k	“curve”	
l	“learn”	
m	“ma ma”	
n	“nerve”	
p	“purr”	
q	“cheep”	. . . but with the tongue forward.
r	“earth”	NOTE: Curl your tongue somewhat. The “r” sounds a little like an “l”.
s	“soup”	
t	“ten”	
w	“wood”	

x	“sheep”	... but with the tongue forward.
y	“even”	
z	“weeds”	NOTE: Another hard sound to pronounce!

Finals:

a	“father”	
ai	“eye”	NOTE: Think of the spelling “ai” as a long “I”.
an	“yawn”	
ang	“song”	NOTE: Think of the spelling “ang” as “ong”.
ao	“how”	
e	“burr”	NOTE: There is a slight hint of an “r” sound following the “e” which combines to form an “er” sound.
e	“fur”	NOTE: After the spellings “i” and “y” “e” takes on “yeh” sound.
ei	“ate”	NOTE: Think of the spelling “ei” as a long “a”.
en	“pen”	
eng	“sung”	NOTE: Think of the spelling “eng” as “ung”.
er	“mermaid”	NOTE: The tongue is curled a bit.
i	“bee”	NOTE: Used after “b”, “d”, “j”, “l”, “m”, “n”, “p”, “q”, “t”, and “x”.
zi	NO English equivalent!	NOTE: You might liken the next three sounds to the sound a fly or a bee makes as it buzzes past you! With the Chinese syllable “zi” you quickly pronounce the “z” sound and then drag a “ds” or a “dz” sound after it.
ci	NO English equivalent!	
si	NO English equivalent!	

(PLACEMENT NOTE: The following three sounds, “zh” “ch” “sh” are not really “finals” but “initials.” However we placed them here because our Beijing lady instructed us that this is the way they do it in China.)

zh “germ”

NOTE: Roll your tongue against the front roof of your mouth as you pronounce a “j” sound.

ch “cherry”

NOTE: You should roll your tongue against the front roof of your mouth as you say it.

sh “shirt”

NOTE: Roll your tongue against the front roof of your mouth as you say it.

ia “yawn”

ian “yen”

NOTE: Think of the spelling “ian” as the spelling for Japanese money: **yen**”.

iang “yong”

iao “yow”

ie “yet”

in “pin”

ing “sing”

iong “yoong”

iu “yo-yo”

o “wah”

ong “kong”

ou “oh”

u “too”

ǔ “ewe”

NOTE: After “j”, “q”, “x”, and “y”.

ua “watch”

uai “why”

NOTE: Think of the spelling “uai” as “**why**”.

uan “wander”

uang “wong”

ue “you-eh”

ui “wee”

un “womb”

uo “wah”