

Origins and History of the Chinese Language

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(A concise, structured overview for quick study)

1. Overview

Aspect	Key Points
Language family	Sino-Tibetan (branch: Sinitic)
Earliest attestations	Oracle-bone inscriptions (~1250 BC)
Modern status	Over 1.3 billion speakers; official language of the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Singapore (Standard Mandarin)
Dialects vs. languages	"Dialect" in Chinese usage often refers to mutually unintelligible varieties (e.g., Mandarin, Wu, Cantonese). Linguists treat many as separate languages within the Sinitic branch.

2. Chronological Stages

Period	Name (Chinese)	Main Characteristics	Representative Texts / Artifacts
Pre-historical	Proto-Sinitic	Reconstructed ancestor; no direct records. Phonological and lexical roots inferred from later stages.	Comparative reconstructions; loanwords in early Tibeto-Burman.
Oracle-bone (???)	Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BC)	First known Chinese writing; mainly divination records. Logographic characters already recognizable.	Bones & shells with inscriptions from Anyang.
Bronze (??)	Western Zhou ? Spring and Autumn (c. 1046–771 BC)	Inscriptions on ritual bronzes; more complex syntax, early use of particles.	"Zhou Ritual Vessels" (????) inscriptions.

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Seal Script (??)	Qin unification (221–206?BC)	Standardized script imposed by Qin Shi Huang; characters more regularized but still pictographic.	“Stone stele of the First Emperor.”
Clerical Script (??)	Han dynasty (206? BC–220?AD)	More rectilinear, easier to write; spread literacy beyond elite.	“Han bamboo slips” (????).
Regular Script (??)	Six Dynasties onward (220?AD–)	Standard form for modern writing; basis of all contemporary printed typefaces.	Calligraphic works of Wang Xizhi (???).
Classical Chinese (???)	Pre?modern (until early 20th?c.)	Concise, literary style; grammar differs from spoken language; used for official documents, poetry, philosophy.	“Analects” (????), “Dao De Jing” (?????).
Vernacular / Early Mandarin	Tang–Song (7th–13th?c.)	Emergence of spoken forms reflected in poetry (e.g., Tang poems) and later in drama.	“Dream of the Red Chamber” (?????) drafts show early vernacular.
Modern Standard Mandarin (???)	20th?c. to present	Based on the Beijing dialect; phonology standardized; simplified characters introduced (1950s).	“People’s Daily” (?????), modern textbooks.

3. Major Linguistic Developments

Development	Description	Approx. Time	Impact
Phonological change	Loss of many final consonants, tone development, merger of initial clusters.	From Old Chinese (c.?	