

Language and culture guide

Chinese

Language experts agree that language learning is most effective when language and culture are linked. *The Polyglots* apps aim to spark children's interest in language and culture through play. This guide provides some general information about China and Chinese culture and language that may be of interest to you and may extend children's learning.

About China

More people live in China than in any other country in the world – about 1.48 billion (in comparison, about 28 million people live in Australia). The country is also geographically big – it borders 14 other countries.

Early childhood education in China

Increasing access to early childhood education has been a priority of the Chinese government in recent years. In 2025, 92 per cent of children attended early childhood education.¹

Language

There are many Chinese dialects, which are often mutually unintelligible. However, all are united by a common writing system. That means that even if speakers cannot understand each other, they can understand each other's writing.

Mandarin is the official language in both China and Singapore. It is also the world's most widely spoken language – the first or additional language of more than 1.1 billion people. It is a tonal language with four main tones: a level tone; a rising tone (such as English speakers use when asking a question); a falling and rising tone; and a falling tone.

Simplified Chinese characters and Pinyin

In the 1950s, written Chinese characters were simplified. The support materials for the Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) program use the simplified system. The support materials also use Pinyin (<https://chinese.yabla.com/chinese-pinyin-chart.php>), the official phonetic system for representing Mandarin with a Roman alphabet. For correct pronunciation, listen carefully to the words as they are spoken in the app or in the sound library in the app toolkit on the ELLA website.

Culture

China was unified by the first Chinese emperor in 221 BCE, and it has a long and rich cultural history that has influenced many of its neighbours. In the 1960s, great cultural changes swept across the country as the Cultural Revolution challenged 'old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas'. In recent decades, China has become the manufacturing centre of the world, with the world's fastest growing economy.

Did you know?

Mandarin is the most commonly spoken language in Australia after English.

Politeness and customs

- You can beckon someone by holding your palm down and making a scratching motion with your fingers.
- Only close friends and relatives ask 'Ni hao ma?' (How are you?) When greeting acquaintances, you could say 'Ni hao' (Hello).
- You can point by using your whole hand. (It is rude to point with your index finger.)
- Take off your shoes when going into someone's house.
- When giving a gift, you hand it to the other person with both hands. The person receiving the gift will accept it with both hands.

Culture in *The Polyglots* apps

As children play with the apps, they can discover fun and intriguing Chinese cultural references such as a panda, a dragon and a peony flower. You can learn more about the cultural references in the app toolkit.

¹ 'Overview of the education system', <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=CHN&treshold=5&topic=EO>

Interesting topics

Animals

The animals of China include:

- Asian elephants
- horses
- leopard cats (small wild cats with leopard markings)
- pandas
- pangolins (an unusual mammal with large scales and a long tail)
- raccoon dogs (an animal with a raccoon-like appearance from the same family as dogs and wolves)
- tigers.

Arts

- Painting: traditionally, an 'inkstick' is used rather than paint. It is rubbed onto a surface and mixed with water to create ink.
- Calligraphy: there is a long tradition of writing beautifully using an ink and-wash technique.
- Lanterns: paper or silk lanterns are used as decoration, especially to celebrate Chinese New Year.
- Paper cutting: this craft is made by folding and cutting paper. When unfolded, the paper forms intricate patterns and pictures.

Food

There are many regional cuisines in China. The Chinese food that we see in Australia is often Cantonese food from the Guǎngdōng region (for example, yum cha). Rice and noodles are particularly popular in the south. Steamed breads are popular in the north. Tea (including green, jasmine and chrysanthemum tea) is very popular throughout China. Some people carry a small thermos with them so that they can drink tea wherever they are.

Chinese foods include:

- yum cha: small dishes such as jiǎozi (dumplings) and bāo (buns), eaten with tea. Yum cha means 'drink tea' in Cantonese. This Cantonese term is used because yum cha is a Cantonese cuisine.
- hot, peppery dishes from the Sìchuān area.
- congee (rice porridge), sometimes served with pork and pídàn (century egg – egg that has been preserved and that has a green yolk).
- Peking duck from Beijing (slices of crispy-skinned duck wrapped in a pancake).

Games

Traditional games include:

- cat and mouse: children hold hands to make a circle. One child (the cat) stands outside the circle and another (the mouse) stands inside. The mouse weaves in and out of the circle, and the cat must follow their path and catch them.
- dragon's tail: this game needs a big group of children (at least 10). The children stand in a line to form a 'dragon', each with their hands on the shoulders of the child in front of them. To play the game, the child who is the dragon's 'head' has to try to touch the dragon's 'tail' (the last child in the chain). The other children in the chain try to stop them without breaking the chain. When the tail is caught, that child goes to the front of the line to become the head, and the game starts again.



Interesting topics

Places

- Chengdu Panda Base: a sanctuary for pandas where people can see baby pandas being raised.
- The Forbidden City: located in Beijing, this was once the imperial palace. It was named the 'Forbidden City' because no-one could enter the palace without the emperor's permission.
- The Great Wall of China: a collection of long walls that stretch across China.
- The Yangtze River: the longest river in Asia.

Seasons

- China is very large, and so the cold climate of the far north is very different to the tropical climate of the far south. Most of China experiences four seasons. Chinese people celebrate the different seasons with festivals such as the Spring and Mid-Autumn festivals. In Australia, the Spring festival is also known as Chinese New Year.

Traditions

- These are just a small selection of China's many rich traditions:
- Chinese New Year (or the Spring Festival) is the most important festival in China. Most people take holidays at this time of the year to visit family and friends.
 - The dragon dance is performed by groups of people who hold poles to control a long dragon puppet made with silk and wood. It is often seen alongside lion dances (performed by people with lion puppets) during Chinese New Year.
 - Red envelopes containing money are often given as gifts at Chinese New Year and other special occasions, such as birthdays. The colour red is considered to be lucky.
 - During the Dragon Boat Festival, people race each other in boats shaped like dragons.

Note: This document contains content that has been gathered through independent research and consultation with subject matter experts. The figures and information included in this document should be reviewed for accuracy over time.



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