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1.8 The Chinese language

The written form of Chinese does not use an alphabet; instead, it uses **characters**. We often say that written Chinese is **ideographic**, but it is important not to misunderstand what that means.

Written Chinese is **ideographic** ≠ Chinese characters stand for **ideas**.

Rather, written Chinese is ideographic in that Chinese characters are used as a shared form of written communication among all the Chinese people, despite their speaking different languages and despite these characters being *pronounced* differently in these different languages. The Chinese written form had a powerful **unifying** effect on Chinese history and culture.

Here we can see that the **sizes** of Europe and China are almost the same. They have almost equally many different spoken **languages**.

What we call the **dialects** of Chinese are as different as the **different languages of Europe**. (We call Romanian and Portugese different languages, despite their similarities and common influences.) In China, however, unlike in Europe, the words, though not the grammar, of these different spoken languages had (and still have) **a single written form**. The characters serve a **medium of communication** when the spoken languages are not mutually understood, i.e., they can serve as a **translation medium** for all the Chinese languages.

<u>Here's an example in modern Chinese</u>:

Suppose two Chinese speakers each want to say that he or she likes to eat dumplings.

The **Cantonese** speaker would say: *Ngo zhong yi sik gao ji.*
The **Mandarin** speaker would say: *Wǒ xǐhuān chī jiǎozi.*

They mightn't be able to understand each other's **spoken utterance** but both would recognize the following characters as expressing the intent of their spoken words in **written form.**

我	喜歡	吃	餃子
I	**like**	**eat**	**dumpling**

Chinese grammar relies on word order, not inflection: neither for tense, for number, for gender, or for case, and so on. This can be seen in the above sentence. (No plural for the word “dumpling”, no subject-verb agreement required, etc.)

The Chinese spoken languages have grammatical differences amongst themselves, but the classical written form had an even more sparse, distinctive grammar of its own.

For example, in **Cantonese & Mandarin** most words are bisyllabic.

生活	快樂	兇手
life	**happy**	**murderer**

In **Classical Chinese** most words were monosyllabic.

仁	心	天
benevolence	**heart**	**sky**

Classical Chinese may never have even been a spoken language and perhaps was instead simply an invented **medium for sharing a vague, formal content structure—rather like logical formulae**.