

## MANDARIN, PUTONGHUA AND CHINESE DIALECTS

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### Abstract

Despite the growth in popularity of Chinese medicine over recent decades, the westward transmission of Chinese medical knowledge continues to be hampered by a number of problems, including a low level of linguistic access to primary Chinese sources, a low level of translation, and a lack of a standardized English terminology.

**Keyword:** Medical concepts, tou (t'ou) (頭), lin ba (l'in b'a) (淋巴), ideograms, nong siong (n'ong xi'ong) (膿胸), fu shui (f'u shu'i) (腹水), nei (nèi) (內) and vey (wèi) (外), Chinese medical concepts, English and Chinese terminology and standardization.

### Introduction

In the Chinese word “Putonghua”, “Putong” means “common” or “general”, while “Hua” refers to the spoken language, speech or simply “tongue”. So Putonghua is taken as the generally adopted spoken Chinese language used across geographical and ethnic boundaries, as well as the common language spoken or understood among Chinese emigrants abroad. However, it neither necessarily substitutes for the various ethnic languages of the nation nor for the various dialects of the Chinese Han people which are used in different areas across the country. The classification of the Chinese dialects spoken across the vast land of the country is actually a very complicated matter that remains controversial even today, with different periods in history having different standards and actual results of classification. However, the most influential two models that are generally accepted at the present time are respectively the “seven categories classification” and the “ten categories classification”. The former includes 1) Guanhua (also called the Northern Dialect), 2) Wuyu, 3) Ganyu, 4) Xiangyu, 5)

Minyu, 6) Kejiahua, and 7) Yueyu. The latter model adds three dialects to the former, namely, 8) Jinyu, 9) Huiyu, and 10) Pinghua.

The following diagram may largely represent the general situation of the Chinese language or languages.

### **1. Guanhua (Mandarin)**

Guanhua is unique in that its status as a dialect is not so much based on its geographically determined features as on sociological ones. In fact, the word originally means “official tongue”, and thus refers to the standard language used in the officialdom of civil service. Therefore, with the transfer of the political and cultural center of the country time and again in history, it has also undergone changes from one dialect to another. For instance, the official language named Guanhua of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) was the Nanjing dialect, but in the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911), it gradually adopted the Beijing dialect as its basis, which has kept its status as such to the present day, serving as the foundation of Standard Mandarin (Putonghua). Although Guanhua has also been called “the Northern Dialect”, it is actually used in a much more extensive area of the country, not really limited to the northern part in geographical terms. Areas using Guanhua also include the southwest, the south central region and the central part of the country, actually covering the whole or some parts of provinces such as Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, Anhui, and Jiangsu. As for the sub-classifications of Guanhua, there used to be four major categories (before 1987), named after their geographical situation: the northern, northwestern, southwestern, and the Jianghuai (the Yangtze, Changjiang and Huai River reaches). Then the Maps of Chinese Languages, published in 1987 in the mainland, re-classified Guanhua into eight categories according to finer regional differences and distinctive features in pronunciation, which include the varieties of Guanhua in 1) Beijing (i.e. Putonghua or Standard Mandarin), 2) the Northeast, 3) Liaojiao (Liaoning and Eastern Shandong), 4) Jilu (Hebei and Western Shandong), 5) Zhongyuan (the Middle Plain), 6) Lanyin (Lanzhou and Yinchuan Area), 7) Jianghuai, and 8) the Southwest. At present, this classification has been adopted in most academic publications in China’s mainland. The regional varieties of Guanhua (Mandarin) have evolved through a long course of interaction between the official language and different dialects. Although various Guanhua forms may share common grammatical structures and a larger part of

the vocabulary, and thus stand very close in condition to the official written language, they nevertheless have many minor differences in speech, most strikingly in the tones. In all varieties of Chinese, Guanhua (Mandarin) is by far the most widely spread, used by the most people—nearly one billion—which accounts for well over 70% of the Chinese population. The varied influences of regional dialects taken by the official Guanhua in different areas have certainly brought the distinctive features of its subcategories. However, these features are not so striking as to make understanding between them impossible. This is why it actually stands out as an independent category against all other distinctively different major dialects.

The following table gives a general description of the other major dialects of the Chinese language.

Wu 吴语 7379 Dialects Users (ten thousand): Areas south of Jiangsu, south of Anhui, Shanghai, most parts of Zhejiang, etc.

Min 闽语 7500 Fujian, Hainan, east of Guangdong, Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore, etc.

Kejia 客家话

4200 North and east of Guangdong, west of Fujian, south of Jiangxi, southeast of Guangxi, etc.

Yue 粤语 5882 With Guangzhou as the center, used in larger parts of Guangdong and Guangxi, Hong Kong, Macau and overseas Chinese towns.

Jin 晋语 6305 Most parts of Shanxi and northern part of Shaanxi, western part of Hebei, northwest of Henan, and southern part of Inner Mongolia, etc.

Gan 赣语 4800 Most parts of Jiangxi, southeastern part of Hunan.

Xiang 湘語

3637 Most parts of Hunan

Hui 徽语 330 Southern part of Anhui, and bordering area between Jiangxi, Zhejiang and Jiangsu.

Ping 平话 778 Parts of Jiangxi

**Special Notes:** 1) Both “语 yu” and “话 hua” mean the spoken language, but the former is more formal. 2) The above names are all given after the formal short appellations of the central areas, with Kejia as an exception. 3) Yue Dialect and Kejia Dialect are more commonly known in English as Cantonese and Hakka.

## 2. Major Chinese Dialects: Their Users and Areas

In fact, the Chinese people hold a view quite unlike that of the Europeans as regards the relation between the language of a nation and its dialects. For one thing, a dialect in a European country will be taken as a language variety with certain regional features in pronunciation and some vocabulary items, different from those in another variety of the same language, but not so different as to make understanding impossible. However, when the Chinese people use the same word, “dialect”, it often means that the language variety is hard for people outside the dialect area to understand. Actually, some linguists even believe that Chinese dialects differ from one another as greatly as completely different languages in the Indo-European language family (such as English and German). Therefore, it remains a very controversial issue even today as to whether the Chinese language should be regarded as a language family or just one language with regional dialects.

However, the grounds for the majority of Chinese linguists to regard all major Chinese dialects as one language instead of a language family are solid enough. That is, the different varieties of spoken Chinese all share the same unified writing system, no matter how little intelligibility there is between them when actually spoken. And it is indeed sometimes seen that people of different Chinese dialect zones do communicate with the aid of writing if one or both sides cannot speak or understand the Standard Mandarin.

The central Chinese government’s language policy is to promote the use of Standard Mandarin (Putonghua) while advocating the equal rights of ethnic languages and protecting regional dialects. As a result, a great many of the population in Chinese dialect regions are actually bilingual or even multi-lingual, using both Putonghua and at least one dialect. In many regions, local radio and TV stations usually run some programs in both Putonghua and the regional dialects, so as to cater to different needs. Most Chinese people who live in big cities use a dialect in the family or the neighborhood, but shift to Putonghua when at work, in school or in other public situations. Regrettably, there is not yet a report to date on the percentage of people making such regular “code shifts” in the population. There is quite a large proportion of people, however, who can understand Putonghua broadcast on radio and TV stations, but they don’t actually speak it themselves. In Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and Singapore, most people who have received tertiary education can actually use or understand

three languages: the local Chinese dialect, English and Putonghua.

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