

Chinese and Mandarin

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- ★ To understand the term *Chinese*
- ★ To understand the difference between Mandarin and Chinese dialects

1.1 What is Chinese?

When beginning your study of Chinese, this is probably the first question you have as you may have heard different terms describing the language, such as *Chinese*, *Mandarin*, or perhaps even *Cantonese*. These terms carry different meanings, as explained below:

- **Chinese** has two different meanings. It can be used to refer to a group of different languages, which are often called the *Chinese dialects* (see the section below); or it can refer to the *standard language* in China. The latter meaning of *Chinese*, which is also called *Mandarin (Chinese)*, is used in this book.
- **Mandarin** is also known as the following:
 - 普通话/普通話¹ Pǔtōnghuà (*lit.* common language) or 汉语/漢語 Hànyǔ (*lit.* Han nationality language) on mainland China
 - 国语/國語 Guóyǔ (*lit.* country language) in Taiwan
 - 华语/華語 Huáyǔ (Chinese language) mainly in east Asian countries
 - 中文 Zhōngwén (Chinese language) throughout the world
 - *Chinese* in this book
 - **Cantonese** is one of the Chinese dialects.

1.2 Do Chinese people speak Chinese?

If the term *Chinese* means Mandarin, as is adopted in this book, then about one-third of Chinese people do not speak Chinese; instead, they speak Chinese dialects. There are seven major dialects within the Chinese language family:

- i. Northern dialect (北方方言 or 官话方言/官話方言 běifāng fāngyán/guānhuà fāngyán)

¹ Simplified characters are placed before the traditional characters throughout the book.

- ii. Cantonese (粵語/粵語 Yuèyǔ)
- iii. Wu (吳語/吳語 Wúyǔ)
- iv. Xiang (湘語/湘語 Xiāngyǔ)
- v. Gan (贛語/贛語 Gànyǔ)
- vi. Min (閩語/閩語 Mínyǔ)
- vii. Hakka (客家語/客家語 Kèjiāyǔ)

The variation between these dialects causes them to be mutually incomprehensible. As such, Mandarin, which is based on the *Northern dialect*, has become increasingly popular in modern China. Nearly all Chinese people who speak different dialects can also understand Mandarin, and some are even able to speak Mandarin with a dialectal accent. This may be because all of the dialects have similar grammatical structures and they all share the same writing system, with logographic forms called *characters*.

1.3 Summary

In this chapter, we have clarified the term **Chinese**, which can refer to either Mandarin or all Chinese dialects, of which there are seven major ones: Northern dialect, Cantonese, Wu, Xiang, Gan, Min, and Hakka. Since the variation of dialects can be problematic for comprehension in oral communication, Mandarin (*Chinese* in this book), which is based on the Northern dialect, has become the most commonly used in China.