

Chinese Join the Global Travel Market: *Do You Know How to Talk to Them?*

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According to the US Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, about three quarters of a million of Chinese-speaking tourists (724,266 to be exact) visited the US in 2005. This ranks them as No. 7 following tourists from Canada, Mexico, UK, Japan, Germany, and France. The growth rate, however, is another story. Compared to 2004, the number of visitors who came from mainland China grew by a whopping 33%, with France being a distant second in this group at 13%, and the remaining five countries in single digits. According to the World Tourism Organization, there will be 100 million Chinese travelers roaming the world in 2020, making China the No. 1 supplier of outbound tourists.

It stands to reason that marketing research companies active in travel and hospitality industries can expect a growing number of Chinese participants in surveys. In order to communicate with the Chinese panel effectively, marketing research companies need to do their homework on a number of cultural and language issues. Cultural differences between Chinese and Americans are fairly well documented and the information is readily available; language issues, however, are more difficult to sort out. In this column, we'll shed some light on the complexities of the Chinese language.

Spoken Chinese

About one-fifth of the world's population speaks some form of Chinese as their native language. Chinese is spoken in People's Republic of China (Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau), Republic of China (Taiwan and nearby islands), Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma and Cambodia, also parts of Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Philippines and other Chinese communities around the world. Chinese can be subdivided into "dialect groups." The main groups, in order of population size, are:

- Mandarin with about 800 million speakers. Mandarin is spoken across most of northern and southwestern China. Standard Mandarin, a member of the Mandarin dialect group which is the standardized spoken variant of Chinese based on the dialect of Beijing, functions as the official spoken language of the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), and one of the official spoken languages of Singapore.

It is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations, and it is the language you need to use if conducting surveys in mainland China and/or Taiwan.

- Wu with about 90 million speakers. It is spoken in most of Zhejiang province, the municipality of Shanghai, southern Jiangsu province, as well as smaller parts of Anhui, Jiangxi, and Fujian provinces. Wu is typically not used in international communication such as marketing research surveys.

- Cantonese with about 80 million speakers. It is mainly spoken in parts of southern mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, by Chinese minorities in Southeast Asia and by many overseas Chinese of Guangdong and Hong Kong origin worldwide.


The name is derived from Canton, a former romanized Western name for Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province. This is the language you need to use if conducting surveys in Hong Kong or in addressing the Chinese population in certain areas of the United States.

- Min with about 50 million speakers. It is spoken in the southeastern Chinese province of Fujian. Unless you receive a specific request to use Min as the language of choice, steer clear of it.
- Xiang with about 35 million speakers. It is spoken primarily in Hunan province, and also in parts of Sichuan, Guangxi and Guangdong provinces. Like Min, Xiang is not likely to be used in your surveys.
- Hakka with about 35 million speakers. It is spoken predominantly in southern China by the Hakka ethnic group and descendants in diaspora throughout the world. This dialect is not mutually intelligible with most of the spoken variants of the Chinese language, and therefore you will use it only if addressing the Hakka people.
- Gan with about 20 million speakers. It is spoken in Jiangxi province and is not a likely candidate for your surveys.

The dialect groups described above do not have clear-cut boundaries, and neither is there a clear consensus on their classification. Some are mutually unintelligible, which is an important consideration, as they often use the same script and are undistinguishable in written form. Unless you receive a very specific request for a very specific ethnic group, you would be well advised to poll your panel in Standard Mandarin. The two exceptions are Hong Kong and the US. For the former you need to use Cantonese, and for the latter you need to do your homework and find out whether your target audience speaks predominantly Mandarin or Cantonese; in some instances you might have to do two versions to accommodate both groups.

Written Chinese

The writing systems in China date back more than 4,000 years, and the relationship between spoken and written language is therefore quite complex. This complexity is compounded by the fact that the numerous variations of spoken Chinese have gone through centuries of evolution, while written Chinese has remained largely unchanged. This is good news and bad news at the same time. The good news is that today there are basically two scripts to be used across most of the dialects; the bad news is that it works only in written form, such as online or printed surveys, but for phone or face-to-face interviews much care has to be taken to select the right person to do the job.

Today, two standards exist for printed Chinese characters. One is the Traditional Chinese script used in Taiwan,  Cantonese and use the Simplified Chinese script, developed by the People's Republic of China government in the 1950's. As was mentioned above, most dialects of Chinese are identical in their written form, but can be mutually unintelligible when spoken due to the tonal structure of Chinese language.

(Continued on next page)

CHINESE JOIN THE GLOBAL TRAVEL MARKET...

(Cont'd. from page 27)

To make things more interesting, either script can be applied to any of the dialects. Thus, for example, even though people in Beijing and in Taiwan speak essentially the same language - Standard Mandarin - in Beijing the language is written in Simplified Chinese, whereas in Taiwan it is written in Traditional Chinese. The table below will help you sort this out for the main geographical areas in which surveys are typically conducted:

Geographical Area	Spoken Language	Script
Mainland China	Standard Mandarin	Simplified Chinese
Taiwan	Standard Mandarin	Traditional Chinese
Hong Kong	Cantonese	Traditional Chinese
United States	Cantonese and Mandarin	Traditional and Simplified

In New York's Chinatown, the bulk of the population spoke Cantonese and Toisanese until 1960's, but today the mix is as varied as in any other urban Chinatown in the US, thanks to the influx of immigrants from mainland China, particularly the Fuzhou province. The Fuzhou dialect (also transliterated as Foochow) is mutually unintelligible with other Chinese dialects and is a possible candidate for face-to-face or phone surveys conducted in particular areas of New York city and other places with significant population of Fuzhou immigrants. Tacoma, WA, is a sister city of Fuzhou, the provincial capital, and it can be expected that the number of Fuzhou speakers will increase in the Northwest as well.

Transliteration Issues

Most people know that the names Peking and Beijing refer to one and the same city. Not many people know that it is a result of two different transliteration – or romanization – systems widely used throughout the world.

The two systems are called Wade-Giles and Pinyin respectively. Peking is the romanized version of the Chinese capital's name using the former system, Beijing using the latter. While other systems exist as well, the Pinyin system, introduced in late 1950's, is the one you want to use. It has been the standard for the United States government for more than two decades, and it is also the standard used by the United Nations and most of the world's media. In 1979, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) adopted Pinyin as the standard romanization system for modern Chinese (ISO-7098:1991), and the Pinyin system has become a useful tool for entering Chinese text into computers.

In some instances, marketing researchers also want to transliterate English names into Chinese. For example, some American cities and brand names have their Chinese form that has been widely accepted.

The tricky part is that each Chinese character used for transliteration of English words carries a meaning. Consider the case of Coca-Cola: When Coke entered the Chinese market some eight decades ago, the company needed to find a Chinese equivalent for the brand name. Sounds simple enough, but when Chinese characters were applied to produce the sounds “co-ca-co-la,” the results were quite unexpected. Among the possible interpretations were “female horse fastened with wax,” “wax-flattened mare,” and “bite the wax tadpole.”

As was mentioned above, most Chinese immigrants in the US speak Cantonese, but of course there is a great number of Mandarin speakers as well as speakers of other Chinese dialects. Different regions of the US have different mix of Chinese immigrants.



For example, in the Northwest, Cantonese is spoken together with Mandarin and Toisanese; in California, large population of Cantonese speakers live in San Francisco, but going further south you will encounter more Mandarin and Taiwanese speakers, particularly in the Orange County and San Diego.

In order to produce a more favorable image, the company finally settled on the following Chinese characters:



This set of characters literally translates as “to allow the mouth to be able to rejoice” which has a lot more positive connotation and is relevant to the product, and Coca-Cola registered it as its Chinese trademark in 1928.

When in Rome...

The travel industry is live and well in China, too, and expectations are high, as you can surmise from the accompanying picture taken by the author of this column during his recent trip to Shanghai. Whether you are touring the country or polling its inhabitants, heed the culture and the language! □

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