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Language Group Specific Fact Sheet **Mandarin Chinese Speakers**

History. Mandarin is the official spoken language of China. Mandarin is also known as Modern Standard Chinese. It is one of over 100 dialects spoken in China and is used by over 720,000,000 people in that country and 885,000,000 people worldwide. Most Chinese can speak, read, and write in Mandarin even if it is not their native dialect. Mandarin dates back to the Han dynasty of 206 B.C. – 220 A.D.

Writing System. Mandarin or Chinese writing uses characters of several types, including pictographs, ideographs, compound ideographs, loan characters, and phonetic compounds (UCLA, n.d.). As many as 50,000 characters exist in the language, and 8,000 are used in contemporary speech. Basic literacy requires the knowledge of approximately 1,500 to 2,000 characters. Mandarin also has a romanized system called pinyin to help aid learning and pronunciation. The use of characters as the written language (as opposed to letters) can make the acquisition of written English quite difficult (Mandarin...(n.d.). The non-alphabetic system can cause “great difficulty in learning English spelling patterns” (Swan and Smith, 1987) such as problems arising from the inconsistent rules of spelling, problems coming out of incorrect pronunciation, from the failure to apply standard spelling conventions, or omission of syllables.

Chinese learners of English may also experience problems with the “visual decoding” of words that are suddenly spread out over many letters as opposed to contained in a single character or ideogram that may be decoded more holistically. “Chinese learners therefore tend to initially have slow reading speeds in English relative to their overall level of proficiency” (Swan and Smith, 1987).

Phonological Structures

***Vowels.** Mandarin uses fewer vowel contrasts than English, therefore English vowel sounds are closer together in terms of articulation. Chinese learners of English need to work especially hard to articulate these differences. “Chinese diphthongs are usually pronounced with quicker and smaller tongue and lip movements than their English counterparts. Learners therefore make these sounds too short, with not enough distinction between the two component vowels” (Swan and Smith, 1987). Some examples of difficulty with vowel distinction include confusing words like eat and it, bean and bin, fool and full, Luke and look, cap and cup, shot and short or shout.

***Consonants.** There are many differences in pronunciation between English and Chinese consonants. For example /b/, /d/, and /g/ are voiced in English, but not Chinese, /v/ is absent in Chinese, as is /n/ and /z/. /l/ and /r/ can be hard to distinguish and has led to mockery about mispronunciations. Mandarin learners of English may face many difficulties learning spoken English.

***Consonant Clusters.** More than one consonant sound placed together is rare in Mandarin and may lead to difficulty in pronouncing words with multiple consonants placed together, like “spoon” and “crisps”.

***Rhythm and Stress.** Reduced syllables do not occur as often in Chinese as they do in English, however, they receive far more stress. This may lead to Chinese speakers either placing too much stress on words like of, the, and and or leaving them out entirely if they find them too difficult to pronounce in a reduced manner.

***Juncture.** Mandarin uses primarily monosyllables. This may lead to a disjointed pronunciation of multi-syllabic English words and sentences and the “staccato effect of a Chinese accent” (Swan and Smith, 1987).

***Intonation/Tones.** Mandarin Chinese is a tonal language consisting of four basic tones (high level, high rising, dipping/falling, high falling). This means that the same written

word or character may have up to four meanings depending upon the tone used when speaking that word. For example, the word “ma” can mean mother, horse, scold, flax, or curse (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2002). Since “stress, intonation and juncture are all areas of difficulty... Chinese speakers find English hard to pronounce and have trouble understanding the spoken language” (Swan and Smith, 1987).

Cognates. Mandarin Chinese and English do not share cognates. “Chinese and English belong to two different language families (Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European), and gave many structural differences” (Swan and Smith, 1987).

Morphology. Mandarin is a relatively simple and uncomplicated language (although of course exceptions exist). Words usually consist of one or two morphemes and for the most part the language is devoid of inflection. Instead of using prefixes and suffixes, Chinese uses word order, particles and prepositions to indicate grammatical relationships.

Syntax/Grammar. Chinese syntax is relatively simple, but very different from English “Notions like subject, direct and indirect object play no role significant role” (UCLA, n.d.) and parts of speech in Chinese are not always distinguished. Verb forms are changed not by using different forms, but rather by using adverbials, word order and context. Time is expressed very differently than it is in English. Verbs are not conjugated to reflect time and this can cause great difficulty for learners of English. In Chinese, some English modals have direct equivalents in English, but places where they do not exist can be very problematic. Articles do not exist in Chinese and are often left out when learning English and there is no gender distinction in pronouns like he, she and it that exist in English. Plurality is not used in Chinese so “s” is often dropped when learning English. Word order is different in Chinese and English (for example it is the same in both questions and statements) and inverted word order is a common difficulty for Mandarin speakers learning English (Swan and Smith, 1987).

Socio-linguistic Issues. There are many differences in communication styles and social etiquette between Chinese speakers and English speakers. The chart below, from Wu

Man Fat's article *Problems Face By Chinese Learners*, summarizes the contrast in communication styles between Asian and Western cultures:

Asian	Western
Indirect	Direct
Implicit, non-verbal	Explicit, verbal
Formal	Informal
Goal oriented	Spontaneous
Emotionally controlled	Emotionally expressive
Self-effacing, modest	Self-promoting, egocentric

Chinese speakers may tend to smile more often or more easily than English speakers, but rather than expressing joy, it may be a sign of embarrassment. Similarly, Chinese speakers may avoid eye-contact, a sign of disinterest or even disrespect to Westerners, when in fact averting their eyes is a sign of respect. Many Asians also have a smaller sense of personal space than Westerners, and this could lead to awkwardness between speakers of the two languages. Chinese are often more indirect in their communication style, leading to the mistaken impression that they are being evasive. Chinese and Western gestures may differ as well. In general, Chinese speakers use much less physical gesturing than Western speakers. Chinese point using an open hand and call to others by waving all of their fingers with their palm facing down. Spitting in public is considered socially acceptable, however, physical contact between strangers should be avoided if possible (Culturegrams, n.d.).

Philosophical differences can also play out in the communication styles of Mandarin speakers and be misunderstood by English speakers. Chinese speakers may use the word “yes” to show understanding but not agreement. Time and the idea of progress are seen differently and may be misinterpreted as a disinterest or lack of focus.

Greetings in China often involve a nod or a bow or a handshake in a more formal setting. Formal introductions are used in Chinese society, with full titles showing a person's status or profession. “old” or “young” may also be used in place of titles as a form of respect. Formal rules of communication may be based on the status that exists between the two participants of a conversation.

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