



White Paper

Localizing into Chinese: the two most common questions answered

Different writing systems, a variety of languages and dialects, political and cultural sensitivities and, of course, the ever-evolving nature of language itself.

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It's no wonder that localizing in Chinese can seem complicated to the uninitiated. For a start, there is no single "Chinese" language to localize into.

Most Westerners referring to the Chinese language probably mean Mandarin; but you should definitely not assume this as the de facto language for all audiences both within and outside mainland China.

To clear up any confusion, we talked to our regional language experts to find out the most definitive and useful answers to two of the most commonly asked questions when localizing into Chinese.

1. What's the difference between Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese?
2. Does localizing into "Chinese" mean localizing into Mandarin, Cantonese or both?

Actually, these are really pertinent questions because they get to the heart of some of the linguistic, political and cultural complexities that need to be taken into account when localizing for this region.

Because of the important nature of these issues, we've gone a little more in depth than some of the articles on related themes elsewhere on the internet.

We think you'll find the answers a useful starting point for any considerations about localizing for the Chinese-language market. And, taking in linguistic nuances and cultural history, we hope you'll find them an interesting read too.

Question 1: What's the difference between Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese?

When you start talking about localizing for the Chinese-language market, you'll very quickly encounter the terms Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese.

What exactly are Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese?

If you haven't encountered the terms before, it would be easy to think that Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese refer to different Chinese languages or dialects.

However, this isn't the case. In fact, Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese are both writing systems, sometimes referred to as scripts.

These are the only two writing systems used to write a variety of different languages/dialects used in China (including Mandarin and Cantonese). So, for example, you could use either Simplified Chinese or Traditional Chinese to express the same word in Mandarin, but they may look very different.

So what are the differences between these two writing systems?

As its name suggests, Simplified Chinese is an easier way of writing the Chinese alphabet than Traditional Chinese. (We'll look at exactly why there are two writing systems a bit later.)

English	Traditional Chinese	Simplified Chinese
country	國	国
gift	禮	礼
love	愛	爱
floor	樓	楼
write	寫	写
turtle	龜	龟
listening	聽	听
speaking	說	说
reading	讀	读
writing	寫	写

If you look at the table above, you'll see how these common words are written in Mandarin in Traditional Chinese and in Simplified Chinese, and how much simpler they are in the latter.

The variations between Traditional Chinese and Simplified Chinese vary from character to character and from word to word, but some of the main areas of difference can be summarized as follows.

1. Fewer strokes

As you can see from the examples above, there are usually fewer strokes (lines) to write the words in Simplified Chinese compared to Traditional Chinese, which makes it easier to write and read.

2. Fewer characters

In Simplified Chinese there are many fewer characters than in Traditional Chinese. In Simplified Chinese, for example, the same character may be used to represent the same phonetic version of a word which has several meanings. In Traditional Chinese, in contrast, each meaning has its own character.

In total, Simplified Chinese has around 8,000 characters compared to around 50,000 which exist in Traditional Chinese (of which usually around only 20,000 are listed in a modern Traditional Chinese dictionary).

Why are there two systems for writing Chinese?

In the 1950s, the People's Republic of China decided to try to tackle the low level of literacy among its largely rural population by introducing a new system which would be easier to read and write. Devised by academics and linguists, the new writing system – known as Simplified Chinese – was first introduced in 1956 with a second round of revisions added in 1965.

So, if I'm localizing text for China or Chinese languages, how do I know when to use Simplified Chinese or Traditional Chinese?

As a general rule, Simplified Chinese is used in mainland China, Malaysia and Singapore, while Traditional Chinese is used in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau.

However, it should also be remembered that while the writing systems of Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese remain consistent across different markets, the choice of words and the way they are pronounced even within the same language (such as Mandarin) can vary dramatically from region to region.

We'll look at this issue more in *Question 2: Does localizing into Chinese mean localizing into Mandarin, Cantonese or both?*

Are there any other written ways of expressing Chinese languages that I need to be aware of?

Yes. Although Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese are the writing systems you'll see across all media (such as books, subtitles, adverts, magazines, etc.), when speakers of Chinese languages use keyboards to input text into phones, tablets and computers, they usually use one of a variety of phonetic transcription systems to write the language. These phonetic systems are also used in schools to teach students how to read and write either Traditional or Simplified Chinese.

In mainland China and in other regions, the [pinyin](#) system uses the Roman alphabet to phonetically express words in Mandarin so they can be typed directly on a standard Roman-alphabet keyboard.

In Taiwan, another system known as [Bopomofo](#) is used to express Taiwanese Mandarin phonetically on keyboards and other devices. There are a number of other systems used in Taiwan as well, such as the [Cangjie input method](#).

Phonetic transcription systems such as pinyin and Bopomofo are particularly important to consider for developers of hardware or apps that might involve keyboard entry of Mandarin or other Chinese languages.

Question 2: Does localizing into "Chinese" mean localizing into Mandarin, Cantonese or both?

Mandarin and Cantonese are both Chinese languages that are most widely used within the Chinese mainland and outside it. So which you use depends on which audiences you want to target. In fact, there are around 300 living languages in China spread across 56 ethnic groups. Thankfully, no one is suggesting you localize into all of them.

So, to understand what your options are, we've taken a closer look at Mandarin, Cantonese and some other Chinese languages.

What is Mandarin?

Mandarin is the most widely spoken language in mainland China and is what most people refer to when talking about the “Chinese” language. It is, for example, the Chinese language that is used at the United Nations.

It’s the main official language in mainland China and Taiwan, which means that other regions that don’t speak Mandarin as their first language are taught and expected to understand it.

However, it’s referred to in different ways by different regional groups who speak it.

- In mainland China, it is referred to as Putōnghuà (普通话/普通話) which literally means “common speech”).
- In Taiwan, it is referred to as Guóyǔ (國語/國語), which literally means “national language”.
- Across parts of southeast Asia, it is referred to as Huáyǔ (華語/華語), which literally means “Hua (Chinese) language”.

It’s important to be aware that there are political and cultural sensitivities around these different terms for Mandarin. A person from Taiwan, for example, may not appreciate being described as speaking Putōnghuà (the term used for Mandarin in mainland China).

To English-speaking audiences, Mandarin is also referred to as Standard Chinese, Modern Standard Mandarin, Standard Mandarin and Mandarin Chinese.

It is estimated that it is spoken as the native language by about 900 million people, some 70% of the Chinese population. It is the main language spoken in Beijing, Shanghai and Taiwan, and is also used in Singapore (among other languages). Many other Chinese in regions which don’t use it as a first language speak and understand it as a second language.

As with any language spoken by such a large and diverse number of speakers, it’s crucial to understand that there are many ways in which its use varies across different regions in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax and style.

To use a simple example, the Mandarin word for “wife” (媳妇 as written in Simplified Chinese) means “daughter-in-law” in Taiwan (媳婦 as written in Traditional Chinese). From marketing campaigns to family gatherings, it’s definitely a term you’d want to avoid any confusion around.

Which, of course, brings us to the point that, when localizing into Mandarin, it’s important to use experts who understand all the complexities of the language in the different markets you are targeting.

What is Cantonese?

Cantonese (known as Yue) is the main language in Hong Kong, Macau and the Guangdong province (including its capital Guangzhou, the third-largest city in China, formerly known as Canton). It is spoken by 60 million people in the country according to the state-run [China Daily](#); it is also spoken by a large number of Chinese communities in Singapore, Malaysia and in Western cities such as London and San Francisco (although Mandarin is also spoken in these communities).

Cantonese is most commonly written using the Traditional Chinese writing system (discussed above). People who speak Mandarin and Cantonese can often understand written texts in both languages, but they are not mutually intelligible to each other when conversing because of differences in pronunciation and grammar.

What are the other Chinese languages?

As mentioned earlier, there are around 300 minority languages in use across China, a number which reflects the size, diversity and history of this vast country.

The largest of these – sometimes referred to as dialects and sometimes as languages – are as follows:

- **Gan:** spoken in Western parts of China, including the Jiangxi province
- **Hakka:** spoken by people across different regions including Jiangzi, Guizhou, Guangdong, Hong Kong and Taiwan
- **Min:** used by speakers in the Fujian province
- **Wu:** spoken in Shanghai and around the Yangtze river delta area
- **Xiang:** used in the Hunan province

So how do I localize for the Chinese market with these languages?

As can be inferred from the above, a “one-size-fits-all approach” is not always the best approach for localizing for the Chinese market. To reach the largest audience for the smallest budget, localizing into Mandarin using Simplified Chinese script is the most obvious option. But, as we have mentioned before, there are important regional differences to take into account. In Taiwan, for example, audiences use many different terms and expressions, and expect Mandarin to be written in Traditional Chinese script. If brands want to connect with consumers in Hong Kong and Guangdong province, however, localizing into Cantonese using Traditional Chinese script is the most audience-focused approach.

And in Hong Kong specifically, professional localizers will often advise on using a wide variety of English terms that are in common usage within this former British colony.

The best advice? Talk to a professional localization service with experience in this diverse market about your specific needs and objectives.

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