3 Initial consonants

Many pinyin letters are pronounced 'like English': the 'el' of lǎo, for example, is very like English 'l', and pinyin f, s, n and m all have more or less the same values in Chinese and English scripts. Unfortunately, such cases are liable to make you think of English even where the pinyin letters have rather *different* values from those of English. Below is a table of symbols that represent all the possible initial consonants of Mandarin. Following Chinese custom, they are presented with a particular set of vowels, and ordered from front of the mouth (labials) to back (velars, and glottals).

3.1 The consonant chart

Two notes: First of all, letters w and y, which do appear initially in pinyin (eg in the numbers wǔ 'five' and yī 'one'), are treated as special cases of 'u' and 'i', respectively, in initial position; thus, instead of 'ī', one finds yī, instead of 'ǔ', wǔ, instead of 'iě', yě, instead of 'uǒ', wǒ, etc. Second, the vowels conventionally placed with the different classes of initials to make them pronounceable turn out to be some of those that have quite idiosyncratic values for speakers of English. Thus 'o' in the first line of the table below is not pronounced 'oh', but 'waw'; 'e' in the second line is 'uh'; 'i' in the third and fourth lines is swallowed up by the initial, but in the fifth line, it represents the more expected 'ee'. The vowel sounds will be discussed in §4 below, but for now, you can use the hints provided on the right hand side of the chart, and imitate your teacher or some other speaker of Chinese:

like				I	II	III	IV	*V-sound*
	1	lips		bo	po	mo	fo	('waw')
	2	tongue tip at teeth	^	de	te	ne	le	('uh')
dzz/tsz/sz	3	flat tongue at teeth	_	**zi**	**ci**	**si**		(not 'ee')
jr/chr/shr	4	tongue tip raised	!	**zhi**	**chi**	**shi**	**ri**	(not 'ee')
'yie[ld]'	5	spread lips	<>	ji	qi	xi		('ee')
	6	back of tongue high	~	ge	ke	he		('uh')

3.2 Notes

Columns I and II

In English, the distinction between sounds such as 'b' and 'p' or 'd' and 't' is usually said to be one of voicing (vocal chord vibration): with 'b' and 'd', voicing begins relatively earlier than with 'p' and 't'. However, in Chinese, the onset of voicing of the row I consonants is different from that of English. The that the sound of pinyin 'b' is actually between English 'b' and 'p', that of pinyin 'd', between English 'd' and 't', etc. That is why the Wade-Giles system of romanization (mentioned in the introduction) writes 'p/p'' rather than 'b' and 'p' (T'aipei rather than Taibei); in phonetic terms, both are voiceless, but the first is unaspirated, the second aspirated. Being aware of this will help you to adjust to what you hear; and remembering to articulate the column I initials 'lightly' should keep you from sounding too foreign.

Row 1

These consonants are 'labials' – all involve the lips. Pinyin writes the sound 'waw' (cf. English 'paw') with just an o only after the labials; otherwise it writes it uo. Thus bo, po,

mo, fo rhyme with duo, tuo, nuo, luo (the latter set not shown in the table above). In other words, o by itself always equals uo (and never ou). Apparently, the creators of pinyin felt that after the labial initials it was unnecessary to indicate the labial onset with 'u'. It will be important to keep the sound of o / uo separate from that of ou, which rhymes with both syllables of English 'oh no'.

Rows 3, 4 and 5 – the crucial rows!

With z, c, and s in row 3, the tongue is flat and touching the back of the teeth at the gum line. The letter i following row 3 initials is *not* pronounced 'ee'; it simply represents a continuation of the voicing of the consonantal sound. So for zi, ci, si, think 'dzz', 'tsz', 'ssz' (as indicated on the left of the chart). English does not have consonants comparable to the first two row-3 initials, z and c, except at the end of words and across root boundaries: *pa**ds**; ca**ts***. In German and Russian, though, similar sounds do occur at the beginning of words, eg German *zehn [dz-]* 'ten', or Russian *cená [ts-]* 'price'. [The last, also written with a c, suggests the source of the pinyin convention.]

With zh, ch, sh and r in row-4, the tip of the tongue is raised towards the roof of the mouth (on or near the rough area behind the teeth known as the alveolar ridge) in what is called a retroflex position. As with the row-3 initials, the letter i in this position represents only a persistence of the consonantal sound. So for zhi, chi, shi and ri, think 'zhr', 'chr', 'shr', and 'rr'. In English, an 'r' following a consonant will often produce the retroflex articulation of the tongue that is characteristic of the row-4 consonants; so another way to get your tongue in the correct position for those initials is to make reference to English, and match zh to the 'dr' of 'drill', ch to the 'tr' of 'trill', sh to the 'shr' of 'shrill' and r to the 'r' of 'rill'.

Finally, with j, q, and x of row-5, the tongue is positioned like the 'yie' in English 'yield'; and this time, the letter i is pronounced ee, so for ji, qi, xi think 'jyee', 'chyee', 'syee'. Later, you will see that row-5 initials are only followed by the written vowels i and u. The first will always be pronounced 'ee' in this context, the second, always 'ü'.

The initial-r of row-4

R-sounds vary considerably among languages: the Scots trill their tongue tips; the Parisians flutter their uvulas; Spanish flap their tongues; and Barbara Walters (a TV news broadcaster and interviewer) has an r that sounds like a cross been 'r'and 'w'. The Chinese r is different again; it has a little bit of a buzz to it. Like zh, ch, and sh, it is retroflex (with tongue tip up) so it resembles the initial sound of English 'rill' or 'ridge'; but it also has friction like the 's' in 'pleasure' (or French *je* 'I'). You will observe considerable variation in the quality of Chinese r, depending on the following vowel and on the particular speaker. Examples: rén, rè, rù, ràng, ruò, ròu, rì.

Exercise 3.
a) Try pronouncing the following syllables, randomly selected from rows 3, 4 and 5 initials, on level (ie 1st) tone:

qi	si	zhi	zi	ji	qi	si	ri	chi
xi	shi	ci	zhi	qi	si	chi	ji	xi

b) Now try pronouncing these Chinese names:

Cí Xì	Qí Báishí	Lǐ Shízhēn	Qízhōu
(last empress)	(famous calligrapher)	(16th C herbalist, from *Qizhou*)	

3.3 An expanded chart of initials

The conventional chart of initial consonants exhibits a rather restricted and idiosyncratic set of rhymes. We can make the initial consonant chart a little more comprehensive by adding one or two lines to each row, as follows:

	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)
(1)	bo	po	mo	fo
	ban	pan	man	fan
(2)	de	te	ne	le
	duo	tuo	nuo	luo
	dai	tai	nai	lai
(3)	zi	ci	si	
	zao	cao	sao	
(4)	zhi	chi	shi	ri
	zhuo	chuo	shuo	ruo
	zhou	chou	shou	rou
(5)	ji	qi	xi	
	ju	qu	xu	
	jian	qian	xian	
(6)	ge	ke	he	
	gan	kan	han	