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CANTONESE

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The Cantonese Language

Although Mandarin Chinese is the state language of China, used by the government and in the schools, there is no one “Chinese” language. Due to the size of China and the ethnic diversity of its population, hundreds of dialects are spoken in different areas. These are the languages used for day-to-day communication between friends, family, and neighbors.

Of these, Cantonese is one of the most widely-spoken, both in China and in Chinese communities around the world. Cantonese is a member of the *Yue* group of dialects of the Sino-Tibetan language family originating in southern China. It was first spoken in the province of Guangdong, northwest of Vietnam, along the coastline of the Yellow Sea. The city of Guangzhou, capital of Guang-dong, called “Canton” by the British, is historically the home of Cantonese.

The island territory of Hong Kong, a British colony until 1997, lies just offshore, not far from Guangzhou. It is, therefore, not surprising that even in the commercial center that is modern Hong Kong, the Chinese spoken by the overwhelming majority is Cantonese, called *Guongdung wa*, or “dialect of Guangdong.” Due to Hong Kong’s

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The Cantonese Language (*continued*)

importance as a financial and commercial center, Cantonese has gained importance as a language of trade, although most business on the island is conducted in English.

Cantonese is also the dialect spoken by the majority of Chinese expatriates, especially in such places as Vietnam, Singapore, and Macao, as well as in the United States.

The proximity of the cities of Guangzhou and Hong Kong has meant that the Cantonese language spoken in each is basically the same in structure. The ethnic Chinese population in Hong Kong originates mostly from the neighboring Guangdong province, and so it is not surprising that the dialect used in Hong Kong has its roots in Guangzhou Cantonese.

The Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong and Guangzhou are mutually understandable, although small differences do exist. Due to differing history and influence, there are now some minor differences between the Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong and Guangzhou Cantonese. There are some, although not many, differences in pronunciation. The term “yesterday,” for example, is pronounced *kem yed* in Hong Kong, beginning with a “k(uh)” sound.

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The Cantonese Language (*continued*)

However, a speaker from Guangzhou is more likely to say *cem yed*. For the most part, differences in pronunciation are minor, and speakers from the two areas have no difficulty understanding each other. It is the Hong Kong dialect which is taught and practiced in this course.

The main difference between the two dialects of Cantonese lies in the languages which have influenced each dialect. The Cantonese spoken in Guangzhou has been more directly affected by the Mandarin Chinese taught in schools and used by the government. The cosmopolitan nature of the city of Hong Kong — a British colony for nearly one hundred years — has had a significant effect on the Cantonese spoken in that city. Hong Kong Cantonese has borrowed many words from other languages, but the loan-words are primarily from English.

The Chinese government has historically discouraged the use of Cantonese (as it has other dialects of Chinese), requiring that schools teach only Mandarin Chinese, the official state language, which is used in Beijing, the Chinese capital. However, even in mainland China some 70 million speakers use Cantonese at home and among friends

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The Cantonese Language (*continued*)

and neighbors. Overseas, there are several million more speakers of Cantonese.

The English name, “Cantonese,” comes from “Canton,” the old Western name used to refer to both the province of Guangdong and its capital city, Guangzhou. In Cantonese, however, the language is known as *Guongdung wa*, or “Guangdong dialect.” Some speakers may also refer to it as *Guongzeo wa*, but this is less common in the modern era, especially in Hong Kong.

These names use the word *wa* or “dialect.” Despite the many differences in vocabulary and grammatical structure, Cantonese speakers see their language as a part of the Chinese family of languages. This is in contrast to the name of the English language: *Yingmen*, or “language of England,” with the *men* ending meaning “language.”

However, to refer to Mandarin Chinese, the word used for “language” is *yü*. In Cantonese, Mandarin Chinese is known as *guog yü* — “national language.” The difference between the two words for “language” used to say “English” and “Mandarin Chinese” is that the *men* ending is used to refer to spoken AND written language,

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The Cantonese Language (*continued*)

while *yü* only refers to a spoken language. This reflects the fact that Mandarin was originally no more than one of many spoken Chinese languages and dialects. However, as it is the only Chinese language which can be entirely represented using the standard characters, and as it's spoken in Beijing, the Chinese capital, it was recognized as the official language in the 1950s.

Cantonese, on the other hand, is different enough from Mandarin that not all Cantonese words and particles can be represented using the standard characters. Several “Cantonese” characters are sometimes added to fill this need, but for the most part, Cantonese does not appear as a separate written language. A simplified Cantonese is sometimes represented in characters, but usually only in comic strips or on some storefront signs.

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Tonality

Chinese is a “tonal” language. This means that in addition to the sounds of the consonants and vowels, the tone with which a syllable is pronounced helps to determine its meaning. The various Chinese dialects are almost exclusively made up of one-syllable words, composed of an initial consonant sound followed by the syllable’s main vowel, sometimes in combination with another consonant or vowel. Longer words do exist, but almost all are compound words, formed by combining one-syllable words.

Because there are a limited number of possible combinations within a single syllable, in order to express a greater variety of meaning, Cantonese also takes into account the tone with which a syllable is pronounced. The tone is determined by the pronunciation of the syllable’s main vowel.

Each tone has a name which describes the starting point — “high,” “mid-level,” and “low” — and the falling, rising, or level motion. In this way, several meanings can be assigned to any one syllable, depending on the tone with which it is pronounced. For example, when pronounced using a high level tone, the word *xig* means “can,” in the sense of “am able to, know how to.” However, when this word is pronounced with a low level tone, it means “to eat.”

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Tonality (*continued*)

Linguists disagree on the number of tones used in speaking Cantonese. Some count nine tones, based on length, six of regular length and three for so-called “short syllables.” Some count seven tones, adding a disputed “high falling” tone. But there is general agreement on the basic six tones: high level, mid-rising, mid-level, mid-falling, low rising, and low level. This course introduces these six tones, which are as follows:

1st tone: (high level)

xi (poem)

2nd tone: (mid-rising)

xi (history)

3rd tone: (mid-level)

xi (attempt)

4th tone: (mid-falling)

xi (matter)

5th tone: (low rising)

xi (market)

6th tone: (low level)

xi (time)

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Traditional Language Beliefs

Just as the number thirteen is traditionally regarded as unlucky in the West, the Cantonese number four, *séi*, is seen as ominous, because it is very similar to the word for “death.” The only difference in this case is that “four” is pronounced with a mid-level tone. The word, pronounced with a mid-rising tone, means “death.”

Conversely, the number eight, *bad*, is regarded as lucky, since it sounds very much like the word meaning “to prosper” — *fat*. Other numbers considered lucky are the “mathematical” form of “two,” *yi*, as this is the same as the word meaning “easy.” Here the only difference is in context, as both are pronounced using a mid-level tone. Similarly “three,” *sam*, is another number thought to bring good luck, as it sounds like the word meaning “to produce” or “to be alive” — *sang*. You’ve heard this word in the title, *xinsang*. This literally means, “earlier produced” or “first born,” reflecting the Cantonese respect for age.

The number nine, *geo*, carries a positive meaning, as this word sounds exactly like the Cantonese word meaning, “long-lasting.” These two words are represented in writing by two

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Traditional Language Beliefs (*continued*)

different characters, but when spoken the distinction is made only through context.

The number nine is used in the city name “Kowloon” — *geo lung*, or literally, “nine dragons.” In China, the dragon is a symbol of royalty and good fortune. This number is also traditionally used when setting a woman’s dowry. In contemporary China, this price is largely symbolic, and therefore the amount chosen is significant not for its size, but for the numbers used to describe it. For that reason, the price will be set, for example, at “ninety-nine dollars” rather than “one hundred,” as the repetition of this number is thought to ensure longevity in the marriage.

That’s when *geo* is spoken with a mid-rising tone. Spoken with a mid-level tone, *geo* means “rescue” in Cantonese. When reporting a fire, accident, or other emergency in Hong Kong, a person would dial “nine — nine — nine.”

These associations are also considered relevant when the numbers appear in combination. For example, when the numbers “two” and “eight” are pronounced in that order, *yi bad*, they can have the meaning “prosper easily.” Similarly, when “two” is

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Traditional Language Beliefs (*continued*)

followed by “three,” *yi sam*, the meaning “produce easily” can be inferred. However, combinations of “two” and “four” are to be avoided, as these two numbers in combination could be interpreted as “die easily.” Of course, these traditional beliefs do not carry the same weight as they once did, but they are still reflected in customary usage.

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About Drinking

In this course, you have used the word *zeo* when asking for “wine.” Literally, however, this word means “alcohol,” and it’s used as a general way to refer to all alcoholic drinks, including beer and spirits. Therefore, to specify a certain type of alcoholic drink in Cantonese, you must either refer to it by name or add some sort of description. *Ngo sêng yem yeddi zeo*, simply means, “I want to have a drink.” To specify “wine,” you must ask either for “grape alcohol” — *po to zeo* — or for rice alcohol — *mei zeo*. The word you used for “beer,” *bézeo*, literally means “barley alcohol.”

There are many idioms associated with the phrase *yem zeo*, most having to do with the observance of some holiday or milestone in a person’s life, such as a wedding, birthday, or the birth of a child. For example, *Ngo gem man hêu yem*, literally means, “I’m going to have a drink tonight,” but it can imply “I am going to attend a reception or banquet, or some other function tonight.” While this phrase is usually used to describe a wedding banquet, it can also refer to other occasions. However, the question, *Néi géi xi céng yem?* (“When will you invite people to drink?”) always refers to a celebration given for a

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About Drinking (*continued*)

newly-married couple. It's like asking, "When are you going to hold your wedding reception," that is, "getting married?"

Here are some other uses of the word *zeo*:

zeo ga — "tavern"

zeo leo — "restaurant,"
(or literally, "alcohol building")

zeo dim — "hotel"

zeo pou — "liquor store"

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Chinese Names

As in many other Asian cultures, in China the society or group is valued more highly than the individual. Your importance is measured by your value to the group, rather than by those qualities which distinguish you from others.

This can be seen in the way a person is named in Cantonese. The most important element of the person's name is thought to be the family of which he or she is a member, and so the family name is spoken first. The given name, which sets the person apart even from others with the same family name, is the final element. Take, for example, the name *Cen Xin Hung*. *Cen* is the family name and *Xin Hung* the given name.

The given name, or first name, is represented by either one or two one-syllable characters. A child's given name is usually chosen very carefully, to represent the parents' hopes for and expectations of the child. Cantonese children are not usually given the name of a relative.

Westerners are usually referred to by a phonetic representation of their names, and a few Western names have been adopted by some Hong Kong parents. Among these are the names "David" -

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Chinese Names (*continued*)

dai wei ; “Mary” - *ma léi* ; and “Charlie” - *ca léi*. The actor Charlie Chaplin, popular in Hong Kong, is known as *ca léi coek bit ling*. Chinese people with a “Western” name will often have a traditional Chinese one also.

There are actually over one thousand Chinese family names in use, but only a few dozen are very common. Children usually take their fathers’ last names; occasionally the mother’s last name may also be used. Most last names are written using single characters. There are a few two-character last names in use: among these, *Seeto* and *Auyeung* are two of the most common. Given names are usually made up of one character on the mainland, and two in Hong Kong.

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Dim Sum and Tea Houses

Many Americans are familiar with the term *dim sum*. This literally means “tease your heart,” and in China it is used to refer to small pastries and other finger foods served with tea.

In earlier days, *dim sum* was eaten as a breakfast or light brunch in the morning. Now, however, it is served in tea houses until two or three o’clock in the afternoon.

This custom is observed all over China, not only in areas where Cantonese is spoken. The term *dim sum* is the same in both Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese. However, in Mandarin this refers only to appetizers, while the Cantonese sometimes make a light meal of *dim sum*.

Chinese people will often have their *dim sum* in a tea house. This is a small establishment which combines the functions of a café and a restaurant. The tea house is often used as a neighborhood reference point, a place where receptions or banquets are held or where one might conduct an informal meeting with business partners or friends.

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Cantonese and English

Hong Kong was a British colony for over one hundred years, and Guangzhou was one of the first five cities to be opened to Western traders at the end of the 19th century. Consequently, Cantonese became the most “Westernized” dialect in Chinese.

Many Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong use English loan-words in their everyday conversation. Some may do so to show off their English ability, but in most cases, the words are so widely used in Cantonese that people are hardly aware of their English origins. Here are some examples:

<i>bo</i> - means “ball”	<i>baxi</i> - means “bus”
<i>boxi</i> - means “boss”	<i>lip</i> - means “lift”
<i>soetsam</i> - means “shirt”	<i>xidam</i> - means “stamp”
<i>tipxi</i> - means “tips”	<i>xido</i> - means “store”

Cantonese words don’t usually end with a final consonant sound, so foreign words such as “ball” or “bus” are often pronounced either with a glottal stop at the end or an added vowel sound.

You may hear a Hong Kong policeman addressed as “Sir!” — *ah soe*. “*Soe*” is the Cantonese pronunciation of the English word, “sir” and the “ah”

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Cantonese and English (*continued*)

beginning is used to draw the person's attention. It sets a friendly, yet respectful tone for the conversation. But this way of saying "sir" is used only to address policemen, or less frequently, educators. The Cantonese word *xinsang* is used otherwise.

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The Concept of *Min*

Language is a vibrant, flexible form of communication loaded with social and cultural information. Cantonese culture is structured around such values as honor, loyalty, and respect. In fact, the respect with which a person's community regards him or her can serve as an important part of that person's identity. In Cantonese, this is often referred to as *min*, which is somewhat equivalent to "face." Here are some common phrases:

Yeo min — "to have face" — means to be shown respect in a certain social situation. For example, when attending a banquet, those seated near the host at the head of the table can be said to *yeo min*.

Similarly, *bei min* — "to give face" — means to show someone the respect due him or her. When you attend a formal dinner, the host and hostess might greet you by saying, *dozé bei min*. This literally means, "Thank you for giving face." In this situation, it is equivalent to saying, "Thank you for coming."

Lok min — "to drop the face" — means to shame a person, to cause him or her to lose the respect of others. A person thought to be an expert

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The Concept of *Min* (*continued*)

on a certain topic can be said to *lok min* if he or she is corrected in public.

Mou min — “to lack face” — means to lose dignity. For example, you are thought to lose face if you are the only one of a certain group who is passed over for a promotion or who fails to receive an invitation to a sought-after event.

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Compliments

Modesty is seen as an essential virtue in Cantonese culture. This humility is shown by some typical responses a Cantonese person will give when complimented. For example, a woman who is told *Néi zen hei hou léng* (“You are really very beautiful”) could answer, *Bindou hei a?* As you may be able to guess, this literally means, “Where is it?” Used this way, it is like saying, “Where do you get that?” or, “I don’t know what you’re saying.”

Another common response to a compliment might be, *Guo zêng la!* This means something like, “Excessive praise!” and it’s used to say, “You’re exaggerating,” or “You’re too kind.” Either of these can be used as a polite, modest response to almost any compliment. Some more Westernized people may also answer simply, *Dozé* when complimented, but this is less common.

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Rice and Meals

In this course, you have used the phrase *xig man fan* with the meaning, “eat supper.” *Fan* literally means “cooked rice,” but in modern Cantonese, this word has come to mean “meal.” In the traditionally agricultural society of Southern China, and especially in the areas where Cantonese is spoken, rice has long been a staple. Even now, rice makes up roughly one third of the local diet.

The importance of rice is reflected in some Cantonese idioms. In colloquial speech, the term “rice bowl,” *fan wun*, refers to a person’s occupation, that is, the source of the money needed to put rice in the bowl. Likewise, the term “iron rice bowl,” *tit fan wan*, is used to refer to secure employment, or a position which provides a reliable source of income. However, the term, “rice barrel,” *fan tung*, is used in a derogatory sense, to refer to a person who consumes excessively without giving back to the family or community through his or her work.

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The Chinese Zodiac

The Chinese have a system of astrology dating back thousands of years. The Chinese zodiac differs from the Western in that each sign represents an entire year, rather than one month.

According to traditional Chinese legend, ages ago, Buddha summoned all of the animals. He honored those who came by naming a year for them. Each animal in turn then gave its characteristics to people born in its year. The twelve-year cycle runs as follows:

- Year of the Rat — *xii*
- Year of the Ox — *ngeo*
- Year of the Tiger — *fu*
- Year of the Rabbit — *tou*
- Year of the Dragon — *lung*
- Year of the Snake — *sé*
- Year of the Horse — *ma*
- Year of the Ram — *yeung*
- Year of the Monkey — *heo*
- Year of the Rooster — *gei*
- Year of the Dog — *geo*
- Year of the Pig — *ju*

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The Chinese Zodiac (*continued*)

Here is the list of qualities traditionally associated with each animal symbol.

◆ The cycle begins with the Year of the **Rat**. Anyone born during the Year of the Rat is expected to be honest and generous, possessing both great ambition and remarkable self-control. Recent Years of the Rat have been 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984, and 1996. The next one will be in 2008.

◆ The Year of the **Ox** follows. Someone born during an Ox year is both intelligent and perceptive, patient with others, but scornful of failure.

◆ A person born in the Year of the **Tiger** is traditionally expected to be aggressive and short-tempered, albeit courageous and considerate of others.

◆ If a person is born in the Year of the **Rabbit**, it is believed that he or she will be affectionate and skillful, successful in the business world despite being shy.

◆ A person born in the Year of the **Dragon** is expected to be both stubborn and empathetic and to possess a great deal of energy.

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The Chinese Zodiac (*continued*)

◆ Someone born in the Year of the **Snake** is wise and beautiful, yet possibly vain and possessed of a quick temper.

◆ If you were born in the Year of the **Horse**, you will be attractive, amiable, and well-liked by others.

◆ Someone born in the Year of the **Ram** will be gracious and creative, but be relatively uncomfortable in a leadership role.

◆ A person born in the Year of the **Monkey** is clever to the point of genius, with a gift for detail.

◆ A **Rooster** is a self-directed, hard-working loner, who prefers to choose his or her own agenda.

◆ Someone born in the Year of the **Dog** is loyal and honest, although demanding of those around him or her.

◆ A person born in the Year of the **Pig** is expected to be noble and well-mannered, with great integrity and a few close friends.

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Hospitality

During your travels abroad, you may find yourself invited to dinner in a Chinese home. Here are some customs which relate to hospitality and correct behavior as a dinner guest.

As in the West, it's considered rude to begin eating immediately when served. Rather, you should wait until everyone has been seated and all of the dishes have been served. Once this has been done, it's customary for the host or hostess to say, "Eat rice!" — *xig fan*. This is similar to such American expressions as, "Dig in!" or, "Enjoy your meal." After the host or hostess has greeted the guests in this way, they in turn may address one another using the same phrase. *Xig fan* having been said all around, everyone begins to eat.

At a more formal dinner party, you may hear the host and hostess greet the guests with the longer, more polite phrase *gog wei hēi fai*, which means, "Ladies and gentlemen, please raise your chopsticks."

At this kind of occasion, a toast is frequently offered before the food is served. The person offering the toast could say, *yem bui* or literally, "drink a cup." Another common toast is *zuk néi gin hong*, meaning, "I wish you health."

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Hospitality (*continued*)

When serving yourself during dinner, you will need to remember to serve yourself only those portions nearest you at the edge of the plate. It's considered rude to stir the food in any dish. If you have finished while others are still eating, you should say *man man xig* ("slowly slowly eat") meaning, "Take your time, enjoy your dinner." After this you may leave the table.

When you are leaving the home of your host and hostess, they may say to you, *Man man hang!* This literally means, "Slowly slowly walk!" and in this situation, it's like saying, "Safe trip home!"

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Chinese Festivals

Until the fall of the Chinese Empire in 1911, the Chinese measured the passage of days, months, and years using a lunar calendar. Developed thousands of years ago, this calendar used the different phases of the moon as a reference point. The lunar calendar is also called “agriculture calendar,” which is based on the seasons, telling peasants when to spread the seeds of certain crops, when to get in the harvests, etc.

Although modern Chinese now follow the commonly accepted Western calendar, the older, lunar system is still in use as a means of determining the dates of traditional holidays.

Of these, perhaps best known in the West is the traditional New Year’s celebration which is the most important annual festival in Cantonese life. Due to the differences between the Chinese and Western calendars, the Chinese New Year usually occurs somewhere between January 21 and February 19. Despite the date, this holiday is known in Cantonese as the “Spring Festival,” *Coen Zi*, as it’s thought to be the day when the weather begins to change. However, when it is celebrated, it is often the coldest time of the year!

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Chinese Festivals (*continued*)

When celebrating the Chinese New Year, Cantonese people will often exchange traditional greetings. These vary, but all express the wish that the person with whom you are speaking will have good luck in the New Year. For example, when greeting an older person, you might say, *Gung héi néi cêng méng bag sêu*. This literally means, “I wish that you may live one hundred years.” Similarly, you could greet a child by saying, *Gung hei nei fai gou zêng dai*, or, “I wish that you may grow fast and tall.” To a young couple, you could say, *Gung héi néi déi med wen sing gung*. Saying this, you are wishing them good fortune and a happy marriage.

Other common greetings, applicable to anyone, are *Gung héi fat coi* (“May you receive a fortune”) and *Man xi yü yi* (“Ten thousand things will turn out according to your wishes.”)

The purpose of these greetings is to establish an atmosphere of good luck as the year begins. Conversely, anything associated with bad luck is avoided in conversation at all costs. During the holiday, the Chinese refrain from discussing death, *séi*; illness, *béng*; or loss, *xü*. You should never give someone a book as a New Year’s gift, because “book,” *xü*, has the same sound as the word “loss,”

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Chinese Festivals (*continued*)

or “to lose.” Similarly, a clock is an inappropriate gift, because the phrase “give clock,” *sung zung*, sounds very similar to the words meaning, “attend someone’s funeral.”

The Chinese will even try to avoid expressing disappointment or displeasure of any kind during this holiday. If, for example, you inadvertently break something, say a vase or a mirror, you should say “That’s good!” — *Hou gé!*

Another important festival, *Ching Ming*, is celebrated around April 5th. This day commemorates one’s ancestors, and usually includes paying respects to the dead in the family’s graveyard. As it is in the middle of the spring, it also provides an opportunity for a walk or picnic with the whole family.

The festival of *Dün Ng*, is celebrated between late May and early June. The legend connected with this day has to do with the great ancient poet *Wed Yün*. As the legend has it, the poet threw himself into the *Mitlo Gong*, Mieluo River, and so on this day, people throw rice dumplings, or *zung*, into a river to distract the fish from the poet’s body. In modern days, the celebration may also include dragon-boat races.

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Chinese Festivals (*continued*)

Mid-Autumn Day — *Zung Ceo* — is the second most important holiday in the Chinese year. Despite the name, “mid-autumn,” it is celebrated in August, during that month’s full moon. In Chinese culture, the full moon symbolizes “completeness, perfection, reunion.” On this day, people eat round “moon cakes,” *yüt bég*, and fruits with a round shape, such as watermelons, oranges, and grapefruit. Traditionally, a person will exchange moon cakes with his or her friends, as well as other gifts. The gift of a moon-cake has a ritual significance to the Chinese which is somewhat equivalent to Christmas gifts in the West.

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The Chinese Calendar

In China, people use both the traditional lunar calendar and the Western solar calendar. The adoption of the solar calendar can be dated back less than a hundred years, after the fall of the Chinese Empire.

The lunar year consists of 12 months, or *yüit*. The word *yüit*, can mean both “moon” and “month.” Each “moon” has 29 or 30 days. The months are named using ordinal numbers and the word *yüit* is used as a suffix. For example, **January** is called *yed yüit*, or literally, “one moon.” In order to differentiate between the name **January** and the period “one month,” “one month” adds the measure word *go*. When saying “one month,” you literally say, “one piece of the moon.” **February** is called *yi yüit*; **March** is *sam yüit*; and so on.

There is really no Cantonese word for “week,” or “weeks.” The word we’ve used, *xing kái*, literally means, “star period” and dates back only to the spread of Christianity. Similarly, the Cantonese refer to **Monday** as, *lei bai yed*. This means “one day after worship,” or literally, “worship one.” **Tuesday** is *lei ba yi*; **Wednesday** is *lei ba sam*; and so on. The exception to this pattern is **Sunday**, or “worship day,” *lei bai yed*. This name is very

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The Chinese Calendar (*continued*)

similar to **Monday**, *lei bai yed*, or, “worship one.” The difference is that the word, “one” used with **Monday** is pronounced with a high level tone, while the word “day” is pronounced with a low level tone.

These names were obviously based upon religious belief, but they have been used so commonly for so long that there is no longer any religious significance attached to them. They are used by Christians and non-Christians alike, in both Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

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Written Chinese

The Cantonese dialect does not have a written system of its own. All educated Chinese write in Mandarin, using the characters specific to that dialect. However, these are not phonetic representations of the sounds, but rather are pictographs (characters representing a drawing of an object) or ideographs (characters symbolizing ideas or an abstract notion).

There are now two distinct versions of the Chinese writing system: the traditional characters and the modified or simplified characters. The simplification was achieved by reduction in the number of strokes of commonly-used characters. In the 1950s the Chinese government introduced an official policy, enforced through the country, making the new “simplified” characters mandatory. The traditional system, however, has remained in use in Hong Kong and outside of China.

When first exposed to written Chinese, you may naturally find yourself somewhat intimidated. Mastering written Chinese is indeed an extremely long and complex process, and even many native speakers are not familiar with every one of the thousands of Chinese characters.

CANTONESE

Written Chinese (*continued*)

During the course of your travels in China, you may learn to recognize some commonly-used Chinese characters. However, in this course, you are learning spoken Cantonese. While a familiarity with Chinese ideograms may be useful to a visitor, it is not necessary to be able to read Chinese in order to acquire the ability to speak.