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Learning Chinese – Pinyin or Zhuyin?

by <u>Dave Flynn</u> | 19th June, 2010 | <u>Study Hacks</u>

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When you're learning Chinese in school or university, you will most likely first learn some form of Pinyin for a period of time before progressing on to learning and reading the Chinese characters themselves. While learning a phonetic alphabet is an essential part of learning Chinese, you do have a choice about which phonetic alphabet you learn, and the choice you make will affect your pronunciation, reading ability, and how fast you learn.

You're probably wondering how the choice of phonetic alphabet could have such a big influence on the learning process, after all, it's all Chinese in the end, isn't it?

While Pinyin might be easier for westerners to grasp from the outset, the use of the roman alphabet to represent the Chinese sounds may have an adverse effect on pronunciation – shouldn't a new language with unique aspects of pronunciation warrant a completely new phonetic alphabet that allows the learner to detach themselves from the pronunciation of their mother tongue?

That's were Zhuyin comes in. Zhuyin, or BoPoMoFo, is a Chinese phonetic alphabet that was used in mainland China until being replaced by Pinyin, and that is in widespread use in Taiwan. If you want to learn more about the history of Zhuyin you can read the <u>Wikipedia article</u>.

Apart from providing a new system of pronunciation that enables you to complete remove yourself from any influence of English pronunciation, Zhuyin also has great benefits when reading Chinese. Learners of Chinese will know this all too well – that when you look at a poster or newspaper that has both English and Chinese, your eyes are automatically drawn to the English. Naturally, this problem also occurs when reading Pinyin accompanied Chinese too, and is amplified by the Pinyin being on a separate line than the Chinese. Consider the following text:

Dialogue | Discussing a Room for Rent with a Friend
小張:你今天 去看房子了沒有?
Nǐ jīntiān qù kàn fáng·zi ·le méiyǒu?

小王:看了一個公寓。我不太喜歡。
Kàn·le yí ·ge gōngyù. Wǒ bú tài xǐhuān.

When learning Chinese and reading this text, the reader is forced to look away from the Chinese to read the Pinyin, subsequently overlooking the Chinese:

Dialogue Discussing a Room for Rent with a Friend

Nǐ jīntiān qù kàn fáng-zi ·le méiyǒu?

Kàn-le yí ·ge gōngyù. Wǒ bú tài xǐhuān.

When reading vocabulary or terminology lists, as the Pinyin is even further away from the Chinese, the effect is more pronounced:

8.	下草罩	下单	xià dān	to buy
9.	盤分勢产	盘势	pán shì	stock -list
10.	指业数员	指数	zhĭshù	index
11.	股災市产	股市	gǔshì	stock market

Again, resulting in the Chinese being ignored or overlooked unless the read specifically diverts their attention to it:

8.	下;草1	下单	xià dān	to buy
9.	盤1分~	立分	pán shì	stock -list
10.	指示数计	担权	zhĭshù	index
11.	股1市~	股市	gǔshì	stock market

Zhuyin, on the other hand, is tucked in next to the character, almost becoming part of the character. It is nearly impossible to read the Zhuyin without being exposed to the Chinese character. The result is that when reading Chinese, the reader of Zhuyin receives increased exposure and reinforcement of the Chinese characters, at the same time speeding up retention.

Obviously the main set back up Zhuyin is that the learner must first memorise all of the characters that represent the Zhuyin alphabet. This process usually takes a couple of weeks, but as seen above, the long term benefits far outweigh this temporary setback.

Another thing to consider is that Pinyin based learning materials are far more widely available than Zhuyin based materials. Meaning that you are more likely to find something that interests you in Pinyin, than in Zhuyin. Although, if you are willing to use learning materials that aren't specifically targeted at foreign learners, then you can still find many books available that feature Zhuyin pronunciation. For example, the except below is taken from a book targeted at Taiwanese secondary/high school children, but if you can read Zhuyin then you can read this book too:

Ultimately, the choice of whether to learn Pinyin or Zhuyin, especially if you are learning in school, may not be yours. Added to the fact that Zhuyin learning materials aren't as widespread in the west as Pinyin materials, it might not be as easy to get a Zhuyin-based start in Chinese. But even if you've been learning Chinese for a long time, it's still worth your while learning Zhuyin, if not only to increase the variety of learning materials available to you, and get a non-mainland China perspective on things.

The image to the right shows the Zhuyin and Pinyin equivalents, for a full table including various types of Pinyin, please see the <u>Wikipedia page on Zhuyin</u>:

Which system did you learn when starting out learning Chinese? What's your opinion of Pinyin, or Zhuyin for learning Chinese? Leave a comment below!

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Zhuyin/Pinyin table from Wikipedia					

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