

Introduction to Sichuanese / 四川话入门

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Sichuanese is a variety of Southwestern Mandarin spoken throughout Sichuan province and Chongqing. More accurately, it is a collection of varieties of Southwestern Mandarin with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility and a shared history of independent development dating back to the Yuan Dynasty. Today Sichuanese is under the constant pressure and influence of Standard Mandarin (普通话), particularly in the cities. Some local vocabulary and expressions are being replaced by more standard counterparts and some archaic pronunciations are giving way to more standard pronunciations, but the phonology of Sichuanese remains perhaps its most unique characteristic. There are systematic correspondences between Standard Mandarin and Sichuanese, and these sound patterns are the key to beginning to understand and speak Sichuanese. We will begin with these differences using modified *pinyin* and focusing primarily on Chengdu pronunciation.

Pronunciation / 发音

The following *pinyin* letters share the same pronunciation as in Mandarin:

p, t, k, b, d, g, m, x, q, j, s, c, z, l

w, h, n, & many **vowels** have varying pronunciations that sometimes parallel Mandarin and sometimes differ.

The following differences should be noted:

The retroflex series in Mandarin (ch, sh, zh) all become alveolar in Sichuanese (**c, s, z**), 吃 /ci²¹/, 是 /si²¹³/, 知 /zi⁴⁵/

r in Mandarin is pronounced like [z] in IPA. I will differentiate this from *pinyin* z by capitalizing it: **Z**, 人 /Zen²¹/

Initial n- in Mandarin becomes **l-** in Sichuanese, 拿 /la²¹/, 你 /li⁵³/

Initial hu- becomes **f-** in Sichuanese, 护士 /fu²¹³si²¹/, 火 /fo⁵³/

wu sometimes becomes **vu** in Sichuanese, 五 /vu⁵³/

-eng in Mandarin becomes **-en** in Sichuanese, 成都 /cen²¹du⁴⁵/

-an in Mandarin takes on a very particular sound in many varieties of Sichuanese, particularly in and around Chengdu. The basic sound is IPA [æ], though slightly nasal and often with an exaggerated “vocal fry” from the throat. I will represent this sound with **æ**, 饭 /fæ²¹³/

-ue becomes -o in Sichuanese, 学生 /xo²¹sen/, 觉得 /jo²¹dei²¹/, 音乐 /yin⁴⁵yo²¹/

-e can be pronounced:

as in Mandarin, 生 /sen⁴⁵/

as -o, 个 /go/, 可以 /ko⁵³yi⁵³/, 乐 /lo²¹³/

as IPA [ɛ], represented here with a capital **E**, 车 /cE⁴⁵/

-ao can be pronounced:

as in Mandarin, 要 /yao²¹³/, 好 /hao⁵³/

as -o, 药 /yo²¹/

Some common archaic and/or colloquial readings of characters:

我	/ngo ⁵³ /
国	/gui ²¹ /
白	/bei ²¹ /
街	/gai ⁴⁵ /
下	/ha ²¹³ /
安	/ngæ ⁴⁵ /
去	/qie ²¹³ /

Tones / 生调

In addition to the above phonological differences, there are extensive tone differences between Sichuanese and Mandarin. These differences are, however, systematic and predictable using knowledge of Mandarin tones as well as the tone systems of other varieties of Chinese. First the basic correspondences:

1st tone in Mandarin is also a high tone in Sichuanese, but slightly rising with a value of 45. Some sources cite a value of 55, identical to Mandarin, which may be true with some speakers, but I have found 45 to be more common.

2nd tone in Mandarin is a low falling tone in Sichuanese, with a value of 21. In a stressed position, this tone can be rather prolonged and sound quite unlike any tone in Mandarin, e.g. 学生 /xo²¹sen/. Note, there is more to say about the 2nd tone - we will revisit it below.

3rd tone in Mandarin becomes a high falling tone in Sichuanese, not unlike Mandarin fourth tone in its abruptness, but not falling as low. Its value is 53. 你好 /li⁵³hao⁵³/

4th tone in Mandarin is falling-rising tone in Sichuanese, similar to Mandarin third tone. Some sources give the same pitch value for Sichuanese 4th tone and Mandarin 3rd tone, but I have found

the Sichuanese 4th tone to sound lower overall, without as much of a rise at the end, so I prefer the value 213 generally.

So for starters, a not-entirely-accurate but still useful cheat-sheet to convert Mandarin tones into Sichuanese:

Mandarin tone	Sichuanese tone
1st tone	same +/-
2nd tone	low falling
3rd tone	Mandarin 4th tone +/-
4th tone	Mandarin 3rd tone +/-

HOWEVER, Sichuanese has traces of the Middle Chinese entering tone (入声), and this throws a bit of a wrench into the works.

In the Chengdu and Chongqing dialects of Sichuanese, entering tone has merged with the 2nd tone, i.e. low falling (21). This means that any word that was pronounced with the entering tone in Middle Chinese, will have the 2nd tone in Sichuanese. Assuming that the average reader of this lesson is not an expert in Middle Chinese, we'll have to find other ways to predict when to use this 2nd tone.

1. Listening. This was the first way I discovered the remnants of 入声 in Chinese without even knowing what 入声 was at the time. I noticed that there were certain words that didn't fit the above tone conversion scheme. 说 was clearly pronounced with this low falling tone, but in Mandarin it is 1st tone. At first I chalked it up to an exception to the rule, and as I paid attention I encountered more and more such exceptions involving this particular tone.
2. Other varieties of Chinese. I began to keep a list of maverick words with the Sichuanese 2nd tone, and eventually I noticed that these words in their Cantonese pronunciation all had an entering or checked tone, i.e. ending in -p, -t, -k. The same pattern checked out in Shanghainese as well. Much later I learned that Middle Chinese entering tone had been preserved in these southern Sinitic languages and even in some dialects of Sichuanese. In the rest of the Sichuanese dialects, though, it merged with other existing tones - in Chengdu and Chongqing it merged with the second tone [21]. So if you know any of the southern Chinese languages like Yue, Min Nan, or Wu, you can use that knowledge to help in pronouncing Sichuanese.
3. The following list. If the above two steps aren't helpful, below is a list of very common words which were entering tone in Middle Chinese and are 2nd tone in Sichuanese.

不 /bu²¹/
学 /xo²¹/
说 /suo²¹/

国	/gui ²¹ /
客	/kE ²¹ /
吃	/ci ²¹ /
读	/du ²¹ /
色	/sE ²¹ /
识	/si ²¹ /
得	/dei ²¹ /

Natural tone sandhi does occur, but it seems to favour efficiency and happens quite naturally in rapid speech without needing to get into specific rules and patterns.

Practice / 练习

So before we get into lexical and grammatical differences in the following lessons, let's look at some words and phrases that, aside from their pronunciation, are identical or very similar to Standard Mandarin.

你好！ /li⁵³hao⁵³/ = Hello!

我住在四川。 /ngo⁵³ zu²¹³ zai²¹³ si²¹³cuæ⁴⁵/ = I live in Sichuan.

他在哪儿？ /ta⁴⁵ zai²¹³ lar⁵³?/ = Where is he?

我不要去成都。 /ngo⁵³ bu²¹ yao²¹³ qie²¹³ cen²¹du⁴⁵/ = I don't want to go to Chengdu.

我给你说嘛。。。 /ngo⁵³ gei⁵³ li⁵³ suo²¹ ma²¹/ = Let me tell you...

给我拿包烟。 /gei⁵³ ngo⁵³ la²¹ bao⁴⁵ ya⁴⁵/ = Give me a pack of cigarettes.

再见！ /zai²¹³jiæ²¹³/ = Good bye!