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Top 5 Reasons to Learn Cantonese

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Grammar Points

The Focus of This Lesson is the Top Five Reasons to Learn Cantonese

Background of the Cantonese Language

Cantonese is the oldest language and the most popular Chinese dialect spoken in Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macau, and some neighboring areas around the eastern part of Guangxi. It is the official language in Hong Kong and Macau, and historically, the most popular form of Chinese spoken outside mainland China.

We're not kidding about Cantonese being spoken everywhere. It is the most widely spoken dialect among Chinese communities in Canada, the United States of America, and Australia, as well as Europe and Southeast Asia.

The language has a variety of names depending upon which provinces people are from. People in Hong Kong and Macau usually call it Guang dong waa (廣東話). Native Cantonese speakers customarily call their language gwong zhou waa (廣州話). People outside of Guangzhou call the language baak waa (白話).

Unlike Mandarin, Cantonese has six tones or nine tones (depending on how you define tones).

Cantonese has around sixteen hundred syllables including tones and six-hundred-and-twenty sounds without tones. Also, note that a single sound can represent many meanings. Therefore, it is important you are pronouncing the right tone because you might end up saying a rude word or talking gibberish.

About China

China is an ancient country with thousands of years of history. Most Chinese people will tell you that China has five thousand years of history, in fact. And

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for most of that, the dominant political and cultural language was Cantonese. It was only in the late 1940s that Mandarin became the dominant official language in mainland China. Cantonese continues to be the dominant language for business and culture in the economic powerhouse of southern China. It is an essential language for business and finance in East Asia. The word for "China" in Cantonese is zung1 gwok3.

Where Is Cantonese Spoken?

Cantonese is mainly spoken in the southern part of mainland China. It is the official language of Hong Kong and dominates Chinatowns worldwide, especially in the United States and Canada. You can also find native Cantonese speakers in Singapore and Malaysia. It is one of the most international Chinese dialects you can learn!

Unlike with its cousin Mandarin, Cantonese speakers tend to be much more mutually intelligible. There isn't as much fracturing of the dialect. However, there are slight differences between the way people from the mainland and people from Hong Kong or Singapore speak Cantonese. Overseas communities also occasionally have slight accents. This isn't generally going to be a problem though, as Cantonese is a global language with shared media like television shows, movies, and music, so the Cantonese you'll hear in most places will be relatively standard, or at least very intelligible.

Pronunciation among native Cantonese speakers in China can be different from that of Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong. A lot of people in Hong Kong, especially the younger generations, use a lot of their own conversational slang and tend to speak what we'll call a "lazy tone." An example is the word "you." The right way to pronounce "you" is [li] and people who speak in a lazy tone will pronounce "you" as [ni].

Chinese Writing

There are two different forms of Chinese writing. In Cantonese, people use the traditional form of writing. This is the older and more classical form, and the form used to write the most famous and best pieces of Chinese literature in the world. If you can read traditional characters, you can easily learn the simplified form used on the mainland (but not vice versa). And for extra fun, there are a

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number of characters you'll run into in Cantonese (like mo2) that do not actually exist in standard mainland Mandarin. Otherwise, if you can read Cantonese, you'll find learning Mandarin easy. Many modern words related to computers, the Internet, and technology use different words in Hong Kong than in mainland China. For example, people in Hong Kong called documents Fai Lo, which is similar to "files," whereas mainland China calls it man gin.

Why is it Important?

So why should you learn Cantonese? Some top reasons are...

1. Economic Opportunity

Cantonese is the Chinese language to learn if you're into business, politics, or Chinese culture. Once you speak Cantonese, you'll be able to live and work with major Chinese companies and communities worldwide! Your opportunities won't just be limited to mainland China! And chances are that if you run into a Chinese speaker outside of China, you'll be able to talk to them too!

2. Unique Cantonese Writing System

Unlike most languages, Chinese has a unique writing system that provides visual comprehensibility, and some consider it to be an art form. And the traditional form used in Cantonese is the most classical and beautiful of the two scripts. If you're going to put your time into learning ANY written form, this is the one you want.

3. Chinese Grammar is Easy!

And spoken Cantonese sounds amazing.

4. Dynamic and Creative Chinese Media!

When you learn Cantonese you'll have full access to the most dynamic and creative Chinese media in the world. Jackie Chan, Maggie Cheung, Chow Yun Fat, Tony Leung, and so many more international stars are native Cantonese speakers! And everyone

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knows that the best Chinese music, movies, and televisions in the world are filmed in Hong Kong. If you're into cool and exciting Chinese culture, Cantonese is what you want to learn. It's so great that everyone in mainland China watches it!

5. Great Fashion Sense!

Did we mention how fashionable Hong Kong is? It's no accident. The people are beautiful! The weather is beautiful (if hot)! The fashion scene is absolutely fantastic. And if you're going to learn the language, you'll be beautiful too.

Vocabulary of This Lesson

中國, zung1 gwok3 ("China") - noun

Cultural Insight

Cantonese Basics

Linguistics

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