



Cantonese QuickChat

The English-speaking world learnt about Cantonese foods like 'chop suey', cooked in a thing called a 'wok', during Hong Kong's period as a British colony, and over the last century, the success of the Hong Kong action film industry has introduced us to martial arts cinema and therefore the language. In this guide we use the Yale system. There's a world of Cantonese food, culture and people to discover, so don't just stand there, say something!

QUESTION WORDS

How?	點樣	<i>dím-yéung</i>
What?	乜嘢	<i>màt-yé</i>
When?	幾時	<i>gây-sì</i>
Where?	邊度	<i>bin-do</i>
Who?	邊個	<i>bin-gaw</i>

CONVERSATION & ESSENTIALS

Hello	哈佬	<i>hàa-ló</i>
Goodbye	再見	<i>joy-gin</i>
Yes	係	<i>hai</i>
No	不係	<i>ng-hai</i>
Please	唔該	<i>ng-gòy</i>
Thank you	多謝	<i>dàw-je</i>
You're welcome	唔駛客氣	<i>ng-sái haak-hay</i>
Excuse me	唔該借借	<i>ng-gòy je-je</i>
Sorry	對唔住	<i>deui-ng-jew</i>
What's your name?	你叫乜嘢名?	<i>láy giu màt-yé méng a</i>
My name is ...	我叫.....	<i>ngáw giu ...</i>
Where are you from?	你係邊度人?	<i>láy hai bin-do yáw</i>
I'm from ...	我係係.....	<i>ngáw hai hái ...</i>

DIRECTIONS

Where's ...?係邊度?	<i>...hái-bin-do</i>
It's straight ahead	喺 前 面	<i>hái chin-min</i>
Turn towards the left	向 左 轉	<i>heung jáw jewn</i>
Turn towards the right	向 右 轉	<i>heung yau jewn</i>
Turn at the next corner	喺 十字路口 轉彎	<i>hái sap-ji-lo-háu jewn-wàan</i>
Turn at the traffic lights	喺 紅綠燈 轉彎	<i>hái hung-luk-dàng jewn-wàan</i>

LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

Do you speak English?	你識唔識講英文啊?	<i>láy sik-ng-sik gáwng ying-mán a</i>
I don't speak Cantonese	我唔識講廣東話	<i>ngáw ng sik gáwng gwáwng-dùng wáa</i>
What does.. mean?	...係乜嘢意思?	<i>...hái màt-yé yi-sì</i>
I (don't) understand	我 (唔) 明	<i>ngáw (ng) ming</i>

TIME & DATES

What time is it?	而家幾點鐘	<i>yi-gàa gáy-dím-jùng</i>
morning	朝 早	<i>jiù-jó</i>
afternoon	下 晝	<i>hàa-jau</i>
evening	晚	<i>mán</i>
today	今 日	<i>gám-yat</i>
tomorrow	听 日	<i>ting-yat</i>
yesterday	寢 日	<i>kám-yat</i>
Monday	星 期 一	<i>sing-káy-yát</i>
Tuesday	星 期 二	<i>sing-káy-yi</i>
Wednesday	星 期 三	<i>sing-káy-sàam</i>
Thursday	星 期 四	<i>sing-káy-say</i>
Friday	星 期 五	<i>sing-káy-ńg</i>
Saturday	星 期 六	<i>sing-káy-luk</i>
Sunday	星 期 日	<i>sing-káy-yat</i>

SHOPPING & SERVICES

I'd like to buy ...	我想買	<i>ngáw séung máai ...</i>
How much is it?	幾多錢?	<i>gáy-dàw chin</i>
Can I look at it?	我可唔可以睇下?	<i>ngáw háw-ng-háw-yí tái haa</i>
I'm just looking	睇下	<i>tái haa</i>
Do you have something cheaper?	有冇平啲?	<i>yáu-mó pèng di gaa</i>
That's too expensive!	太貴啦!	<i>taai gwai laa</i>
Do you accept credit cards?	你地收唔收信用卡 呀?	<i>láy-day sàu-ng-sàu seun-yung-kàat a</i>
Can you write down the price?	唔該寫低個價錢?	<i>ng-gòy sé dài gaw gaa-chin</i>

PLACES

church	教堂	<i>gaau-tàwng</i>
city centre	市中心	<i>sí-jùng-sám</i>
embassy	大使館	<i>daai-sí-gú</i>
market	街市/市場	<i>gàai-sí/sí-chèung</i>
museum	博物館	<i>bawk-mat-gún</i>
post office	郵局	<i>yàw-gúk</i>
public toilet	公廁	<i>gùng-chi</i>
tourist office	旅行社	<i>léui-hàng-sé</i>

TRANSPORT

What time does it leave?	幾點鐘出發?	<i>gáy-dím jùng chèut-faa</i>
I'd want to travel by ...	我想坐.....	<i>ngáw séung cháv...</i>
boat	船	<i>sèwn</i>
bus	公共汽車	<i>gùng-gung hay-chè</i>
plane	飛機	<i>fáy-gày</i>
train	火車	<i>fó-chè</i>
Where do I buy a ticket?	去邊度買飛?	<i>heui bin-do máai fáy</i>
platform	月台	<i>yewt-tày</i>
ticket office	票房	<i>piu-fáwng</i>
timetable	時間表	<i>sí-gaan-biú</i>
train station	火車站	<i>fó-chè-jaam</i>

EMERGENCIES

Help!	救命!	<i>gau-meng</i>
I've lost my ...	我.....唔見咗	<i>ngáw... ng-gin-jáv</i>
Go away!	走開!	<i>jáu-hòy</i>
Call the police	快啲叫警察	<i>faai-di giu gíng-chaat</i>
Call a doctor!	快啲叫醫生	<i>faai-di giu yi-sàng</i>

SIGNS

Entry	入口
Exit	出口
Information	信息
Open	開
Closed	關門
Vacancy	空闕
No Vacancy	滿
Police	警察
Police Station	警察局
Toilets	廁所



SPEAKING CANTONESE

What a difference a border makes. Cantonese is still the most popular dialect in Hong Kong, Guǎngzhōu and the surrounding area. It differs from Mandarin as much as French differs from Spanish.

Speakers of both dialects can read Chinese characters, but a Cantonese speaker will pronounce many of the characters differently from a Mandarin speaker. For example, when Mr Ng from Hong Kong goes to Beijing the Mandarin speakers will call him Mr Wu. If Mr Wong goes from Hong Kong to Fújiàn the character for his name will be read as Mr Wee, and in Beijing he is Mr Huang.

ROMANISATION & PRONUNCIATION

Unfortunately, several competing systems of Romanisation of Cantonese script exist and no single one has emerged as an official standard. A number have come and gone, but at least three have survived and are currently in use in Hong Kong: Meyer-Wempe, Sidney Lau and Yale. In this guide we use the Yale system. It's the most phonetically accurate and the one generally preferred by foreign students.

VOWELS

The vowel sounds in Cantonese are similar to those found in English. There is, however, a distinction between long and short vowels in Cantonese. But in our pronunciation guide, there is only a long and short distinction for 'a', to aid in being understood. This vowel sound is represented with a double 'a' – the letter 'a' represents a short sound and 'aa' represents a long sound. Note that the examples given below for the pronunciation of vowels reflect British pronunciation.

a	as in 'father'
ai	as the 'i' in 'find', but shorter
au	as the 'ow' in 'cow'
e	as in 'let'
ei	as the 'a' in 'say', but without the 'y' sound
eu	similar to the 'ur' in 'urn' with lips pursed, but without the 'r' sound
i	as in 'marine'
iu	similar to the word 'you'
o	as in 'not'; as in 'no' when at the end of a word
oi	as the 'oy' in 'boy'
oo	as in 'soon'
ou	as the word 'owe'
u	as in 'put'
ue	as the 'u-e' in 'suet'
ui	as 'oo-ee'

CONSONANTS

There are only a few differences between consonant sounds in English and Cantonese. Firstly, the 'ng' sound can appear at the start of the word in Cantonese. You can practice by saying 'sing

along' slowly and then eventually do away with the 'si' at the beginning. With a little practice, it should come easily. In addition, this sound doesn't have an obvious g ending in Cantonese as it does in English.

Another difference is that words ending with the consonant sounds p, t, and k are clipped in Cantonese. This means that these sounds, at the end of words, must start to be sounded out normally but then intentionally and abruptly stopped before breathing out the sound.

In general, consonants are pronounced as in English. Three that may give you a little trouble are:

g	as in 'go'
j	as the 'ds' in 'suds'
ng	as in 'sing'

Cantonese has seven tones (although you can easily get by with six). In the Yale system used here, six basic tones are represented: three 'level' tones, which do not noticeably rise or fall in pitch (high, middle and low), and three 'moving' tones, which either rise or fall in pitch (high rising, low rising and low falling).

Remember that it doesn't matter whether you have a high or low voice when speaking Cantonese as long as your intonation reflects relative changes in pitch. The following examples show the six basic tones. Note how important they can be to your intended meaning:

high tone: represented by a macron above a vowel, as in *fōo* (husband)

middle tone: represented by an unaccented vowel, as in *foo* (wealthy)

low tone: represented by the letter 'h' after a vowel, as in *fooh* (owe); note that 'h' is only pronounced if it occurs at the start of a word; elsewhere it signifies a low tone

middle tone rising: represented by an acute accent, as in *fóo* (tiger)

low falling tone: represented by a grave accent followed by the low tone letter 'h', as in *fòoh* (to lean) low rising tone: represented by an acute accent and the low tone letter 'h', as in *fóoh* (woman)

GRAMMAR

Chinese grammar is much simpler than that of European languages. There are no articles (a/the), no tenses and no plurals. The basic point to bear in mind is that, like English, Chinese word order is subject-verb-object. In other words, a basic English sentence like 'I (subject) love (verb) you (object)' is constructed in exactly the same way in Chinese. The catch is mastering the tones.