

This dissertation concerns itself with the segmental syllable of Mandarin, i.e., of standard Chinese as codified in P.R.C. and known as putonghua. While it leaves aside the aspect of tone it explores all major topics related to the phonological and phonetic description of the isolated Mandarin segmental syllable and the ways in which they are treated in broad literature, both Chinese and Western. We approach the subject from the perspective of teaching Chinese as a second language (TCSL), where mastering the syllabary (cca 400 segmental syllables, 1300 tonic syllables) represents a crucial basic step. Poor command of the pronunciation of isolated syllables will inevitably have a detrimental effect on the spoken language competence of a student.

Because the pinyin romanization system (developed in P.R.C., officially approved in 1958) assumedly is the only feasible phonological system for the paedagogical purposes, the present dissertation does not aspire to establish any new phonological interpretation of the Mandarin syllable (although some attempts will be made). After making a broad comparison of existing analyses and their pros and cons, we strive to explore the solutions most convenient for the purposes of teaching pronunciation. Along with accepting pinyin as a phonological background, we advocate for a traditional Initial-Final view of the syllable structure (as opposed to the rather recent Onset-Rime model accepted by many modern phonologists). We will show the major advantages of the traditional model for teaching purposes. Unlike more or less all treatments of the Mandarin sound system (be it Chinese or Western) we insist on the necessity of making the explanation of the syllable hierarchical structure the point of departure. Furthermore, we strongly recommend placing a major emphasis on the traditional components of the syllable (initial – medial – central – terminal defined by their function within the syllable structure) as opposed to approaches that depart from the inventory of vowel and consonant segments and present the Mandarin syllable chiefly as a string of segments arranged according to a set of phonotactic rules. This approach is considered as one of the major contributions of the present text.