

What English Words Come from Chinese?

A language student may think, “It’s impossible to learn all these Chinese words!” But what if you were told that there are quite a few Chinese words used in English that you already know?

Yes, it’s true. Have you ever eaten *tofu*? Or, do you drink orange *pekoe* tea? Perhaps you love dogs, or own a *Shih Tzu* puppy. Perhaps you live in an area that is susceptible to *typhoons*.

And you never would’ve guessed it—but *ketchup* is a word from Chinese as well! I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling pretty *gung-ho* to learn more Chinese words used in English.

Building a stronger connection to Mandarin Chinese will help you take better advantage of all the [free language learning resources](#) available online. You might be compelled to get hooked on an addictive [TV drama](#), or discover that [cultural holidays](#) and festivities hold many opportunities to further your studies.

In addition to learning the words below, you can build cultural connections to the Chinese language through [FluentU](#).

[FluentU](#) takes real-world videos—like music videos, movie trailers, news and inspiring talks—and turns them into personalized language learning lessons.

Let’s get started!

27 Chinese Words Used in English That You Already Know

—Food and Eating—

1. pekoe

Pekoe is a popular type of tea, typically produced in Sri Lanka and India. The name comes from a Chinese dialect called Amoy, spoken in Xiamen, China, in which the tea is called *pek-ho*. In Mandarin, it’s 白后 (*bái hòu*), which means “white empress.” The name refers to the downy tips of young buds from the tea plant.

2. bok choy

Bok choy, a leafy green vegetable with white stems, can be found at Chinese stores or general grocery stores. It's a common ingredient in Asian cuisine. The word comes from 白菜 (*bái cài*), meaning "white vegetable."

3. chop suey

Chop suey is a mixed-vegetable dish you can order at Chinese restaurants. It comes from 杂碎 (*zá suì*), meaning "mixed pieces." For example, you might see "pork chop suey" or "vegetable chop suey" listed on a menu.

4. dim sum

Dim sum are small, appetizer-like dishes of food, served for brunch at Chinese restaurants. There are a large variety of dim sum, including meat dishes, vegetarian dishes, cakes and pastries. Dim sum comes from 点心 (*diǎn xīn*). It translates literally as "touch the heart," perhaps because of the dishes' small, attractive quality.

5. ginseng

Ginseng is a herbal root used for tea and naturopathic medicine. It comes from 人参 (*rén shēn*). Ginseng is known to have many health benefits, including boosting circulation, lowering cholesterol and reducing stress.

6. loquat

Loquat is a yellow, plum-like fruit native to China and Japan, sometimes called Japanese plum. The name comes from a word in Cantonese, *luh kwat*, literally meaning "rush orange." In Mandarin, it's 芦橘 (*lú jú*).

7. won ton

Won ton are Chinese meat-filled dumplings, usually served in soup, sometimes accompanied by noodles. The name is from 馄饨 (*hún tún*), meaning "irregular pasta."

8. wok

A wok is a stir-fry pan used for cooking. The word comes from Cantonese *wohk*, meaning "pan." Its equivalent in Mandarin is 锅 (*guō*).

9. hoisin sauce

Hoisin sauce is a dark-colored, savory condiment with consistency like ketchup. It's also called oyster sauce. It comes from 海鲜酱 (*hǎi xiān jiàng*), literally, "seafood sauce," because it traditionally includes oyster essence or flavor.

10. ketchup

Would you have guessed that America's favorite condiment comes from a Chinese word? Yup—it's from the Hokkien Chinese term *kê-tsiap*, and it was originally a sauce made from fermented fish. Europeans tried to replicate it and later added tomato as a key ingredient. In Mandarin, ketchup is 番茄酱 (*fān qié jiàng*), or "tomato sauce."

11. chow

Chow refers to food, and “chow down” means to eat. The term is Chinese-English pidgin, and dates back to the 1800s, when Chinese laborers developed railroads in California. There are different stories on this word’s origin. One explanation is that it comes from the Chinese word for “stir fry,” 炒 (*chǎo*).

12. kung pao

Have you ever had kung pao chicken? Kung pao chicken is a type of Chinese dish. This spicy dish originates from Sichuan Province (southwestern China) and traditionally uses Sichuan peppercorns.

In Mandarin, it’s called 宫保鸡丁 (*gōng bǎo jī dīng*). 宫保(*gōng bǎo*) means “palace guard.” Legend has it that this dish was the favorite of a famous palace guard in ancient China.

13. tofu

Tofu is soy bean curd. It comes directly from its Chinese name, 豆腐 (*dòu fǔ*).

14. lychee

Lychee is a tropical fruit with characteristically red shells and sweet, white flesh. Lychee is also used to flavor other foods like tea. In Chinese, it’s 荔枝 (*lì zhī*).

—Culture and Sayings—

15. kung fu

Kung fu, or Chinese martial arts, has been made famous by Hollywood movies and movie stars like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. The word comes from 功夫 (*gōng fū*).

16. coolie

A coolie is a laborer. The term comes from European colonialism and the practice of importing cheap labor from China and India. In Chinese it’s 苦力 (*kǔ lì*), or literally, “bitter work.”

17. gung-ho

Gung-ho means to show enthusiasm. It comes from the name for Chinese industrial cooperatives, 工合 (*gōng hé*), which means “work together.”

In 1942, US Marine Corps Lieutenant Evans Carlson saw and admired the work ethic of these organizations and decided to take the phrase back to America as an unofficial slogan for the Marines.

18. tai chi

Tai chi is a slow, meditative martial arts exercise. It comes from the Chinese name for this practice, 太极拳 (*tài jí quán*), or “shadow boxing.”

19. yin and yang

In Taoist philosophy, yin and yang represent two balancing forces in the universe. Yin is the dark force, and represents feminine quality. Yang is the light force, and represents masculine quality. The harmony of ying and yang is thought to balance the universe and influence everything in it. It comes from the Chinese term 阴阳 (*yīn yáng*).

20. mahjong

Mahjong is a Chinese gambling game. It comes from both Cantonese *màhjeuk* and the Mandarin 麻雀 (*má què*), which literally mean “sparrow.” A sparrow is often pictured on the first tile of a playing set. Mahjong is also phonetically identical to the game’s name in Chinese, which is 麻将 (*má jiāng*).

21. cheongsam

Cheongsam is a traditional robe for men. It is still worn at weddings or [during Chinese New Year](#). The word comes from Cantonese *chèuhngsām*, equivalent to Mandarin’s 长衫 (*cháng shān*) or “long dress.”

22. qipao

Qipao is a form-fitting traditional dress for women. The Chinese name is 旗袍 (*qí páo*).

23. feng shui

The practice of feng shui is thought to balance the energies in the environment and bring about good fortune. It comes from Chinese 风水 (*fēng shuǐ*), meaning “natural surroundings” or literally “wind and water.”

24. typhoon

A typhoon is a hurricane. The term comes from the Chinese equivalent, 台风 (*tái fēng*).

25. Shar Pei

Shar Pei is a breed of dog with characteristically brown, wrinkly skin and a blue-black tongue. Its name comes from 沙皮 (*shā pí*), meaning “sandy skin.”

26. Shih Tzu

Shih Tzu is a Tibetan dog breed with a long silky coat. It comes from 西施犬 (*xī shī quǎn*).

27. chop chop

Last but not least, the famous phrase for “hurry up!” Chop chop comes from the Cantonese word, *gāp*, which in Mandarin is 急 (*jí*). Both mean “in a rush.”

And more

. Gung Ho 长庚何

Pronounced gōng hé in Mandarin. The literal translation is, “work together.” The English use was popularized by Marines fighting in the Pacific in World War II. The phrase came to [mean](#): “whole heartedly enthusiastic, and loyal, eager, and zealous.”

2. Typhoon 台风

Pronounced dàfēng in Mandarin and tai fung in Cantonese. The literal translation is “strong wind.” Experts say the term, typhon from the Greek and Arabic, was strengthened with the Chinese translation.

3. Chopsticks 筷子

British sailors are said to have first used this word in the late 17th century. The term derives from the word ‘kap kap’, which sounds like chop-chop to the English ear. The Chinese word literally means “fast.”

4. China 中国

In Chinese, the name is pronounced zhōng guó and literally means “the middle country.” The name was first used by the Italian explorer, Marco Polo.

5. Catsup (Ketchup) 番茄酱

Pronounced koechiap and literally means “brine of fish.” Originally, ketchup was a tomato based sauce for fish. Purportedly, introduced to England by William Ketchner.

6. Silk 丝绸

Pronounced si in Mandarin. The word was first introduced to Western culture by smugglers who took silk worms and mulberry leaves out of China in 552 Common Era (CE).

7. Feng Shui 风水

Literally wind and water. It is the Chinese belief in creating a spiritual balance in one’s home and workplace. The word was first introduced to Westerners in 1757.

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8. J-Particle J 粒子

A subatomic particle discovered by Samuel C. C. Ting. The letter J resembles the Chinese symbol of Ting's last name.

9. Kowtow 磕头

Literally means “knock head.” Pronounced e k’o-t’ou in Chinese. In China the word is a way of bowing and touching the forehead to the ground to indicate respect. In English the word means to “be servile: to behave in an extremely submissive way in order to please somebody in a position of authority.”

10. Junk 垃圾

The literal translation in Chinese is “boat.” In 1884 the term came to mean “old refuse from boats and ships,” and eventually came to mean trash in Western culture.

11. Lose Face 丢了面子

The literal translation is “humiliation” and is pronounced tu lien in Chinese. The word is said to have been introduced to English speakers in 1876.

12. Shanghai 上海

Shanghai is a Chinese seaport. The word in English came to mean, “to drug a man unconscious and ship him as a sailor.” This was the practice of ‘recruiting’ sailors to the seaport of Shanghai.

13. Tai Chi 太极

In Chinese, the word is literally translated to the “supreme ultimate.” It is now used in American lingo to describe the martial art of tai chi. Some emphasize the slow movements as a form of exercise, while others practice it as a martial art.

14. Oolong 乌龙茶

Literally “black dragon.” First introduced to the English language in 1852 as a dark, black tea.

15. Tea 茶

Pronounced chá in Chinese. Introduced to the English in 1852, from the Mandarin.