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## [Scientists say learning Chinese languages makes you musical](#)

[www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk) — Learning to speak Mandarin and Vietnamese as a child helps make you more musical, claims a study that suggests being fluent in the languages helps you have perfect pitch. (Arts & Culture)

Made popular 15 days ago

Submitter: [joeboy70](#)

### Top 119 of 119 Comments

- +25 [MarkusX](#) on 04/30/2009

This is incredible, although it's quite logical if you think about it. Languages are shaping how we think and hear and of course how we express ourselves and if the language attaches different meanings to tonal differences of the same word, then it's quite natural that people who speak that language natively need to make an effort to express themselves as clearl as they can. Much more than people who's language isn't relying on such tonal qualities. BTW: "Deutsch" is the perfect last name for a scientist researching languages. :-)

- +23 [DarkBlueAnt](#) on 05/01/2009

This is wrong. If it were true, going to Karaoke bars with my Chinese friends wouldn't be as funny as it is.

- +21 [jasonbovey](#) on 05/01/2009

This totally explains why I can't learn Mandarin no matter how many times I've tried. I can't sing for my dear life. Speaking of singing, Asian are awesome when it comes to Karaoke...Ahhhh, that explains it all.

- +16 [mandarin](#) on 05/01/2009

Im surprised you can actually use the internet.

- +16 [urbanetruth](#) on 05/01/2009

Mandarin seems much more pitch-sensitive than other languages. Voice inflexion and pronunciation

are more varied. So this makes sense.

- +12 [PandaBearShenyu](#) on 05/01/2009

Even if you do speak mandarin, you have to have the perfect 4 pitches down pat to really benefit from this. A lot of Chinese people don't really pronounce the tones well, so if you go to karaoke with them, they suck as much as the next person. lol The hardest part when I teach Mandarin is for the people to get the sense of the 4 tones into their heads, since if they mix up the tones, it just sounds weird. XD

- +11 [stradf](#) on 05/01/2009

I tried to learn chinese. I really did. But the entire world worked against me to prevent me from learning Chinese. First I learnt I was learning the WRONG chinese - cantonese, when most of China speaks Mandarin. One month wasted. Then the teacher missed two classes. And even if she misses we have to pay. Then I realized most people in my class ALREADY spoke mandarin and were there for a easy A+ and the 3 credits. It isn't very hard to find when most students in the class... are chinese. Results? An average of 95% in exams, and my grades were below 60% Then came the mid-session exam. It was a miserable failure. The voice quality was horrible and I didn't understand \*\*\*\*\* of what the person said. I ended up answering randomly wo shi xuesheng hoping to get a few points. Then came a week vacations. One class lost. And at the end of the week - a seven weeks strike started!!!! No classes!!!! I swear this is complete \*\*\*\*\* , teachers started a strike to get a salary increase (which they eventually got) and we kept paying to stay home. At the end I had one class and I didn't know the strike ended so I didn't go. Result? I got my final monday on seven weeks of classes I was supposed to read. Result? One session of chinese, \$1000 and I barely speak 10 words, plus I risk failing and losing my credits, and dropping my GPA. Morale of the story? Don't study chinese or at least study it in a good school. Anyway where was I going with all that...

- +9 [yuckapoo](#) on 05/01/2009

Since when does musicality equate to perfect pitch?

- +9 [vapn420](#) on 05/01/2009

I'm more surprised he owns a computer. Actually, he's probably at the public library.

- +9 [crozon](#) on 04/30/2009

There is a great episode of Radio Lab that deals with tonal languages - the first portion actually interviews Professor Diana Deutsch - give it a listen:

[http://www.wnyc.org/shows/radiolab/episodes/2006/0 ...](http://www.wnyc.org/shows/radiolab/episodes/2006/0...)

- +8 [blaydcor](#) on 05/01/2009

No, that's from overbearing parents who threaten severe beatings if rigorous piano-practicing schedules are not adhered to

- +8 [VisualRhetoric](#) on 05/01/2009

I hate Twitter but I think I'm beginning to understand it... Limit people's whiny drivel to 140 characters...BRILLIANT!

- +6 [hooahaha](#) on 05/01/2009

Hell, it'd explain the amount of Chinese kids playing piano on YouTube.

- +6 [chillybeans27](#) on 05/01/2009

It's not BS. Mandarin and other tonal languages are different because the tone of a word and its direction can completely change its meaning. For example, in Mandarin the word 'ma' with different tones can mean mother, horse, to scold, or rope.

- +6 [mattmollysdad](#) on 05/01/2009

I have trouble with the opening: "Learning to speak Mandarin and Vietnamese as a child helps make you more musical, claims a study that suggests being fluent in the languages helps you have perfect pitch." 1. as a pianist for the last 57 years I still DO NOT HAVE PERFECT PITCH 2. I lived and performed in Asia for 15 years and it was easier for me to learn to write than speak the language 3. My 24 year old son does not sing or play the piano. He does have perfect pitch. Because of that and my obvious interest in Chinese from living in Taiwan I pushed him to learn Mandarin. He studied Chinese in college and spent a year at University of Beijing. He speaks fluently and has a great accent. So I think the intro should be rewritten. "Having perfect musical pitch makes it easier to learn how to speak Asian languages."

- +5 [raydeen](#) on 05/01/2009

Who needs perfect pitch. We have Autotune. :D

- +5 [redrabbit](#) on 05/01/2009

Why would it? It isn't the ONLY factor that determines one's musical ability. Cultural, economic and social factors are also important. I bet per capita, more Koreans and Japanese can afford to buy instruments for children earlier on than Chinese families. This is changing though, as the Chinese middle class grows.

- +5 [TOFUU](#) on 05/01/2009

I think the point is that knowing a tonal language makes it easier for you to become perfect pitched/good with music. It's not like you're automatically going to be good if you speak one. Some people just can't pick it up, asian or not. Furthermore, when you go to the karaoke bar/box, you can be as crazy as you want anyways. I don't go to the karaoke box to sing to my best ability. I go to have fun and let loose. Which sometimes means singing terribly. Also, you and your friends are probably half drunk. Right?

- +5 [Syric](#) on 05/01/2009

What does that have to do with perfect pitch? Perfect pitch doesn't help you for \*\*\*\*\* with writing music or playing an instrument. It can help you learn songs by ear faster, but that's about it.

- [+5blaydcor](#) on 05/01/2009

What a fascinating personal anecdote; please tell another one.

- [+5aristotle0dude](#) on 05/01/2009

Have a chip on your shoulder do we? I think you are just upset because you cannot hold a note. Nobody is perfect pitch or even close to it all the time but some people do get close to it on a fairly consistent basis. Perhaps they are not perfect when measured by instruments but close enough for the typical human ear.

- [+4whorunbartertwn](#) on 05/01/2009

Learning Chinese is hard work, no getting around it. The additional factors of a \*\*\*\*\* learning environment would make it impossible for anyone.

- [+4Syric](#) on 05/01/2009

Isn't this pretty common knowledge by now? It's pretty obvious that growing up needing to differentiate between different pitches/intervals will make you better at it. Also, most of these comments = fail. People seem to assume that perfect pitch is supposed to be correlated to musical talent, or something. That's not true, and the article doesn't pretend that it is (although the title is misleading). Perfect pitch doesn't help you make music any more than clear vision makes you a good painter. It's just something some people can do.

- [+4KingGorilla](#) on 05/01/2009

I agree your life is \*\*\*\*\*

- [+4orsinoduke](#) on 05/01/2009

This is depressing. Last week, I found some articles said Chinese/Korea/Japanese are smarter than us. They have the highest average IQ on this planet ...close to 104. Now, this article tells me that Chinese also can sing better than us. What else?

- [+3beloitpiper](#) on 05/01/2009

You're gonna put Coldplay and the Sex Pistols with The Beatles and Zeppelin? AND you forgot Clapton. Your music tastes are \*\*\*\*\*.

- [+3whorunbartertwn](#) on 05/01/2009

>A lot of Chinese people don't really pronounce the tones well< Agreed. Some people stress too much about learning perfect tones but context plus combined zi into ci often makes it pretty clear. Chinese

speakers often go neutral on trailing tones of common words with no loss of understanding.

- +3

ma - mom, numb, horse, cuss....all depending on the tonation.

- +3Syric on 05/01/2009

Nor does it purport to. RTFA?

- +3yuckapoo on 05/01/2009

[http://www.aruffo.com/eartraining/research/article ...](http://www.aruffo.com/eartraining/research/article...) Summary: "Thus the absolute hearing (perfect pitch) correlates neither with musicality, musical achievement, or academic giftedness. The data is hardly different when correlated with individual musical skills."

- +3fuzzybunny1701 on 05/01/2009

If you want to hear what Mandarin tones sound like, watch this pinyin video for kids produced by the People's Republic of China. The section on tones starts at 1:59. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9Ayvvy-Dgs>

- +3Ifirimain on 05/03/2009

So maybe this explains why 90% of "musical prodigies" seem to be of Asian descent...

- +3Irishsmurf on 05/01/2009

Cool story bro.

- +3matu4251 on 05/01/2009

I didn't know that vietnamese was considered a chinese language... it doesn't sound even close to cantonese or mandarin and has a complete different grammatical structure. The conclusion of the study might be valid but the title of the article is dead wrong.

- +3IglooBurner on 05/01/2009

I always thought black people are the best singers around.

- +2vapn420 on 05/01/2009

... are you serious right now?

- +2NickLee808 on 05/01/2009

Mandarin was the first language I ever learned. Apparently, I had a knack for humming to tapes as a toddler. Then I went to preschool and started learning English. Now I'm a writer who sings in a monotonous voice during karaoke. I still speak Mandarin, but with a really heavy English accent, apparently.

- +2[PandaBearShenyu](#) on 05/01/2009

lol I hate Jay Chou. I don't even know what he's singing half the time, it's like he has no tongue or something. XD

- +2[laim](#) on 05/01/2009

i remember my high school teacher telling me this

- +2[Bodhinature](#) on 05/01/2009

The title isn't wrong. Vietnamese is a tonal language and so are the Chinese dialects (as is Thai, Laotian, Karen, Meo, Cambodian). This doesn't mean they are related. They are no more related than Russian is to Aleutian, both of which are highly inflected.

- +2[orsinoduke](#) on 05/01/2009

Japanese are quite successful, but I don't see any reason why Korean should also be listed there. Forgive me, I can not find a single famous piece of Korean music. Chinese have lots excellent traditional classics, as well as Teresa Teng and Faye Wong.

- +2[redrabbit](#) on 05/01/2009

Dude, he's a sound engineer! Clearly, his opinion on music is the only right one! (And his name isn't Surely!)

- +2[seltaeb4](#) on 05/01/2009

It worked for the Beatles.

- +2[doctressjulia](#) on 05/01/2009

Mandarin has 4 tones, Cantonese has 12... not sure about Vietnamese... wo bu zhi dao.

- +2[noumuon](#) on 05/01/2009

a chinese talent contest in london surely makes you an expert on chinese music. surely.

- +2[Enterres](#) on 05/01/2009

We're sort of like some of the derelict children in Africa i've heard studied about; since they were



Being good with pitches wouldn't help you play a piano. It's a matter of dexterity, rhythm, and music reading ability. Unless you're looking to tune the piano yourself.

- **+2**[Syric](#) on 05/01/2009

"What makes mandarin so much different?" <http://tinyurl.com/ct3htd>

- **+1**[iamchewy](#) on 05/01/2009

Yes.

- **+1**[Hillsfar](#) on 05/02/2009

That translates as "Please steal/grab the worm."

- **+1**[Hillsfar](#) on 05/02/2009

There are 5 tones. That's how we learned it. The last is short and abrupt.

- **+1**[Hillsfar](#) on 05/02/2009

Why are you surprised? Anything that expedites fapping will be learned quickly and be practiced often.

- **+1**[Bodhinature](#) on 05/01/2009

All of those awesome bands are completely negated by Coldplay...

- **+1**[mrzack](#) on 05/01/2009

you sinister racist.

- **+1**[mintedmeadow](#) on 05/01/2009

Playing a piano is different from speaking a language; in each, respectively, they require different functions within the brain. It's the same reason in which children can understand their parent when they speak in a foreign language, but they cannot produce it themselves. While your ear may be able to pick up and understand different pitches, your vocal chords are not trained to produce it.

- **+1**[mintedmeadow](#) on 05/01/2009

The reason that Korean and Japanese musicians are more popular has nothing to do with their singing prowess.

- **+1**[Hillsfar](#) on 05/02/2009



I listened and learned!!

- [+Ithankreek](#) on 05/02/2009

Does English's ridiculous spelling rules make native speakers better at remembering trivia?

- [+Imatu4251](#) on 05/01/2009

Well I wouldn't have said anything if it said "tonal language" like you :) It's just that they said "chinese language" as if China was the entire South East Asia... and like you pointed out there are a lot of different countries there with different cultures and different languages.

- [+Iharley999](#) on 05/01/2009

I beg to differ.. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5w-5QchsVkc>

- [+Iopensourcer](#) on 05/01/2009

and according to Outliers, better at math too

- [+IBodhinature](#) on 05/01/2009

Uhm, Mandarin is not romanized, officially, and Cantonese are aware of tonality in language. That they have no romanized explanation for it does not mean they are ignorant of the concept at all!

- [+Iaristotle0dude](#) on 05/01/2009

I think learning more than one language as a child is beneficial and can help you develop an ear for music since you have to juggle learning more than one way of pronouncing vowels and other sounds.

- [+Iredrabbitt](#) on 05/01/2009

Because they were under such a strict regime for so many decades that didn't allow the market to handle the music industry's content?

- [+Iwhorunbartertwn](#) on 05/01/2009

Trust me it's just your POV. I speak Mandarin, and the tones on Cantonese sound far more extreme both in pitch and in length of how long they are held. Sure Mandarin speakers will sometimes end sentences with the occasional 阿 held a little long but nothing like Cantonese.

- [+Iwhorunbartertwn](#) on 05/01/2009

As another aside, I have a coworker who doesn't speak either but has learned to tell the difference from hearing which is which. When he imitates mandarin he does a muffled : "shi shi bi shi ji shi jiang shi ji shi" When he does cantonese it's far more an up and down exaggerated tone dealie.

- [+Igregjazz](#) on 05/01/2009

I have perfect pitch, and can honestly say it didn't help me with tones when learning Mandarin. Generally musicians do not develop perfect pitch over time unless they spend a LOT of effort developing it. Even then, they do not have the same degree of perfect pitch as people born with it (being born with perfect pitch means that you have the ability to retain pitches in your memory).

- [+Idslfreakdude](#) on 05/01/2009

as a native cantonese speaker, i can say that learning mandarin tones can be a b\*tch. the key is that their 2nd tone goes from low to high and their 3rd tone goes down and up. If you look at cantonese tones, they're nice and moderate (from my pov)

- [+I digmule](#) on 05/01/2009

I didn't realize that Vietnamese was a "Chinese language".

- [+Irlbigfish](#) on 05/01/2009

This probably explains why all the best YouTube piano performances are done by Asians. Is it racism if it's a compliment?

- [+ItimothyCrash01](#) on 05/01/2009

Dude - you come across as a jackass. Perfect pitch doesn't mean you can perfectly hit incremental stages up to .1 hz. It is more often used to listen - then learn and transcribe music (within a specific scale) without the use of sheet music or verbal communication. Also - it is often used by musicians to tune their instrument without the aid of a reference tone. This last skill is quite common - and yes, there are musicians who can tune their instrument by ear just as well as using a digital tuner. I'm in the same room right now with a violinist that does it all the time. Just for the record - even the most beautifully recorded symphonies can be out of tune by .10hz. Your comment about microtones is ridiculous. Depending on the musicians training, Middle-eastern, Thai, & Indian musicians are as comfortable (pitch wise) with 22+ note scales (sruti, etc) as western musicians are with 12 tone. I've worked with string players who can perfectly identify notes in either, no problem. Here's a short (kinda cheaply made) documentary I found, that shows how perfect pitch works. (I'm sure there's better videos out there.) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69fFZ9v6fG4>

- [+IAdamlite](#) on 05/01/2009

Beans, beans, the musical fruit?

- [+Isanskrtam](#) on 05/01/2009

Historically Koreans had been exposed to old school Japanese music (pre-WWII) along with their traditional music. But still, South Korea and Japan have some of the best music-related educations in the world.

- [0vapn420](#) on 05/01/2009

I have to agree. There are only 4 basic tones to mandarin Chinese and they are so simple even a third grader can master them. The true difficulty in Chinese is learning to read and write.

- [0hakamanakus](#) on 05/02/2009

Dude, he just said Hispanics, whites, etc are inferior!

- [0Hillsfar](#) on 05/02/2009

www.fmylife.com

- [0strongsad](#) on 05/01/2009

I see what happened there. You used an assignment operator by accident and made perfect\_pitch == musicality for any further tests for the remainder of the scope of perfect\_pitch... Musicality is assisted by perfect pitch, motor skills, creativity etc...

- [0bluesman3535](#) on 05/01/2009

I would like to thank the presenters of such a thorough study which finally reveals Beethoven's hidden Asian language secrets.

- [0bacon\\_skoda](#) on 05/01/2009

William Hung was ROBBED!!!

- [0ViscidGobs](#) on 05/01/2009

Narcissism anyone?

- [0fauxbro](#) on 05/01/2009

I can see how being able to write kanji could help out with sight reading sheet music but in my own experience (playing piano since i was 3) i subconsciously relate sounds with a specific experince not a symbol then i attach it to note to it . Oh well to each his own

- [0pikelet](#) on 05/02/2009

There are a bunch of successful Japanese singers who are actually Korean. Look at BoA (Korean, does release albums in Korean, Chinese and English but mainly sings in Japanese - often she records in Japanese first and releases a Korean version later) Tohoshinki (boy band, primarily Korean but are successful in Japan and China, better known as DBSK). There's also a lot of Japanese artists with links to Korea, either ethnically (Crystal Kay) or were born there, but went to Japan (Verbal, although he's a rapper).

- [0michaelalfera](#) on 05/02/2009

Actually, this conclusion assumes that perfect pitch is the \*only\* skill required to be a good singer. In fact there are many skills that go into being a good singer, vocal technique being the first of them. Also, as a child, I had a piano teacher who had insane perfect-pitch abilities and in my lessons when she sang, it was all over the place, wildly off-key, and really ugly sounding. The point is that she wasn't paying \*attention\* to using her perfect pitch to sing on pitch...and it's easy to see how this might be the case with your Chinese friends after they've had a drink or two. Furthermore, the fact that Mandarin has only four tones does not negate the fact that cultivating early childhood sensitivity to these tones may very well also cultivate sensitivity to all 12 notes of the Western chromatic scale. Sure, the tones are simple -- I could explain them to you in thirty seconds -- but that does not mean that they are easy to identify and replicate in conversation. For adults who have not learned a tonal language and have not cultivated their aural skills through music or other activities, learning to actually differentiate these tones in a practical setting can be excruciatingly difficult.

- [0Fightzilla](#) on 05/01/2009

It also depends on how the people are taught. You can be fluent but not consciously aware of the tones. Most Cantonese people are not aware of tones, because up until recently most of it is taught by teachers saying a word and repeating it. No romanization with tone marks were used. Many Cantonese people say something and if you ask them what tone mark is used they would not have a clue. Of course this is very different in Vietnamese and Mandarin where romanization is used with tone marks in the case of Vietnamese all the time and in Mandarin it is used when learning the language.

- [0orsinoduke](#) on 05/01/2009

I think this is true. For western people, learning Chinese can help ..., for Chinese, learning English also can help a lot. The fact is so simple I don't even believe someone waste time and money to do such research!

- [0Bodhinature](#) on 05/01/2009

Buried for old news and not mentioning that Thai, Cambodian, and Laotian and their related dialects are also tonal languages.

- [0dwhitbeck](#) on 05/01/2009

Being able to sing a perfect A 440 for example is a little more difficult than recognizing it when played on the piano. Also some people are better able to recognize pitches played on certain instruments, so perhaps timber has something to do with it also. Pitch is something better developed at a young age and it helps if the tones that are heard are always near the correct pitch. Playing and listening to out of tune instruments will not be a help.

- [0z4r4thustr4](#) on 05/02/2009

English languages uses pitch...it's just that tone is phonemic in Chinese and not in English. When I was working on a similar research project, some of the music professors we consulted had perfect

pitch....and it really only helps for music tests, according to them.

- [-Iryrocker](#) on 05/01/2009

that makes sense, all speaking is trying to make sounds... so i guess if you can say the word with accuracy you can sing the note as well...

- [-Imrzack](#) on 05/01/2009

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPMHezOzTSI>

- [-Ijatthegiant](#) on 05/01/2009

I'd rather just eat beans, its quicker...

- [-IJoshReflek](#) on 05/02/2009

name 10 bands from china name one you want to listen to.

- [-IBodhinature](#) on 05/01/2009

So, by your definition, the world is everything immediately accessible to you and only you.

- [-Imintedmeadow](#) on 05/01/2009

Moral of the story? Don't rely on a class to teach you a language.

- [-IPenta5](#) on 05/02/2009

Musical maybe, but one this fore sure, it makes you the worst driver in the world.

- [-Iborez](#) on 05/01/2009

Mate, I sound engineered a huge Chinese talent contest in central London last year and I've heard some \*\*\*\*\* music in my time, but that was beyond. They offered it to me again for this year, and I flat turned it down without a second thought. Oh and FTR: Oppression in society has delivered some of the worlds greatest musical talent.

- [-Idoctressjulia](#) on 05/01/2009

Yes.

- [-2mintedmeadow](#) on 05/01/2009

Based on these comments, lots of people on Digg who don't understand anything about language.

- -2[xsecretfiles](#) on 05/01/2009

Yeah, I'm Chinese and what? Yeah, you know who this is, Jin Let me tell you this The days of the pork fried rice and the chicken wings coming to your house five years is over [Chorus] Ya'll gonna learn Chinese Ya'll gonna learn Chinese Ya'll gonna learn Chinese When the pumps come out, ya'll gon' speak Chinese

- -2[whorunbartertwn](#) on 05/01/2009

Actually Vietnamese and Cantonese rely more on tones than Mandarin.

- -2[mintedmeadow](#) on 05/01/2009

"Last week, I found some articles said Chinese/Korea/Japanese are smarter than us. They have the highest average IQ on this planet" I can't speak for Korea or China since I know little about them, but for Japan, I'd say that's largely because of their militant education system. You have kids jumping off buildings for a reason. Asian parents also tend to be a little... strict about grades. If you bring home a 99% on a paper they'll probably say, "99? Why couldn't you get 100?" (I'm not making this up, these are the sort of stories I've heard from many Asians), whereas most white/black/whatever people would praise their kids and be proud.

- -3[molsen311](#) on 05/01/2009

Only language I know is English and I have perfect pitch. So there.

- -3[c010rb1indusa](#) on 05/01/2009

Think about it Led Zepplein The Beatles Pink Floyd The Who Coldplay Sex Pistols Oasis I could go on and on, every musical generation has an All-Star talent from the UK, it's not the only place where great music is written but they have a pretty damn good track record.

- -3[bhuntsbarger](#) on 05/01/2009

yeah if you like the sound of someone throwing a bunch of silverware up clashing in the air.

- -3[vapn420](#) on 05/01/2009

Wouldn't someone with perfect pitch be considered musical? Perfect pitch=musicality.

- -4[havocjaw](#) on 05/01/2009

This does not explain why Korean and Japanese musicians are more successful than Chinese.

- -5[vapn420](#) on 05/01/2009

Aren't all languages tonal? Isn't that how you get your point across? What makes mandarin so much different? This sounds like a load of BS if you ask me.

- [0z4r4thustr4](#) on 05/02/2009

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