HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 1: Introduction: God, Nature and Dao
Section 8: Introduction to language

- Language differences between China and Indo-European West are significant
    - Geographical barriers slowed linguistic diffusion
- Role of Chinese characters widely misunderstood
    - We refer to Chinese writing as *pictographic* or *ideographic*, not because the characters refer to ideas but because the character is pronounced differently in different dialects
- This system of writing played a powerful unifying role in Chinese history and culture
- 40 different Chinese languages, called ‘dialects
    - Variety of spoken dialects but same unique written from
- Written language also spread to Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese (still used in Japan)
    - Characters can become a method of communication when the different spoken forms are not mutually understood
- Grammatical differences in spoken dialects of Chinese; unified written form has a distinctive grammar of its own
    - The written form was possibly never used as a spoken form
    - In Cantonese and Mandarin, most words are bi-syllabic and in classical they were mostly monosyllabic
    - Compounds typically had regular grammatical structures
- Chinese grammar was highly analytic, it had no tense, number, gender, or case inflections