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Mandarin Chinese: stress or de-stress?
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HAND–OUT

The paper attempts at viewing Chinese stress from a new perspective, offering a “reverse view” of the issue. It argues that non-stress (de-stress) is more important here than stress.

Connected speech is a sequence of syllables of varying prominence:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full glass</th>
<th>Empty glass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>stressed</td>
<td>unstressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Western analysis** (non-tone languages): all syllables are originally (by default) unstressed, then some of them become stressed, prosodically enhanced (word stress, emphasis...)

**Proposed analysis** for Mandarin Chinese (tone language): all syllables (except the morphemes with lexical neutral tone) are originally (by default) full, then some of them become prosodically weakened (reduced) for particular reasons / in particular contexts

**EVIDENCE FOR THE HYPOTHESIS (IMPORTANCE OF DE-STRESSING):**
- existence of **lexical neutral tone** fulfilling important linguistic functions (了, 吗, 的, 孩子...)  
- existence of the group of **cliticoids** (monosyllabic tonal function words such as 我, 把, 是...) which are regularly unstressed in speech – high-frequency words!  
- native Chinese **hardly perceive stress differences** (except for neutral tone and emphasis)  
- **linguists disagreement on stress in Chinese** (many contradicting analyses) as opposed to agreement on non-stress (neutral tone, 轻声)  
- **word stress in disyllabic words unsolved** (except for 孩子 type of words)  
- **speech synthesis** (may sound artificial and unnatural – too many full syllables)  
- Chinese cover term is qīngzhòngyín 轻重音, not *zhòngqīngyín 重轻音

**Conclusion:** In Chinese, leaving aside emphasis, it is worth searching for a mechanism and rules for **NON-STRESS ASSIGNMENT** (and phonetic reduction), rather than for a mechanism and rules for **STRESS ASSIGNMENT** (and phonetic enhancement).