

1.4 Stative Verbs

The verb is the heart of the Chinese sentence. Young urban speakers of Chinese may slip material from English or other languages into the noun position in a sentence (Wǒ yǒu *lab*. ‘I have a *lab*’), and nouns such as jítā ‘guitar’ with foreign origins have been incorporated in the language as a result of persistent contact with other cultures. But very rarely does foreign language material show up in the verb position.

Some comparisons with English also reveal the centrality of the verb to the Chinese sentence schema. In Chinese, where the context makes the participants clear, verbs do not need to be anchored with pronouns – as they do in English:

Jiǎ	Máng ma?	Are [you] busy?
Yī	Hěn máng.	Yes, [I] am.

In English, ‘am’ is not a possible response to the question ‘are you busy?’. A pronoun is required: ‘I am.’ However, in the English answer, the verb ‘busy’ does not need to be repeated – ‘I am’ rather than ‘I am busy’. Chinese behaves oppositely from English, as our example shows. Pronouns are often *not* expressed when the context makes the reference clear. On the other hand, verbs tend to be *reiterated* in the answer, without the need of an equivalent to the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ of English.

1.4.1 Types of verbs

As you encounter words in Chinese, you will find that it is useful to categorize them into groups and subgroups (the traditional parts of speech and their subclasses), such as nouns (with subtypes such as countable and non-countable), verbs (with subtypes such as transitive and non-transitive), pronouns (eg, personal pronouns and demonstratives), and adverbs (eg, manner adverbs and degree adverbs). Such categories capture useful generalizations about how words behave. An adverb, for example, will always appear before a verb (or other adverb).

It is also useful to be able to talk about the components of a sentence: subjects, predicates, adverbials, modifiers, etc. A general schema for the sentence hěn máng would be a null subject, and a predicate consisting of an adverb (hěn) and a verb (máng). It is not necessary to be adept at using the linguistic nomenclature, but it is important to be able to understand the notion of classes of words and positions within sentence structure so that generalizations can be noted.

For Chinese verbs, it will be useful to distinguish a number of classes. In this lesson, we will focus on two. One resembles what are called adjectives in English and many other languages: hǎo ‘be good’, máng ‘be busy’, è ‘be hungry’. As the English glosses show, these words do not require an additional form of the verb ‘to be’ (‘are, am, is, etc.’) when they are used as predicates in Chinese: Lèi ma? ‘Are [you] tired?’ / Hěn lèi. ‘[I] am.’ The difference is shown by translating the Chinese words as ‘be+tired’, ‘be+good’, etc. Because such words convey states rather than actions, they are called ‘stative verbs’, abbreviated as ‘SVs’. Strictly speaking, SVs should always be glossed as

‘be+adjective’ (when they are being used as predicates). But once the notion is familiar, we will often fall back on the more convenient practice of glossing them with English adjectives: máng ‘busy’; shūfu ‘comfortable’.

Another general class of verbs involve actions: chī ‘eat’; xǐzǎo ‘to wash’; zǒu ‘to walk; leave’. These will simply be called action verbs, abbreviated V_{act}.

1.4.2 Questions and positive responses

You can begin by learning to ask questions with SVs, and to give either positive or negative responses. Assuming that the context makes explicit [subject] pronouns unnecessary, then one way to ask questions that seek confirmation or denial - *yes-no* questions - is to add the final ‘question particle’ ma to the proposal:

Hǎo ma?	Are [you] well?
Máng ma?	Is [she] busy?
Lèi ma?	Are [you] tired?
È ma?	Is [he] hungry?
Kě ma?	Are [you] thirsty?
Jǐnzhāng ma?	Are [they] nervous?
Shūfu ma?	Are [you] comfortable?
Lěng ma?	Are [you] cold?
Rè ma?	Is [it] hot?
Gāo ma?	Is [she] tall?
Duì ma?	Is [it] correct?

Notes: *máng* [mahng]
lèi rhymes with English ‘say’; *duì* (and *wèi*), rhyme with ‘way’
è [uh]; cf. *rè* [ruh] and *hěn* [huhn]
jǐnzhāng [jeen-j!ahng]; *shūfu* [sh!oofoo] – ! reminds you to raise the tip of your tongue towards the roof of your mouth.

Positive responses repeat the verb, usually with an adverb. The default adverb, where no other is chosen, is hěn, usually glossed as ‘very’, however, in contexts such as these, hěn does little more than support the positive orientation of the sentence, and so is best left untranslated. SVs such as duì ‘correct’, which are ‘all or nothing’, do not occur with degree adverbs, such as hěn.

Máng ma?	Hěn máng.	Yes, [I] am.
Kě ma?	Hěn kě.	Yes, [I] am. <i>Apply the tone rule!</i>
Gāo ma?	Hěn gāo.	Yes, [she] is.
Duì ma?	Duì.	Yes, [it] is.

Notice that unlike English, where the typical positive answer indicates affirmation with ‘yes’ before going on to answer the question, Mandarin has only the direct answer.

1.4.3 Negative responses

Negative responses are usually formed with bu ‘not the case’— recall that the tone of bu is conditioned by that of the following syllable.

Máng ma?	Bù máng.	No, [I]'m not.
Kě ma?	Bù kě.	No, [I]'m not.
Gāo ma?	Bù gāo.	No, [she]'s not.
Duì ma?	Bú duì.	No, [it]'s not.

As with positive answers, Chinese has no direct equivalent to ‘no’, but simply offers a negated verb.

A less abrupt negative (but, again, not used with duì) is formed with bú (with tone shift) plus tài ‘too; very’:

Hǎo ma?	Bú tài hǎo.	No, not very.
Máng ma?	Bú tài máng.	No, not too.
Lèi ma?	Bú tài lèi.	
È ma?	Bú tài è.	

[Negative questions with ma, such as Nǐ bú lèi ma? ‘Aren’t you tired?’, will be dealt with in a later unit. While such questions are easy to form in Chinese, the responses follow patterns unfamiliar to speakers of English.]

1.4.4 *V-not-V questions*

Another way to form *yes-no* questions is to present the verb and its negative, as though offering both options. The negative, bu, in these constructions is often toneless in normal speech: hǎo bù hǎo is usually pronounced hǎo bu hǎo, or even hǎo bu hao. While *V-ma* questions slightly presuppose an answer congruent with the question – ie positive for positive questions, negative for negative questions, *V-not-V* questions are neutral. At this stage, you can regard the two as essentially equivalent:

Rè ma?	Hěn rè.
Rè bu rè?	Hěn rè.
Lěng ma?	Bù lěng.
Lěng bu lěng?	Bú tài lěng.

Other examples

Duì bu duì?	Duì.
Hǎo bu hǎo?	Hěn hǎo. <i>With tone shift!</i>
Máng bu máng?	Bù máng.
Lèi bu lèi?	Hěn lèi.
È bu è?	Bú tài è.
Kě bu kě?	Hěn kě.
Lěng bu lěng?	Hěn lěng.
Rè bu rè?	Bú tài rè.
Jǐn<zhāng> bu jǐnzhāng?	Bù jǐnzhāng.

Shū<fu> bu shūfu? Bù shūfu.

Note

With two-syllable SVs, the 2nd syllable of the first, positive part of *V-not-V* questions often gets elided, as indicated by < > in the last two examples.

1.4.5 Three degrees of response

You can respond to the two kinds of *yes-no* questions positively, neutrally, or negatively; the typical neutral response makes use of the adverb hái (or, before other adverbs, háishi) ‘still; yet’: hái hǎo ‘so so; [I]’m okay (still okay)’.

SUMMARY

SVs: hǎo, máng, lèi, è, kě, lěng, rè, gāo, shūfu, jǐnzhāng, duì				
Yes-No Qs		+	0	--
-ma	V-not-V			
Lèi ma?	Lèi bu lèi?	Hěn lèi.	Hái hǎo.	Bú lèi. Bú tài lèi.
Jǐnzhāng ma?	Jǐn bu jǐnzhāng?	Hěn jǐnzhāng.	Hái hǎo.	Bú jǐnzhāng. Bú tài jǐnzhāng.

1.5 Time and tense

1.5.1 Today, yesterday and tomorrow

Speakers of English and other European languages take the verbal category of tense for granted: speaking of the past generally requires past tense. For Chinese (as well as many other languages), this is not so. Time words such as jīntiān ‘today’, zuótiān ‘yesterday’ (both of which share the root tiān ‘sky; day’), or dates (bā hào), may be added to simple sentences containing SVs without any change to the form of the verb, or any other addition to the sentence:

Zuótiān lěng ma? Was [it] cold yesterday? <Zuótiān> bú tài lěng.
 Zuótiān rè bu rè? Was [it] hot yesterday? <Zuótiān> hěn rè!
 Zuótiān hěn máng ma? Were [you] busy yesterday? <Zuótiān> hěn máng!
 Jīntiān lèi bu lèi? Are [you] tired today? <Jīntiān> hái hǎo!
 Èrshíbā hào hěn lěng. The 28th was quite cold.

Note the differences in word order between the English and the Chinese in the previous examples:

Was it cold? > It was cold. Lěng ma? > Hěn lěng.
 Was it cold *yesterday*? Zuótiān lěng ma?

The appearance of a time word such as míngtiān (or a date) can be sufficient to indicate that an event is certain to occur in the future – something that is also true of English.

Wǒ míngtiān hěn máng. I'm busy tomorrow.

However, at times, Chinese does require some additional acknowledgement of the fact that, unlike the past and present, the future is uncertain. Thus, in talking about future weather, the word huì ‘can; will; likely to’ is in many cases added to the statement of futurity: Míngtiān huì hěn lěng ma? ‘Will [it] be cold tomorrow?’ Huì, while it does correspond to English ‘will’ in this example, is not actually as common as the latter. For the time being, you should be wary of talking about future states.

1.5.2 SVs plus le

Rather than the static notion of past versus present (or, more accurately, past versus non-past), Chinese is more sensitive to a dynamic notion of ‘phase’, or ‘change’. For example, if a speaker wishes to underscore the relevance of a *new situation*, he can signal it by the addition of the sentence-final ‘particle’, le:

Zuótiān bù shūfu, jīntiān [I] didn't feel well yesterday, but [I]'m
hǎo le. okay today.

An explicit contrast between an earlier situation (zuótiān) and a current one (jīntiān) typically triggers this use of le. However, it is quite possible state the situation at both times without underscoring the change with le, too, as the examples below show.

Other words that can signal prior or current time include:

<i>earlier</i>	<i>current</i>
<u>yǐqián</u> ‘formerly; before; used to [be]’	<u>xiànzài</u> ‘now; a present’
<u>běnlái</u> ‘originally; at first’;	<u>zuìjìn</u> ‘recently; lately (most-near)’
<u>cóngqián</u> ‘before; in the past’	<u>mùqián</u> ‘at present; currently (eyes-before)’

Examples

Yǐqián hěn jǐnzhāng, xiànzài [I] was nervous yesterday, but [I]'m okay
hǎo le. now.

Xiànzài bú è le! [I]'m not hungry anymore!

Yǐqián bù shūfu. [It] used to be uncomfortable.

Jīntiān rè le!	[It]'s gotten hot today!
Zuótiān hěn lèi, jīntiān hěn máng.	[I] was tired yesterday [and] I'm busy today!
Běnlái hěn máng, xiànzài hǎo le.	[I] was busy at first, but now [I]'m okay.
Mùqián hěn lěng, hěn bù shūfu.	It's quite cold at present, [I]'m not comfortable.
Běnlái hěn lěng, zuìjìn rè le.	It used to be cold, but lately it's gotten hot.
Cóngqián wǒ bù shūfu, zuìjìn hái hǎo.	In the past, I wasn't comfortable, but recently, [I]'m okay.

Observe that it is the *new situation* that is associated with le, not the original state! The presence of le generally cancels out the need for a supporting adverb, such as hěn.

1.6 Pronouns

As many of the examples above show, Chinese often manages to keep track of people (or things) relevant to a situation without the use of pronouns. But pronouns are available where context alone might be insufficient – or where it might otherwise be more appropriate to use one. The set of personal pronouns in Chinese is relatively simple, and regular. They are presented in the following table, with notes following:

<i>singular</i>	<i>collective</i>	<i>singular</i>	<i>plural</i>
wǒ	wǒmen	I, me	we, us
nǐ nín	nǐmen	you you [polite]	you [all]
tā	tāmen	he, she, [it] him, her	they, them

Notes

a) Tā tends to refer only to people (or to animals being treated as if they were people); in speech, at least, it rarely refers to things, and so rarely corresponds to English 'it'. On those occasions when tā is used to refer to things, it is more common in object position, so it is more likely to occur in the Chinese equivalent of the sentence 'put it away' than in 'it's in the drawer'. Chinese sometimes uses a demonstrative (zhè 'this' or nà 'that') where English has 'it', but generally it has no explicit correspondence at all.

b) The form nínmen ('you+POL-MEN') is rare, but does sometimes occur in letters, or in formal speech. The -men suffix (not usually toned, though sometimes cited in isolation with a rising tone) is most often found with pronouns, as shown. With nouns designating people, it can also occur as a 'collective' eg lǎoshī 'teacher', lǎoshīmen 'teachers'. But even in such cases, -men should not be

thought of as a plural marker, for it never co-occurs with numerals: sān ge lǎoshī ‘three teachers’, with no -men possible. In faster speech, wǒmen often becomes wǒm, tāmen, tām, and so on.

c) Mandarin speakers from Beijing and the northeast, also make a distinction (found in many languages) between wǒmen ‘we’ that includes speaker, addressee and others, and zán or zánmen (pronounced ‘zámen’, as if without the first ‘n’) ‘the two of us; we’. The latter includes the speaker and the person spoken to, but excludes others. Eg Zánmen zǒu ba! ‘Let’s leave [us, but not the rest of them]’ – a phrase worth storing away as a prototype example for zánmen.

1.6.1 Names

Where the identification or status of a person requires more than a pronoun, then of course, Chinese has recourse to personal names, or names and titles (cf. §1.9.1). For now, suffice it to say that Chinese students often refer to each other either by personal name (at least two syllables), or by surname (xìng) prefixed by a syllable such as xiǎo ‘young’. Thus, Liú Guózhèng may be addressed by friends as Guózhèng or xiǎo Liú; Lǐ Dān, as Lǐ Dān (full name of two syllables) or xiǎo Lǐ.

1.6.2 The particle ne and the adverb yě

The particle ne, placed after subject nouns, has a number of uses. It may signal a pause for reflection, something particularly useful for learners:

Zuótiān ne, zuótiān hǎn rè.	Yesterday -- yesterday was hot.
Tā ne, tā hěn jǐnzhāng.	[As for] him, he’s quite anxious.

It may also be used to signal follow-up questions. The response to a follow-up question often contains the adverb yě ‘also; too; as well’. Recall that adverbs are placed before verbs (including SVs) or other adverbs (such as bu):

<p> Jiǎ Jīntiān lèi ma? Wǒ yě hěn lèi. Jīntiān rè bù rè? Zuótiān ne? Nǐ jǐnzhāng ma? Wǒ háishi hěn jǐnzhāng. Xiǎo Wáng zuótiān bù shūfu. Jīntiān ne? Jīntiān hǎo le. </p>	<p> Yǐ Hěn lèi, nǐ ne? Hěn rè. Zuótiān yě hěn rè. Bù jǐnzhāng le. Nǐ ne? Ng. Ng. </p>
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Notes

1. Háishi ‘still’; cf. §1.7.1.
2. Spoken Chinese makes use of variety of ‘interjections’. Ng (with pronunciation ranging from a nasalized ‘uh’ to ‘n’) is one of them. On the falling tone, it indicates agreement, or as in the above example, understanding.

Exercise 1.

Write down, and recite, what you would say under the circumstances; be prepared to shift roles:

1. Ask him if [he] was busy yesterday?
 2. Note that [it]’s quite cold today.
 3. Remark that [it]’s gotten cold today.
 4. Find out if young Li’s nervous.
 5. Respond that [she] is [nervous].
 6. Say that you are too.
 7. Say [you] didn’t feel well yesterday.
 8. Say that you’re better now.
 9. Tell your friend [you]’re not very hungry.
 10. Tell him that you’re okay today, [but] you were quite nervous before.
 11. Ask your friend if [she]’s thirsty [or not].
 12. Find out if your classmate is comfortable.
 13. Say that [you]’re not hungry anymore.
 14. Say that he was wrong.
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21G.101 / 21G.151 Chinese I (Regular)
Spring 2006

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