

HSK 3 Grammar

English edition

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1 Adjectives

1.1 + — “...to the max” ()

When something is **off the charts** — the best, the worst, the most you’ve ever seen — tack (jīle) onto the adjective. means “**the furthest point, the extreme**” (it’s the of , the North *Pole*), so reads literally as “*good — all the way to the pole.*” It works for praise and complaints alike, and it lives in casual, spoken Chinese.

Unusually for a degree phrase, clamps **straight onto the adjective with no** — and the is **welded on**: drop it and the sentence is simply wrong.

Structure: Subject + Adjective + *Literally: “[subject is] adjective — to the extreme.”*

{zh: |zhè ge|this / |zhǔ yi|idea / |hǎo|good / |jí le|extremely / 。 }
This idea is perfect.

{zh: |gāo kǎo|the college exam / |nà tiān|that day / , |wǒ|I / |jīn zhāng|nervous / |jí le|extremely / 。 }
I was incredibly nervous on the day of the gaokao.

{zh: |nà ge|that / |nán hái|boy / |tǎo yàn|annoying / |jí le|extremely / ! }
That boy is unbelievably annoying!

Remember: = pole, the furthest point (= North Pole). pushes “good” all the way to the pole — and never travels without its .

Watch out

- The **is non-negotiable:** ✓, never .
- No** — it attaches bare (), unlike most degree complements ().
- already carries the emphasis, so don’t pile on or : , never .

1.2 — doubling adjectives for warmth (AA / AABB)

Repeat an adjective and it turns **soft, warm, and vivid** — less a cold fact, more a fond little picture. This doubling runs all through friendly, natural Chinese, especially for **physical descriptions**: colours, sizes, shapes.

A **one-syllable** adjective doubles as **AA**, usually with before the noun — (“big”) → (“nice and big, big and round”):

Structure: A + A + (+ Noun)

{zh: |bǎo bao|the baby / |de / |yǎn jīng|eyes / |dà dà de|big and round / 。 }
The baby has big, round eyes.

{zh: |jīn wǎn|tonight / |de / |yuè liàng|moon / |yuán yuán de|nice and round / 。 }
The moon is lovely and round tonight.

A **two-syllable** adjective doubles as **AABB** — repeat each character, not the whole word: → , → , → . Used as an **adverb**, the AABB form takes before the verb:

{zh: |wǒ|I / |xiǎng|want to / |shū shū fú fú|comfortably / |de / |tǎng|lie / |zài|on / |shā fā shàng|the sofa / 。 }
I just want to lie comfortably on the sofa.

Remember: doubling **softens and warms** — isn’t a flat “big eyes,” it’s the affectionate “lovely big eyes” a parent would coo. AA + paints a noun; AABB + colours a verb.

Watch out

- Not every adjective doubles** — , , are never said as / . Stick to common physical descriptors until you’ve heard a form used for real.
- A doubled adjective is **already emphatic** — never put in front (is wrong).

1.3 + + — turning an adjective into “-ly” ()

To say **how** an action is done, park the particle (de) after an adjective — it is Chinese’s “-ly.” (“happy”) → (“happily”); (“careful”) → (“carefully”). The adverb always sits **in front of** the verb.

Structure: Adjective + + Verb *Literally: “happy-ly — smiled.”*

{zh: |tā|he / |gāo xìng|happy / |de / |xiào|smiled / |le / 。 }

He smiled happily.

{zh: |lǎo shī|the teacher / |rèn zhēn|careful / |de / |kàn|read / |le / |wǒ de|my / |zuò wén|essay / 。 }

The teacher read my essay carefully.

Remember: = “-ly”. Three *de*’s sound identical but split the work: owns a noun (), drives a verb (), rates the result (). The here even carries “earth” on its left — picture an adverb *grounding* how the verb is done.

Watch out

- This is read **de**, not *dì* — same sound as and , different job.
- The adverb phrase comes **before** the verb, never after it.

2 Adverbs

2.1 + + — “(did it) again” (in the past)

Something already happened **one more time**? Reach for (yòu) — “again, once more.” It looks **backward** at a repeat that’s done, and it often carries a flick of annoyance, like English “*again?!* ” (For “again” in the *future*, you want instead — see the contrast below.)

Structure: (Subject +) + Verb + *Literally: “again — [verb] — (and it’s happened).”*

{zh: |nǐ|you / |yòu|again / |chí dào|late / |le / 。 }

You’re late again.

{zh: |yòu|again / |xià yǔ|rain / |le / ! }

It’s raining again!

{zh: |jīn tiān|today / |yòu|again / |yào|have to / |jiā bān|work overtime / |le / ! }

We’ve got to work overtime again today!

Remember: looks back, looks forward. = “here we go again” (it happened); = “do it once more” (it will). Future takes no ; past needs it.

Watch out

- also works with negatives: (“he didn’t come *again*”).
- For something about to repeat, pair it with : ... (“here it comes again”).

2.2 — “all along, continuously”

is literally “**one straight (line)**” — picture a single, unbroken line drawn through time. It describes an action or state that runs **non-stop** over a stretch — “continuously, the whole time, all along.” English often lands it as “always.”

Structure: Subject + + Predicate *Literally: “in one straight line, [predicate].”*

{zh: |wǒ|I / |yì zhí|all along / |hěn|very / |xǐ huan|like / |nǐ|you / 。 }

I’ve liked you all along.

{zh: |lǎo bǎn|the boss / |yì zhí|always / |hěn|very / |máng|busy / 。 }

The boss is always busy.

{zh: |shí bā suì|eighteen / |yǐ hòu|after / , |tā|he / |yì zhí|has ... ever since / |yí ge rén|alone / |zhù|lived / 。 }

Since he was eighteen, he’s lived alone the whole time.

Remember: = **one straight line through time** — no breaks. It’s *unbroken duration*; for a repeating *habit* (“always does X”), switch to .

Watch out

- It often pairs with () or ().
- also means “go straight ahead” — the same “straight line” idea, in space.

2.3 — “always” (a habit)

is “always” in the sense of a **habit or consistent pattern** — something that just keeps recurring. means “all in all, in every case,” so says “*in every case, it’s like this.*” It’s neutral in tone and sits before the verb.

Structure: Subject + + Verb · with an adjective: + / + Adj
{zh: |tā|he / |zǒng shì|always / |chí dào|late / 。 }

He’s always late.

{zh: |nǐ|your / |jiā|home / |zǒng shì|always / |hěn|very / |gān jìng|clean / 。 }

Your home is always so clean.

Remember: = “in every case.” is the **neutral** “always” (a pattern); its grumbling twin (below) adds the eye-roll.

Watch out

- Before an **adjective** you must add a degree word: ✓, not .
- = a *recurring habit*; = one *unbroken* stretch. “He’s always late” (each time) is ; “it rained the whole time” is .

2.4 — “finally, at last”

marks something **finally happening after a long wait** — and it glows with **relief or joy**. is “the end / finish line” (the of), so is “*at the finish line, it came.*” Unlike English “finally,” it can’t stand alone, move to the front, or end a sentence — and it must team up with .

Structure: Subject + + Predicate +

{zh: |nǐ|you / |zhōng yú|finally / |dào|arrived / |le / ! }

You’re finally here!

{zh: |zuò yè|the homework / |zhōng yú|finally / |zuò|done / |wán|finished / |le / ! }

I’ve finally finished the homework!

Remember: = the **finish line** you’ve been straining toward — is the sigh of relief as you cross it, always sealed with .

Watch out

- The **is obligatory** — ... ; never bare like English “finally” on its own.
- It implies a *welcome* outcome. For a flat, neutral “in the end,” use .

2.5 — “nearly, almost”

means “nearly, almost” — it gets you right up to the line without quite crossing it. It loves company: it very often teams up with an **“all” word** (, , ...) or a **“none” word** (,).

Structure: + / ... · Subject + + [/] + Predicate

{zh: |jī hū|almost / |měi ge rén|everyone / |dōu|all / |yǒu|has / |shǒu jī|a phone / 。 }

Almost everyone has a phone.

{zh: |jī hū|almost / |méi yǒu|no / |rén|one / |xiāng xìn|believes / |tā|him / 。 }

Almost no one believes him.

{zh: |wǒ|my / |lǎo bǎn|boss / |jī hū|hardly / |bù|ever / |hē jiǔ|drinks / 。 }

My boss hardly ever drinks.

Remember: think of as a needle stopping **just short** of the mark. + → “almost all”; + → “almost none”; / → “hardly ever.”

Watch out

- It points to one extreme (all or none) — pair it with a / / to land the meaning.

2.6 — “only”

(zhǐ) is the everyday word for “only.” It’s an **adverb**, so it clings to the **verb** (or an auxiliary like 着 / 着) — never to the noun the way English “only” floats around.

Structure: 我 + Verb 只有 + 我 / 我 + Verb

{zh: 我|wǒ|I / 只|zhǐ|only / 有|yǒu|have / 一|yí ge|one / 个|gē ge|older brother / 的|de / }

I only have one older brother.

{zh: 我|wǒ|I / 只|zhǐ|only / 想|xiǎng|want / 跟|gēn|to be with / 你|nǐ|you / 一|yí|together / 起|qǐ|together / 的|de / }

I only want to be with you.

{zh: 我|wǒ|I / 只|zhǐ|only / 能|néng|can / 说|shuō|say / 两|liǎng|two / 句|jù|sentences / 中|Zhōng wén|Chinese / 的|de / }

I can only say a couple of sentences in Chinese.

Remember: 只 sits **on the verb**: 我只有一只 (“I only have one”), never 我只有一个人. English “only” wanders; Chinese 只 stays glued to the verb.

Watch out

- 只 (zhǐ, “only”) is written the same as 只 (zhī), the measure word for animals (一只猫) — same character, two readings and jobs.

2.7 Duration + 时间 + 多久 — how long you haven’t done something

Here’s a word order that trips up English speakers. To say **how long you have NOT done** something, the duration jumps **in front of** the verb: **time + 已经 + verb + 了**. Compare the normal ”did it for ten years” (verb first), and you’ll see the mirror image.

Structure: Subject + (已经 +) Duration + 已经 + Verb + 了

{zh: 我们|wǒ men|we / 已经|yǐ jīng|already / 十年|shí nián|ten years / 没|méi|haven’t / 见|jiàn|met / 了|le / }

We haven’t seen each other for ten years now.

{zh: 他|tā|he / 已经|yí ge xīng qī|a week / 没|méi|hasn’t / 洗|xǐ zǎo|showered / 了|le / }

He hasn’t showered in a week.

{zh: 你|nǐ|you / 多久|duō jiǔ|how long / 没|méi|haven’t / 回|huí jiā|been home / 了|le / ? }

How long has it been since you went home?

Remember: “have done” puts time after the verb; “haven’t done” puts time before it. 他看了十年 = “watched for ten years”; 他没看过 = “haven’t watched in ten years.” The 这里 here means “and counting.”

Watch out

- Chinese avoids “since [a time point].” Say a *duration* instead (他等了十年 …), or 他上次是 … (“the last time was…”).

2.8 Time + 时间 + 时间 — “not until” (lateness)

才 (cái) drags an action **later than expected** — “not until, as late as.” If 他说 says “already, sooner than you’d think,” 他 is its grumpy opposite: “only then, finally, took its time.”

Structure: Subject + Time + 才 + Verb

{zh: 我|wǒ|I / 昨天|zuó tiān|yesterday / 十一|shí yī diǎn|eleven o’clock / 才|cái|not until / 到家|dào jiā|got home / 了|le / }

I didn’t get home until eleven last night.

{zh: 他|tā|he / 二十五|èr shí wǔ suì|twenty-five / 才|cái|not until / 上|shàng|started / 大学|dà xué|university / 了|le / }

He didn’t start university until he was twenty-five.

Remember: 才 = late / barely (早 = early / already). And 才 takes **no** 了 — the lateness is the point, not a completed result: 他没赶上, never 他赶上了.

Watch out

- Same character does double duty: before a *time* it means “late” (this point); before a *number* it means “only a little” (point 2.12 below).

2.9 先 … , 然后 … — “first …, then …”

To line events up **in order**, frame them with 先 … 然后 … — “first …, (and) then ….” The trap: here 然后 means “**then / next**,” not its usual “again.”

Structure: 先 + Verb 1 , 然后 + Verb 2

{zh: 先|xiān|first / 洗|xǐ shǒu|wash hands / , 然后|zài|then / 吃|chī|eat / 了|le / }

Wash your hands first, then eat.

{zh: 你|nǐ|you / 应该|yào|should / 先|xiān|first / 做|zuò|do / 作业|zuò yè|homework / , 然后|zài|then / 看|kàn|watch / 电视|diàn shì|TV / 了|le / }

Do your homework first, then watch TV.

Remember: in, is the “**and then**” of a sequence, not “again.” Picture two stepping stones: step on first, then .

Watch out

- ... means “do X first, *then* we’ll see” — a “deal with it later” feeling:
- Chain longer sequences with (“and then”) and (“next”).

2.10 ... — doing two things at once

Two deliberate actions happening **at the same time**? Frame both with ... — “(do X) while (doing Y).” means “side,” so it’s literally “*on one side ... on the other side ...*” — two tracks running together.

Structure: Subject + + Verb 1 (,) + Verb 2

{zh: |wǒ|I / |cháng cháng|often / |yì biān|while / |xǐ zǎo|showering / , |yì biān / |chàng gē|sing / 。 }

I often sing in the shower.

{zh: |bié|don’t / |yì biān|while / |kāi chē|driving / , |yì biān / |dǎ diàn huà|make calls / 。 }

Don’t make calls while driving.

Remember: = “**side**” — one action on each side, at once. Casually it shrinks to ... (, “chatting as we walk”).

Watch out

- Both actions must be **intentional**; for “while X was going on,” use ...
- The *main* action is usually the **second** one in Chinese (English often flips the order).

2.11 — “always” (a complaint)

(or just) also means “always” — but it’s the **grumbling** version, loaded with frustration, like “you’re *always* on your phone.” Swap it in for anywhere you want to add an eye-roll.

Structure: Subject + () + Predicate

{zh: |nǐ|you / |zěn me|why / |lǎo shì|always / |chí dào|late / ? }

Why are you always late?

{zh: |zhè ge|this / |jī qì|machine / |lǎo shì|always / |chū|having / |wèn tí|trouble / 。 }

This machine is always breaking down.

Remember: is neutral; **complains.** If you could add “ugh” to the English, use .

Watch out

- It’s a **complaint** — don’t use it for something good (use there).
- Before an adjective, add / / : .

2.12 + — “only” (a small number)

A second job for (cái): drop it before a **number** and it stresses the amount is **smaller than you’d expect** — “only, just, a mere.” Where the “lateness” says “late,” this one says “barely that much.”

Structure: + Number + Measure Word + Noun + Verb + Number + MW + Noun

{zh: |nǐ|you / |cái|only / |èr shí suì|twenty / ? }

You’re only twenty?

{zh: |zhè jiā|this / |diàn|shop / |cái|only / |kāi yè|been open / |yí ge|one / |xīng qī|week / 。 }

This shop has only been open a week.

{zh: |tā men|they / |cái|only / |rèn shi|known each other / |sān ge yuè|three months / ! }

They’ve only known each other three months!

Remember: one , two jobs — before a **time** it drags things *late* (2.8); before a **number** it shrinks the amount to *only that much*. Both share the feeling “less than expected.”

Watch out

- After + verb, the is optional: ≈ .

3 Adverbs with Adjectives

3.1 / + — “so ..., this / that ...”

Put or in front of an adjective to dial its degree up — English “so, this much, that much.” The split mirrors English **this** vs **that**: points to something **near or happening right now** (“*this* cold”); points to something **further off or already mentioned** (“*that* clever”).

Structure: Subject + / + Adjective

{zh: |jīn tiān|today / |zěn me|how come / |zhè me|so / |lěng|cold / ? }

Why is it so cold today?

{zh: |nǐ|you / |nà me|so / |cōng míng|clever / , |yí dìng|surely / |néng|can / |cāi dào|guess it / . }

You’re so clever — you’ll definitely guess it.

Remember: = **here** / **now**, = **there** / **then**; the turns “this/that” into “*this much* / *that much*.” Same split as English this/that.

Watch out

- Both translate as “so,” but keep the near/far feel: for what’s in front of you, for what’s removed.
- Very common after for a surprised “how come it’s so ...?”:

3.2 A + / + B + — “the same as, as ... as”

To say two things are **alike**, link them with (or) and — literally “one same (shape).” Add an adjective on the end and you get “equally ..., as ... as.”

Structure: Noun 1 + / + Noun 2 + (+ Adjective)

{zh: |nǐ jiā|your home / |gēn|as / |wǒ jiā|my home / |yí yàng|the same / |dà|big / . }

Your place is just as big as mine.

{zh: |Běi jīng|Beijing / |de / |tiān qì|weather / |hé|and / |Shàng hǎi|Shanghai / |bù|not / |yí yàng|the same / . }

Beijing’s weather isn’t the same as Shanghai’s.

Remember: = “**one-same**” — cut from the same cloth. The adjective rides after (= “equally big”), and to negate goes **before** it ().

Watch out

- Word order traps English speakers: it’s ... , never .
- and are interchangeable here; is more spoken, a touch more neutral.

3.3 — “both ... and ...”

The frame stacks two qualities that hold **at the same time** — “both ... and ...” The one rule: the two adjectives must share the **same feeling** — both positive, or both negative. Mixing a plus and a minus jars the Chinese ear.

Structure: Subject + + Adjective 1 + + Adjective 2

{zh: |zhè ge|this / |fáng zi|house / |yòu|both / |dà|big / |yòu|and / |liàng|bright / . }

This house is both big and bright.

{zh: |zhè lǐ|here / |de / |kā fēi|coffee / |yòu|both / |guì|expensive / |yòu|and / |nán hē|bad-tasting / . }

The coffee here is both pricey and nasty.

Remember: both ’s must **point the same way** — (both plus ✓), (both minus ✓), but not (mixed ×).

Watch out

- For two simultaneous *actions* rather than qualities, use instead.

3.4 + — “fairly, rather, relatively”

literally means “to compare,” and as an adverb it means “fairly, rather, comparatively.” It’s a **gentle hedge** — softer and less absolute than or — and it quietly implies “more so than the rest,” even when nothing else is named.

Structure: Subject + + Adjective (also + feeling-verb)

{zh: |zhè ge|this / |wèn tí|question / |bǐ jiào|fairly / |jiǎn dān|simple / . }

This question is fairly simple.

{zh: |wǒ|I / |bǐ jiào|rather / |xǐ huan|prefer / |zuò|taking / |dì tiě|the subway / . }

I rather prefer taking the subway.

Remember: has “compare” () baked in — it always whispers “*relatively, compared to the alternatives*.” Use it to sound measured, not gushing.

Watch out

- Works with feeling-verbs too: 我喜欢你，我也喜欢你。

3.5 + — “how ...!” (exclamation)

In an exclamation, (or) before an adjective means “how ...!, so ...!” — a quick, emotional burst of admiration or complaint. It usually closes with .

Structure: Subject + + Adjective + !

{zh: |nǐ|your / |nǚ ér|daughter / |duō|how / |cōng ming|clever / |a / ! }

How clever your daughter is!

{zh: |yí ge rén|on your own / |duō|how / |hǎo|nice / ! }

How nice it is to have the place to yourself!

Remember: the same that asks about degree — ? (“how old?”) — also exclaims it: ! (“how big!”). The and the “!” are the tell.

Watch out

- It’s an exclamation — pair it with and a “!”.

3.6 + + — describing a noun

To stick an adjective in front of a noun, glue them together with — Chinese’s all-purpose “of / ‘s” link. English just lines the words up (“a beautiful girl”); Chinese threads between them.

Structure: Adjective + + Noun

{zh: |piào liang|beautiful / |de / |nǚ hái|girl}

a beautiful girl

{zh: |nǐ|you / |yào|want / |lěng|cold / |de / |hái shì|or / |rè|hot / |de / ? }

Do you want a cold one or a hot one?

Remember: clips an adjective onto a noun. A **two-syllable** adjective almost always needs it (); a tight one-syllable pairing can drop it (, “good friend”).

Watch out

- Adj + can stand alone for “the ... one(s)”: (“I’ll have the sweet one”).

4 Conjunctions

4.1 — “or” (in statements)

Use to lay out alternatives in a **statement** — “either ... or.” It tells, it doesn’t ask: “coffee or tea, both fine.” The moment you want the listener to *choose*, you must switch to (the last point in this topic) — this is the single most-tested “or” trap in Chinese.

Structure: Possibility 1 + + Possibility 2

{zh: |wǒ|I / |hē|drink / |kā fēi|coffee / |huò zhě|or / |chá|tea / , |dōu|either / |xíng|is fine / 。 }

Coffee or tea — either’s fine for me.

{zh: |xīng qī liù|Saturday / |huò zhě|or / |xīng qī tiān|Sunday / , |dōu|both / |kě yǐ|work / 。 }

Saturday or Sunday both work.

Remember: = “or” when you tell; = “or” when you ask. A statement (“either is fine”) takes ; a question (“which one?”) takes .

Watch out

- It often closes with / (“either one is fine”).

4.2 / — “then, in that case”

(or the fuller) picks up what was just said and draws a suggestion or conclusion from it — “then, so, in that case.” It opens your reply, reacting to the other person’s remark. (It’s the same as “that” — literally “that being so, ...”).

Structure: Situation , () + Suggestion / Decision

{zh: |tā|he / |bù|won’t / |tīng|listen / , |nà|then / |wǒ|I / |yīng gāi|should / |zěn me bàn|do what / ? }

He won’t listen — so what should I do?

{zh: |nǐ|you / |bù|don’t / |xǐ huan|like / |zhè ge|this one / , |nà|then / |wǒ men|we / |huàn|swap / |yí ge|for another / 。 }

You don’t like this one — then let’s swap it.

Remember: () = “that being so...” — it *reacts and suggests* in conversation. It is **not** (“therefore”), which states a cause→effect inside one thought.

Watch out

- A bare `is` is the most natural in speech; `isn't` sounds a touch more formal.

4.3 ... () + — “with (someone)”

Before the verb, `with` marks the person you do something **with** — “(together) with.” It frequently teams up with `together` (“together”). `Follow` also means “to follow / heel,” which is why it leans toward doing things *alongside* someone.

Structure: Subject + _____ + Person + (_____) + Verb

{zh: |nǐ|you / |yào|want to / |gēn|with / |wǒ|me / |yì qǐ|together /
|qù|go / |ma / ? }

Do you want to come with me?

{zh: |gēn|after / |wǒ|me / |dú|read / 。 }

Read after me.

Remember: literally “to **follow**” — so _____ is “read *after* me.” The “with” phrase always sits **before** the verb: _____ ✓, never _____.

Watch out

- $\approx$ for plain “with,” but only $\approx$ carries the “follow” sense (e.g., “come with / after me”).

4.4 A + + B? — “or” (in questions)

When you ask someone to **choose** between options, use **either/or** — never **and**.
 turns the sentence into an either/or question, and the asker is waiting for you to pick one.

Structure: (Subject + Verb +) A + + B + ?

{zh: |nǐ|you / |yào|want / |hē|drink / |chá|tea / |hái shì|or /
|kā fēi|coffee / ? }

Do you want tea or coffee?

{zh: |tā|he / |shì|is / |Měi guó rén|American / |hái shì|or /
|Yīng guó rén|British / ? }

Is he American or British?

Remember: Questions $\rightarrow$ **Answers**; **statements** $\rightarrow$ **Proofs**. This is the pair to keep glued together — see **Answers** at the top of this topic.

Watch out

- Don't repeat before B: $\checkmark$, not $\times$.

5 Nouns

5.1 Time / + — “before (a specific point)”

Place (yǐqián) *after* a time or an action to mean “before” it. The trap for English speakers is the **order**: the reference point comes **first**, then — the exact reverse of “before eating,” which Chinese says as “eating-before.”

Structure: Time / Verb Phrase + ,

{zh: |chī fàn|eating / |yǐ qián|before / , |nǐ|you / |xǐ shǒu|wash
hands / |le / |ma / ? }

Did you wash your hands before eating?

{zh: |xīng qī wǔ|Friday / |yǐ qián|before / , |nǐ|you / |yào|need to
/ |zuò wán|finish / |zhè xiē|this / |gōng zuò|work / 。 }

You need to finish this work before Friday.

Remember: Chinese stamps the time-word **after** the event: = “eating-
before.” Flip the English order and tack on the end.

Watch out

- “Verb + **before**” means “before [doing] the action” (e.g. “before doing homework”).

5.2 , — “in the past, before” (general)

Drop **at** the **front** of a sentence and it means “in the past, back then” — a general earlier time, no specific event attached. It can also slip in right after the subject.

Structure: + Subject + Verb · Subject + + Verb

{zh: |yǐ qián|in the past / , |wǒ|I / |bú huì|couldn't / |shuō|speak /
|Zhōng wén|Chinese / 。 }

I couldn't speak Chinese before.

{zh: |tā|he / |yǐ qián|used to / |shì|be / |chú shī|a chef / 。 }

He used to be a chef.

Remember: one spot, two spots — **after an event** it’s “before X” (); **at the front** it’s “in the past, used to.” It usually contrasts the past with now (often with a marking the change).

Watch out

- Front position or after-the-subject — both are correct.

5.3 — “just now, a moment ago”

(gāngcái) is a **time word** for the very recent past — “just now, a moment ago.” Don’t confuse it with the adverb : is a *noun* (a moment that just passed) and can stand alone, while (“just”) clings to the verb.

Structure: (Subject +) + Verb

{zh: |nǐ|you / |gāng cái|just now / |shuō|said / |shén me|what / |le / ? }

What did you just say?

{zh: |gāng cái|just now / |shéi|who / |lái|came / |le / ? }

Who came just now?

Remember: = a **noun** (a moment in the past, can sit anywhere); = an **adverb** (glued to the verb). (“I just arrived”) vs ? (“who came a moment ago?”).

Watch out

- can take a / on the verb (); + verb usually doesn’t.

5.4 Time / Event + — “when, at the time of”

is a compact, **formal** stand-in for — “when, at the time of” — placed after a time or event. The thing to remember: it drops the .

Structure: Time / Event + ,

{zh: |kǎo shì|exam / |shí|during / |bú yào|don’t / |shuō huà|talk / . }

Don’t talk during the exam.

{zh: |wǒ|I / |miàn shì|interviews / |shí|during / |jīng cháng|often / |wèn|ask / |zhè ge|this / |wèn tí|question / . }

I often ask this question during interviews.

Remember: is **in its Sunday best** — same meaning, formal register, and **no** : ✓, never . In speech you’d just say .

Watch out

- Reserve it for writing or set phrases; everyday speech uses .

5.5 , — “in the future, from now on”

At the start of a sentence, means “in the future, from now on, later.” It mirrors exactly: it can sit at the front (“from now on”), after the subject, or after an event (“after ...”).

Structure: + Subject + Verb · Event + ,

{zh: |wǒ|I / |yǐ hòu|from now on / |bù|won’t / |hē jiǔ|drink / |le / . }

I won’t drink from now on.

{zh: |xià kè|class ends / |yǐ hòu|after / , |wǒ men|we / |qù|go / |chī fàn|eat / . }

After class, let’s go eat.

Remember: is the perfect **mirror of** — after an event = “after X” (/); at the front = “from now on” / “in the past.” But it points to an *indefinite* future, **not** “in a moment” (that’s).

Watch out

- Don’t let “later” mislead you into using it for “shortly” — is the open-ended future.

5.6 , — “afterwards, later” (past only)

(hòulái) sequences **past** events — “afterwards, later on.” The hard limit: both events must have **already happened**. (after) + (came) — it has, by definition, *already come*.

Structure: [Past Event 1] , [Past Event 2]

{zh: |kāi shǐ|at first / |wǒ|my / |fù mǔ|parents / |bù|didn’t / |tóng yì|agree / , |hòu lái|later / |tóng yì|agreed / |le / . }

At first my parents disapproved; later they came round.

{zh: |tā|he / |yǐ qián|used to / |shì|be / |chú shī|a chef / |hòu lái|later / |dāng|became / |le / |lǎo bǎn|the boss / . }

He used to be a chef; later he became the boss.

Remember: = a **PAST “and then”** (both events done and dusted). For a *future* “and then,” switch to . The (“came”) tells you it has already arrived.

Watch out

- Never use for a plan or future sequence — that’s .

6 Numbers

6.1 + — approximating with two numbers in a row

Say **two consecutive numbers** back to back and you get “about, a few” — exactly like English “three or four” or “a day or two.” It’s the quickest way to be vague about a quantity.

Structure: Number + (next Number) + Measure Word + Noun

{zh: |wǒ|I / |děng|waited / |le / |nǐ|for you / |sān sì ge|three or four / |xiǎo shí|hours / 。 }

I waited three or four hours for you.

{zh: |zhè ge|this / |cí|word / |wǒ men|we / |xué guo|have studied / |liǎng sān cì|two or three times / |le / 。 }

We’ve studied this word two or three times now.

Remember: for the productive “N or N+1” approximation the two numbers are **next-door neighbours** — , , . (A few skip-pairs survive only as fixed idioms — e.g. in / “a few” — so learn those as set phrases, not as a pattern to build.) For “ten-odd / a dozen-ish,” use .

Watch out

- (“one or two”) is the common small one: (“a day or two”).

6.2 / — big numbers

Here’s where Chinese numbers feel alien: the language counts big in (ten thousand) and (hundred million), not in thousands and millions. So you have to **group digits in fours**, not threes — and that mental regrouping is the whole skill.

Structure: Number + · Number +

{zh: |yì bǎi wàn|one million}

1,000,000 — literally “a hundred (ten-thousands).”

{zh: |shí sì yì|1.4 billion}

1.4 billion — roughly China’s population.

Remember: mentally **shift the comma one digit left**: 12,000 → “1|2000” → . Lock in = 10⁴ and = 10⁸, then regroup in fours: 52,152 = .

Watch out

- English “million” = (a hundred); English “billion” = (ten). The mismatch is what trips people up.

6.3 x y / / — telling the time (precise)

Once you can say whole hours, add the detail: for minutes, for quarter-hours, and for the minutes *short of* the hour. One quirk: a single-digit minute needs a (“oh”) to fill the gap.

Structure: x () y · x y · y x

{zh: |liǎng diǎn|two o’clock / |líng|oh / |jiǔ fēn|nine minutes}

2:09 (fills the single-digit minute).

{zh: |chà|to / |wǔ fēn|five minutes / |sān diǎn|three o’clock}

Five to three.

Remember: = a **quarter** (= :15, = :45); = “**short of**,” so is “five to three”; and any minute under 10 takes a ().

Watch out

- comes **first**, before the minutes and hour: = “7:55.”

6.4 + () — telling the time (basic)

The whole hour is a number + (“o’clock”), with for half past. A full time-stamp is built **big-to-small**: day → part of day → clock time — the opposite of casual English.

Structure: (/ +) Number + (+)

{zh: |xiàn zài|now / |xià wǔ|afternoon / |liǎng diǎn bàn|half past two / 。 }

It’s 2:30 pm now.

{zh: |xīng qī tiān|Sunday / |shàng wǔ|morning / |shí diǎn bàn|half past ten}

Sunday at 10:30 am.

Remember: there’s **no “am/pm” word** — put (morning) or (afternoon) *before* the time, and build everything big-to-small (date → part of day →). The in is optional and usually dropped.

Watch out

- “2 o’clock” is , not — use for the hour count.

7 Particles

7.1 + — an ongoing state

(zhe) after a verb freezes the action into a **lingering state** — the door *is* (standing) open, you *are* holding it. Think of 开 as a clip that keeps the verb “switched on.” A second, very common use is **Verb 1 + 着 + Verb 2**: V1 开 sets the posture or manner, and V2 is the real action done in that state.

Structure: Verb + 着 · Verb 1 + 着 + Verb 2

{zh: 你们|nǐ men|you all / 坐着|zuò|sit / 着|zhe / , 我|wǒ|I / 马上|马上|right away / 回来|回来|huí lái|come back / 。

Stay seated — I’ll be right back.

{zh: 她|tā|she / 喜欢|xǐ huan|likes to / 站|zhàn|stand / 着|zhe / 吃饭|吃|chī fàn|eat / 。

She likes to eat standing up.

{zh: 他|tā|he / 笑|xiào|smiling / 着|zhe / 说|shuō|said / 对不起|对不起|duì bu qǐ|sorry / 。

Smiling, he said sorry.

Remember: 开 = the verb **held on, lingering** (开 = “the door stays open”); for an action actively *in progress*, use 着 (着). In V1 V2, V1 is the **backdrop**, V2 the **real action** — 吃饭 = “eat *while* standing.”

Watch out

- 开 is a state, not a play-by-play — pair it with 正在 / 正 only when you really mean “is currently …”.

7.2 — a change of state

Sentence-final 了 can announce a **new situation** — something has *become* the case that wasn’t before. This “change” 了 (often called 了₂) is a different beast from the 了 that marks a *completed action*; here it means “**now**.”

Structure: Subject + Adjective + 了 · Subject + Verb + 了

{zh: 我|wǒ|I / 饿|hungry / 了|le / 。

I’m hungry (now).

{zh: 下雨|xià yǔ|raining / 了|le / 。

It’s raining (it wasn’t before).

{zh: 宝宝|bǎo bao|the baby / 会|huì|can / 说话|shuō huà|talk / 了|le / 。

The baby can talk now.

Remember: this 了 = “**now, a new state**” (了 = “hungry *now*”), **not** “did and finished.” Whenever you’d add “now” in English, this is the 了 you want: (“he’s a manager now”).

Watch out

- Same character, two jobs: change-of-state 了 (了) vs completed-action 了 (了). Context and position tell them apart.

7.3 ? — “and you? / what about ...?”

你 at the end lobs a question **back** without you having to repeat it — “and ...? what about ...?” A neat extra: a bare noun + 呢 (with no prior question) asks “**where is ...?**”

Structure: Topic + 呢 ?

{zh: 我|wǒ|I / 很|hěn|very / 好|hǎo|well / , 你|nǐ|you / 呢|ne / ? }

I’m well — and you?

{zh: 我|wǒ|my / 的|de / 手机|shǒu jī|phone / 呢|ne / ? }

Where’s my phone?

Remember: 哪里 = “**...and X?**” — it bounces the last question back (哪里 ? “and you?”). With nothing asked before, noun + 哪里 means “**where is X?**” (哪里 ? “where’s the money?”).

Watch out

- It rides on context — without a prior question or a “where is” sense, a bare 哪里 has nothing to bounce off.

7.4 / / — the three structural “de”

Three different characters, all pronounced **de**, each with exactly one job. Keeping them straight is the single most common slip in written Chinese — so sort them by **what comes next**.

Structure: 因为 + Noun · Verb + 的 + Complement · Adjective + 地 + Verb

{zh: 你|nǐ|you / 坐|zuò|did / 的|de / 很|hěn|very / 好|hǎo|well / , 因为|yīn wèi|because / 你|nǐ|you / 认真|rèn zhēn|carefully / 的|de / 听|tīng kè|listened / 。

You did well, because you listened attentively in class.

{zh: |mā ma|Mom / |de / |xīn|new / |shǒu jī|phone / |pǎo|runs /
|de / |tè bié|especially / |kuài|fast / 。 }

Mom’s new phone runs especially fast.

Remember: sort them by what **follows**: → a **noun** (); → a **verb**, building an adverb (); → sits **after** a verb, rating the result ().
Tip: has “earth” (it *grounds* the verb); leans on the verb to tell you *how well*.

Watch out

- A true adverb (, ,) needs **no** — only an *adjective* used adverbially does (, but just , never).

8 Prepositions

8.1 — “about, regarding, as for”

(guānyú) flags the **topic** a sentence is about — “about, regarding, as for.” Used this way it opens the sentence, setting the subject up before you say anything about it: “*As for* X, ...”.

Structure: + Topic ,

{zh: |guān yú|as for / |Zhōng guó|Chinese / |lì shǐ|history / |wǒ|I / |zhī dào|know / |de / |bù duō|not much / 。 }

As for Chinese history, I don’t know much.

{zh: |guān yú|as for / |nǐ|your / |de / |jiàn yì|suggestion / , |lǎo bǎn|the boss / |hái|still / |zài / |kǎo lǜ|considering it / 。 }

As for your suggestion, the boss is still thinking it over.

Remember: + topic = a **headline** at the front of the sentence (“Regarding X, ...”). It can’t sit mid-sentence like English “about.”

Watch out

- Many English “about”s are **baked into the Chinese verb** — say (“talk about your job”), not

8.2 — “not until”

(zhídào) means “all the way until (a point).” Pair it with and you get the emphatic “**not until** X did Y happen” — the is what stamps on the “and that’s surprisingly late.”

Structure: + Time / Event , Subject + + Verb

{zh: |zhí dào|not until / |shí èr diǎn bàn|half past twelve / , |wǒ|I / |cái|only then / |zuò wán|finished / |zuò yè|the homework / 。 }

I didn’t finish my homework until half past twelve.

{zh: |tā|he / |zhí dào|not until / |yī shēng|the doctor / |lái|came / |le / , |cái|only then / |fàng xīn|relaxed / 。 }

He didn’t relax until the doctor came.

Remember: sets the **deadline**, delivers the “**finally / only then**.” Drop the and you lose the “annoyingly late” punch.

Watch out

- The subject may also go before :

8.3 — “towards, to (and sometimes from)”

（xiàng）aims an action **towards** a person or direction — no actual movement required （ , “smile at him”）. The twist English speakers must memorise: a few verbs that take “**from**” in English use （“toward”）in Chinese — ... （“borrow *from*”）, ... （“learn *from*”）.

Structure: + Direction / Person + Verb

{zh: |xiàng / |qián|forward / |kàn|look / 。 }

Look ahead.

{zh: |nǐ|you / |bì xū|must / |xiàng|to / |tā|him / |dào qiàn|apologise / ！ }

You must apologise to him!

{zh: |wǒ|I / |bù|don’t / |xǐ huan|like / |xiàng|from / |péng you|friends / |jiè qián|borrowing money / 。 }

I don’t like borrowing money from friends.

Remember: = an **arrow** pointing at someone. Even “learn / borrow **from**” is framed as aiming *toward* the source in Chinese: （“learn toward the teacher”）.

Watch out

- Use it with verbs of facing or directing: （“walk forward”）, （“turn to me for help”）.

9 Verbs

9.1 — “looks, seems, appears”

（kànqǐlái）reports a snap **impression from what you can see** — “(it) looks / seems / appears” — and comes right before the description. Best of all, the whole sense-family works the same way: swap in （“sounds”）, （“tastes”）, （“feels to use”） and you’ve got a free set of patterns.

Structure: Subject + + Adjective

{zh: |dàn gāo|the cake / |kàn qǐ lái|looks / |hěn|very / |hǎo chī|tasty / 。 }

The cake looks delicious.

{zh: |tā|he / |kàn qǐ lái|looks / |hěn|very / |lèi|tired / 。 }

He looks tired.

Remember: sense verb + = “comes across as ...”. （looks）, （sounds）, （tastes）, （handles） — learn the frame once, reuse it everywhere.

Watch out

- For an *inferred* “it seems” (a conclusion, not a look), reach for or instead.

9.2 （ ） — “not as ... as” (comparison)

（ ） is the flip side of : “A B + Adjective” means “A is **not as** [Adjective] as B.” Yes — it’s the very same as “not have,” moonlighting as a comparison word.

Structure: Noun 1 + （ ） + Noun 2 + Adjective

{zh: |Xiǎo Zhāng|Xiao Zhang / |méi yǒu|not as / |Xiǎo Lǐ|Xiao Li / |gāo|tall / 。 }

Xiao Zhang isn’t as tall as Xiao Li.

{zh: |jīn tiān|today / |méi yǒu|not as / |zuó tiān|yesterday / |lěng|cold / 。 }

Today isn’t as cold as yesterday.

Remember: = “more than”; = “not as much as.” （“you’re taller than me”） flips to （“I’m not as tall as you”）. Add for force:

Watch out

- The adjective is bare — no 的 : 好, not 好的 .

9.3 让 / 叫 / 请 — making someone do something

These **causative** verbs slot a **person** between the verb and what they end up doing — “make / let / ask / cause someone to ...” Pick by tone: 让 is the everyday “make / let,” 叫 a colloquial “tell,” 请 a polite “ask / invite,” and 请 a formal, written “cause.”

Structure: Subject + 谁 / 谁 / 谁 + Person + Predicate

{zh: 你|you / 为什么|wèi shén me|why / 不|not / 让|let / 我|me / 去|qù|go / ? }

Why won't you let me go?

{zh: 我|I / 想|xiǎng|want / 请|qǐng|to ask / 你|you / 帮|bāng|do / 我|me / 的|yí ge|a / 忙|máng|favour / 。 }

I'd like to ask you a favour.

Remember: all four mean “get someone to do something,” sorted by politeness: (formal) → 请 (neutral, “make/let”) → 让 (casual, “tell”) → 叫 (polite, “ask/invite”). 让 is your safe default in speech.

Watch out

- 让 covers both “make” and “let” — context decides which.

9.4 经过 — “pass by / after going through”

经过 (jīngguò) wears two hats. As a **verb** it means “pass by / through (a place)”;

as a **preposition** it sets up “after going through (a process or time), ...” before you state the result.

Structure: 谁 + Place (verb) + 怎么样 + Process / Time , Result

{zh: 我|I / 每天|měi tiān|every day / 上班|shàng bān|to work / 都|dōu / 经过|jīng guò|pass by / 这里|zhè lǐ|here / 。 }

I pass by here every day on my way to work.

{zh: 经过|jīng guò|after / 努力|nǚ lì|hard work / , 她|tā|she / 考上|kǎo shàng|got into / 大学|le / 大学|dà xué|university / 。 }

Through hard work, she got into university.

Remember: 经过 always means “go through” — through a *place* (the verb) or through a *process* (the preposition). Compare 通过 (“by means of, via”): 通过 rides a journey/process, 经过 rides a method/agent.

Watch out

- As a preposition it opens the sentence: 经过 + process, then the result.

10 Auxiliary verbs

10.1 / — “should, ought to”

(yīnggāi, often clipped to 应该) is the everyday “should, ought to” — what’s **right, advisable, or expected**. It’s an auxiliary verb, so it leans on the main verb that follows. A handy second meaning: it also covers “**ought to be the case / probably**” (an expectation, not a duty).

Structure: Subject + 应该 + Verb (+ Object)

{zh: |nǐ|you / |yīng gāi|should / |duō|more / |xiū xi|rest / 。 }

You should rest more.

{zh: |wǒ|I / |yīng gāi|should / |gěi|give / |nǐ|you / |duō shao|how much / |qián|money / ? }

How much should I give you?

{zh: |zài|in / |Zhōng guó|China / , |nǐ|you / |yīng gāi|should / |shì shi|try / |bái jiǔ|baijiu / 。 }

In China, you ought to try baijiu.

Remember: 应该 has two flavours — “**should**” (advice: 应该去) and “**should be / probably**” (expectation: 他应该在那里, “he should be there by now”). Same word, told apart by context.

Watch out

- Negate with 不应该 (“shouldn’t”): 你不应该去.
- The clipped 得 is the casual spoken form: 你得去 (“you’d better get going”).

11 Verb phrases

11.1 + — “hard to ...”

Stick 难 (“difficult”) in front of a verb and you get “**hard to ...**” — 难学 (“hard to learn”), 难找 (“hard to find”). Its mirror image is 容易 (“easy to”: 容易学 “easy to learn”). With sense verbs, 难 fuses into fixed adjectives: 难吃 (“bad-tasting”), 难听 (“unpleasant to hear”).

Structure: Subject + (的) + Verb

{zh: |Hàn yǔ|Chinese / |hěn|very / |nán|hard to / |xué|learn / 。 }

Chinese is hard to learn.

{zh: |zhè lǐ|here / |de / |kā fēi|coffee / |hěn|very / |nán hē|bad-tasting / 。 }

The coffee here tastes bad.

Remember: 难 = “**hard to**,” 容易 = “**easy to**.” Bolt either onto a verb: 难理解 (“hard / easy to understand”), 难看 (“ugly,” lit. “hard to look at”), 好看 (“good-looking”).

Watch out

- With sense verbs it forms set adjectives: 难闻, 难闻 (“smells bad”), 难看 (“ugly”).

11.2 + + — “did ... for (a length of time)”

To say **how long** a finished action lasted, drop the **duration after the verb** — Chinese has no “for” preposition, so the word order does the carrying. If there’s an object too, slip 在 in front of it.

Structure: Subject + Verb + 在 + Duration (+ 的 + Object)

{zh: |tā|he / |xué|studied / |le / |yì nián|a year / |Zhōng wén|Chinese / 。 }

He studied Chinese for a year.

{zh: |wǒ men|we / |zuò|took / |le / |shí wǔ ge|fifteen / |xiǎo shí|hours / |de / |fēi jī|flight / 。 }

We took a fifteen-hour flight.

Remember: no “for” word — the slot does it. Duration goes *after* the verb (学了, “studied for a year”), and an object hangs off a 的 (看了, “watched TV all day”).

Watch out

- Contrast (‘‘haven’t studied *in* a year’’), where the same duration flips to *before* the verb.

11.3 + + + — ‘‘has been ...ing (and still is)’’

Tag a **second** onto the very end and the action stretches **up to now and keeps going** — ‘‘have been ...ing for X (and still am).’’ When the verb has an object, you **repeat the verb**.

Structure: Subject + Verb + + Duration + (with object) Subj + Verb + Obj + Verb + + Duration +

{zh: |tā|he / |zài|in / |Běi jīng|Beijing / |zhù|has lived / |le / |liǎng nián|two years / |le / . }

He’s been living in Beijing for two years (and still is).

{zh: |wǒ|I / |xué|learning / |Zhōng wén|Chinese / |xué|have learned / |le / |yì nián|a year / |le / . }

I’ve been learning Chinese for a year now.

Remember: one = a finished stretch; two = still going. That trailing means ‘‘...and counting.’’ With an object, double the verb:

Watch out

- Without the final , reads as ‘‘lived there two years (then left)’’ — the second is the whole ‘‘still ongoing’’ difference.

11.4 + — ‘‘no way to, can’t’’

is ‘‘there’s **no way**.’’ Standing alone it’s a shrug — ‘‘it can’t be helped, what can you do.’’ In front of a verb it means ‘‘have no way to ..., can’t possibly’’

Structure: Subject + + Verb

{zh: |jīn tiān|today / |tài máng|too busy / |le / , |zhōng wǔ|at noon / |méi bàn fǎ|no way to / |chū qù|go out / |chī fàn|for lunch / . }

It’s too busy today — no way to go out for lunch.

{zh: |méi yǒu|without / |mì mǎ|the password / , |wǒ men|we / |méi bàn fǎ|have no way to / |dǎ kāi|open / |zhè ge|this / |wén jiàn|file / . }

Without the password, we have no way to open this file.

Remember: = ‘‘a way / method,’’ so = ‘‘**no way (to)**’’ and = ‘‘have a way.’’ Alone, is the all-purpose ‘‘what can you do.’’

Watch out

- It’s stronger and more resigned than — it says the door is simply shut.

11.5 + — softening by reduplication

Double a verb and the action turns **brief, light, ‘‘give-it-a-go’’** — ‘‘have a quick look,’’ ‘‘talk it over.’’ It warms the tone, perfect for soft suggestions and polite requests.

Structure: Verb + Verb (one-syllable, AA) · ABAB (two-syllable)

{zh: |wǒ|I / |xiǎng|want to / |chū qù|go out / |zǒu zou|for a little walk / . }

I’d like to go out for a bit of a walk.

{zh: |zhè jiàn|this / |shì|matter / |wǒ men|we / |shāng liang|discuss / |shāng liang / . }

Let’s talk this over.

Remember: doubling a verb adds a ‘‘**just a little / give it a try**’’ softness. One-syllable doubles **AA** (), two-syllable doubles **ABAB** () — *not* the adjective’s AABB. and past are common variants.

Watch out

- It only fits actions you can do ‘‘a bit of’’ — you wouldn’t reduplicate a one-off like or .

11.6 + — feelings take

A small club of **feeling / mental verbs** (, , , , ...) act like adjectives and take — which is exactly why beginners end up saying ‘‘very like!’’

Structure: Subject + + [feeling verb]

{zh: |wǒ|I / |hěn|really / |xǐ huan|like / |zhè bù|this / |diàn yǐng|film / . }

I really like this film.

{zh: |tā|he / |hěn|well / |liǎo jiě|understands / |Zhōng guó|Chinese / |wén huà|culture / . }

He understands Chinese culture well.

Remember: feelings behave like adjectives, so they take (,). Action verbs don't — there's no or . If it's an emotion or a state of mind, is welcome.

Watch out

- As with adjectives, this is often just the plain positive form, not a strong “very.”

12 Complements

12.1 + / — direction complements

Tag (“towards me”) or (“away from me”) onto a verb to show **which way** the action moves relative to *you, the speaker*. These build into handy compounds — (“come in”), (“go out”), (“up”), (“over here”).

Structure: Verb + / · Verb + compound (/ ...)

{zh: |wǒ|I'm / |zài / |lóu shàng|upstairs / , |nǐ|you / |shàng lái|come up / 。 }

I'm upstairs — come up.

{zh: |qǐng|please / |zhàn|stand / |qǐ lái|up / 。 }

Please stand up.

Remember: = toward me, = away from me — anchored to wherever the speaker stands. (“come in,” I’m inside) vs (“go in,” I’m outside).

Watch out

- With a **place** object, the place sits *between* the verb and / : / — never .

12.2 + / + — potential complements

Slot (“can”) or (“can’t”) between a verb and its result to ask whether that result is **achievable** — (“can understand”) vs (“can’t”). They’re built straight from result complements (, , , ...).

Structure: Verb + / + Complement

{zh: |nǐ|you / |tīng|hear / |de|can / |dǒng|understand / |Shàng hǎi huà|Shanghainese / |ma / ? }

Can you understand Shanghainese?

{zh: |zhè zhǒng|this kind of / |shǒu jī|phone / |xiàn zài|now / |mǎi|buy / |bù|can't / |dào|get / |le / 。 }

You can't get this kind of phone any more.

Remember: = can, = can't, wedged right after the verb (/). It asks about *reaching a result* — subtly different from (“be allowed / have the chance to”).

Watch out

- The negative form is far more common in speech than the form — you’ll hear constantly.

12.3 + — “keep on ...ing”

The complement means **carry on** with something already under way — “keep ...ing, go on ...ing.” Picture the action continuing *downward and onward* into the future.

Structure: Subject + Verb +

{zh: |shuō|talk / |xià qù|keep on / 。 }

Keep talking.

{zh: |nǐ|you / |zài|keep / |hē|drinking / |xià qù|on / |jiù|then / |zuì|drunk / |le / 。 }

If you keep drinking, you’ll get drunk.

Remember: = “carry on from here” with something already started. Its potential form = “can’t carry on”: (“I can’t bear to keep listening”).

Watch out

- It’s specifically about *continuing* — don’t use it to *start* something.

12.4 + / / — result complements

A short word right after the verb tells you **how it turned out** — (“finished”), (“done well / ready”), (“wrong”). It usually takes a , and the object is often pulled to the front as a topic.

Structure: Verb + / / (+)

{zh: |zhè ge|this / |zì|character / |xiě|wrote / |cuò|wrong / |le / 。 }

You wrote this character wrong.

{zh: |fáng jiān|the room / |dǎ sǎo|cleaned / |gān jìng|spotless / |le / |ma / ? }

Is the room all cleaned up?

Remember: the verb is the action, the complement is the outcome. = “write,” but = “wrote *wrong*,” = “wrote *to the finish*.” Common ones: , , , , , , .

Watch out

- Negate the *whole* thing with (, “didn’t finish writing”), not .

13 Conditional Statements

13.1 ... — “as long as”

... sets out a **sufficient condition** — “as long as A, (then) B.” A on its own is **enough** to trigger B, even if it isn’t the *only* route to B. Read as “you only need...” and as “...then, right away.”

Structure: + Condition , + Result

{zh: |zhǐ yào|as long as / |nǐ|you / |nǚ lì|hard / |xué xí|study / , |jiù|then / |huì|will / |yǒu|make / |jìn bù|progress / 。 }

As long as you study hard, you’ll make progress.

{zh: |zhǐ yào|whenever / |xià yǔ|it rains / , |tā|she / |jiù|then / |xīn qíng|mood / |bù hǎo|bad / 。 }

Whenever it rains, she’s in a bad mood.

Remember: = “you only NEED...” (enough, maybe one of several ways); = “ONLY if...” (the sole way). pairs with ; pairs with . The vs the is the tell — see below.

Watch out

- reaches for (“then, immediately”); swapping in quietly changes the meaning to “only if.”

13.2 , — “only then, only after”

between two clauses says the second happened **only after / only because of** the first — usually after real time, money, or effort was spent. English: “not until ..., only after ...”

Structure: Condition , + Result

{zh: |nà běn shū|that book / |wǒ|I / |kàn|read / |le / |liǎng biàn|twice / |cái|only then / |kàn dǒng|understood it / 。 }

I only understood that book after reading it twice.

{zh: |tā|she / |zuò wán|finished / |le / |gōng kè|homework / |cái|only then / |shuì jiào|went to bed / 。 }

She didn’t go to bed until she’d finished her homework.

Remember: spotlights “**how much it took**” before the result came — two readings, lots of effort, a late hour. The result clause usually ends in a result complement (,), reporting what was finally achieved.

Watch out

- This takes **no** on its verb — the effort, not a tidy completion, is the point.

13.3 ... — “only if”

... names the **one essential condition** — “only if A (can) B happen.” No A, no B, full stop. The is very often followed by .

Structure: + Condition , () + Result

{zh: |zhǐ yǒu|only if / |nǚ lì|you work hard / , |cái|only then / |néng|can / |zuò hǎo|do well / |gōng zuò|the job / 。 }

Only by working hard can you do the job well.

{zh: |zhǐ yǒu|only if / |duō|more / |chī fàn|you eat / , |cái|only then / |néng|can / |zhǎng gāo|grow tall / 。 }

Only if you eat more will you grow tall.

Remember: = the **ONLY door** (a *necessary* condition) → pairs with ;
= **ANY door that works** (a *sufficient* condition) → pairs with . Lock the pairs together: ... , ...

Watch out

- here very often carries : ...

14 Noun Phrases

14.1 ... — “some ... (others) ...”

picks out **part** of a group — “some (of them).” It shines in **pairs or sets**, contrasting one slice of a group against another: “some are ..., some are” It can sit before the noun or right after the subject, and the noun is often dropped once context is clear.

Structure: + (Subject) + Predicate , + (Subject) + Predicate

{zh: |yǒu de rén|some people / |zài|are / |hē jiǔ|drinking / , |yǒu de rén|some people / |zài|are / |tiào wǔ|dancing / 。 }

Some are drinking, some are dancing.

{zh: |wài guó rén|foreigners / |yǒu de|some / |hěn|very / |yǒu qián|rich / , |yǒu de|some / |méi qián|not / 。 }

Some foreigners are rich, some aren’t.

{zh: |zhè xiē|these / |píng guǒ|apples / |yǒu de|some / |tián|sweet / , |yǒu de|some / |suān|sour / 。 }

Some of these apples are sweet, some are sour.

Remember: ... splits a group you already have (“some of *them*...”). For “some” as a vague amount you want or buy, switch to ().

Watch out

- It can sit **after the subject** (...) or **before the noun** (...) — both are fine.

15 Numbers and Measure Words

15.1 — “half” (and where it sits)

The word 半 means “half.” The only thing to master is **where it sits** relative to the **measure word**, and it follows one clean rule: “**half a** [unit]” puts 半 *first*; “[X] **and a half**” puts 半 *after* the measure word — exactly where the fraction lands in the English too.

Structure: 半 + Measure Word + Noun (half a ...) · Number + Measure Word + Noun (X and a half)

{zh: 半 |bàn ge|half a / 小时 |xiǎo shí|hour}

half an hour

{zh: 半 |bàn píng|half a bottle of / 酒 |jiǔ|wine}

half a bottle of wine

{zh: 三 |sān ge|three / 半 |bàn|and a half / 小时 |xiǎo shí|hours}

three and a half hours

Remember: 半 mirrors English word order. “*Half* an hour” → 半 first (半小时); “three *and a half* hours” → 三 after the measure word (三小时). Say the English and 半 lands in the same spot.

Watch out

- 半 and 个 are *themselves* measure words — use **no** 量词 : 半 (not 个), 个 (not 半).

16 Sentence Patterns

16.1 + + / + / ... — “not even one”

To say **not a single one**, build a total, emphatic negative: + **measure word** (+ **noun**) + / + / + **verb**. The / is the muscle here — it’s what turns “one” into “not *even* one.” The object can also be pulled to the front as a topic.

Structure: (Topic +) + MW + (Noun) + / + / + Verb

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 一个 |yí jù|a single / 词 |huà|word / 都 |dōu|even / 没 |méi|didn’t / 说 |shuō|say / 。

He didn’t say a single word.

{zh: 这个人 |zhè ge rén|this person / 我 |wǒ|I / 一次 |yí cì|even once / 也 |yě|even / 没 |méi|haven’t / 见 |jiàn guo|met / 。

I’ve never met this person, not even once.

Remember: the shape is “**one ... not even ...**” — 一 sets up the smallest possible amount, and / + negative knocks even *that* out. Drop the / and the “not even” force collapses.

Watch out

- 一 and 个 are interchangeable here; for an uncountable “not at all,” use 一点 .

16.2 — “the more ... the more ...”

A B ties two things that **rise together** — “the more A, the more B.” Picture two dials geared to the same shaft: turn one up and the other climbs with it. Both halves take 越 , and the two clauses can even have different subjects.

Structure: Subject + 越 + Verb + 越 + Adjective / Verb

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 越 |yuè|the more / 看 |kàn|look / 越 |yuè|the more / 喜 |xǐ huan|like it / 。

The more I look at it, the more I like it.

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 越 |yuè|the more / 推 |ràng|push / 孩 |hái zi|the kid / 学 |xué|to study / , 孩 |hái zi|the kid / 越 |yuè|the less / 想 |bù xiǎng|wants to / 学 |xué|study / 。

The more you push the kid to study, the less he wants to.

Remember: two 越 ’s, **rising together**. Don’t confuse it with 越多 (“more and more *over time*,” next file): 越多 ... 越多 links *two things*, 越多 ... 越少 tracks *one thing across time*.

Watch out

- Both halves need ； the second names what **grows** as the first does.
- The two halves can have different subjects: ， 。

16.3 — “take it and...” (the construction)

Chinese grammar’s famous hurdle — but the core idea is simple. literally means “**take / grab**,” so a sentence is just “**take [this specific thing] and [do something] to it.**” Reach for it when you want to spotlight **what happens to an object** — where it ends up, how it’s changed, what’s done with it.

The trap for English speakers: the object jumps **in front of** the verb, and the verb can never stand alone — it must be followed by the **result** (a complement, ， a location...). “ ” lands on a Chinese ear like “put the book...” and then trailing off.

Structure: Subject + + Object + Verb + (result) *Literally: “I — take — the book — put — on the table.”* (。

{zh: |qǐng|please / |bǎ / |mén|the door / |guān shàng|close / 。 }

Please close the door.

{zh: |tā|she / |bǎ / |wǒ|my / |de / |shǒu jī|phone / |fàng|put / |zài|in / |bāo lǐ|her bag / |le / 。

She put my phone in her bag.

Remember: carries the **hand radical** — picture a hand reaching out, **grabbing** the object, and dragging it in front of the verb. Grab it → then say what you did to it.

Watch out

- The object must be **specific / known** (the door, *my* phone), and the verb must report **what happened to it** — a bare verb won’t do: ✓.
- Negation goes **before** : ， — never inside the phrase.
- Feeling / perception verbs (， ， ，) **can’t** take — there’s no “result” to a feeling.
- (is also a measure word for handled things — “an umbrella” — a different word entirely.)

16.4 — “got done to” (the passive)

A sentence flips the focus to the **receiver**: “(it) got ...ed (by ...).” The thing acted upon becomes the subject, and the doer is optional. Like ， the verb can’t stand bare — it needs a result — and sentences lean toward **unfortunate** events (things done *to* you).

Structure: Receiver + + (Doer) + Verb + (/ result)

{zh: |wǒ|my / |de / |shǒu jī|phone / |bèi|got / |tōu|stolen / |le / 。

My phone got stolen.

{zh: |tā|he / |bèi|by / |jǐng chá|the police / |zhuā|caught / |le / 。

He was caught by the police.

Remember: leads with the doer, leads with the victim. (“the thief took the phone”) ↔ (“the phone got taken by the thief”). even hides (a quilt/cover) — picture the action *laid over* the subject.

Watch out

- The verb can’t be **bare** — it needs a or result: ✓, not 。
- The **doer is optional**: (“I was tricked”), doer unknown or unimportant.
- Negate **before** : (“wasn’t discovered”).
- These sentences usually report something **bad** happening to the subject.

17 Basic/Simple Sentence Patterns

17.1 Place + + — saying what’s where

To paint **what is where**, Chinese runs **place — verb — — thing**: “(at the place) there sits / lies / hangs a ….” The verb tells you *how* the thing is positioned (lying, standing, hanging). A close cousin is **Place + + thing**, meaning “all there is at the place is ….”

Structure: Place + Verb + + Noun Phrase

{zh: |zhuō zi shàng|on the table / |fàng|lies / |zhe / |yì běn|a / |shū|book / 。 }

There’s a book lying on the table.

{zh: |dà tīng lǐ|in the hall / |zhàn|are standing / |zhe / |yì xiē|some / |jǐng chá|police / 。 }

Some police are standing in the hall.

Remember: the **place comes first** (the camera pans to a spot), then the verb + freezes how the thing sits there. English starts with “there’s a …”; Chinese starts with the *location*.

Watch out

- The verb is **stative** (, , ,) — it describes a position, not an active action.
- The version says the place holds *only* that: (“the wall is all photos”).

17.2 + + + — “do whatever you like”

Echo a question word on both sides of and you get “(do) **whatever / wherever / whenever** you like.” The **same** question word appears twice — once setting the choice, once cashing it in.

Structure: + Verb + QW + + Verb + QW

{zh: |xiǎng|want / |chī|eat / |shén me|what / |jiù|then / |chī|eat / |shén me|whatever / 。 }

Eat whatever you want.

{zh: |xiǎng|want / |qù|go / |nǎr|where / |jiù|then / |qù|go / |nǎr|wherever / 。 }

Go wherever you like.

Remember: the **same question word both times** — … , … , … , … . Read it as “whatever you pick, that’s what you get.” It’s the language of total freedom.

Watch out

- Keep the question word identical on both sides — mixing with breaks it.

17.3 + / — “every / any”

A question word + (or) sweeps over **all** cases — “everyone, anything, anywhere.” Add a / and it flips to the total negative: “none, nothing, nowhere.”

Structure: Question Word + / + Predicate

{zh: |shéi|everyone / |dōu|all / |xǐ huan|likes / |měi shí|good food / 。 }

Everyone loves good food.

{zh: |wǒ|I / |shén me|anything / |dōu|at all / |bù|don’t / |xiǎng|want / |chī|to eat / 。 }

I don’t want to eat anything.

Remember: **question word + = “all / every”**; **add / = “none / nothing.”** (“everyone likes”) → (“nobody believes”). stands in for , especially in negatives (, “said nothing”).

Watch out

- The question word here is *not* asking anything — it’s the indefinite “any,” swept up by / .

17.4 + — “more and more”

before an adjective (or verb) means a quality **keeps climbing as time passes** — “more and more ….” Literally “more-comes-more.” It usually closes with to mark the change in motion.

Structure: Subject + + Adjective +

{zh: |tiān qì|the weather / |yuè lái yuè|more and more / |lěng|cold / |le / 。 }

The weather is getting colder and colder.

{zh: |wǒ|I / |yuè lái yuè|more and more / |bù|don’t / |xiāng xìn|trust / |tā|him / |le / 。 }

I trust him less and less.

Remember: = “**more-comes-more**” — one thing changing over *time*. Its look-alike ... (previous file) links *two* things (“the more A, the more B”). Time → ; pairing → ...

Watch out

- With a **negative** verb, English flips to “less and less”: (“understand less and less”).

17.5 — “some / a certain”

A bare question word can quietly mean a vague “**some / a certain**” — (“some-where”), (“someone”), (“something”), (“sometime”). It isn’t a question at all; tone and small cues (, ,) flag the difference.

Structure: Question Word (used as "some")

{zh: |zhè ge rén|this person / |wǒ|I / |zài / |nǎr|somewhere / |jiàn guo|have met / 。 }

I’ve met this person somewhere before.

{zh: |wǒ men|we / |yīng gāi|should / |zuò|do / |diǎnr|a bit of / |shén me|something / 。 }

We should do something.

Remember: a question word with no rising “question” tone = “some.” (“who?”) vs (“someone”); (“what?”) vs (“something”). Cues like , , or confirm the “some” reading — ... = “sometime,” not “when?”.

Watch out

- Context does the work — there’s no extra word; only the falling tone and the cues distinguish “some” from a real question.

17.6 — “in order to, for the sake of”

spells out a **purpose** or beneficiary — “in order to, for the sake of.” It usually opens the sentence (“In order to X, ...”), or appears as “... ..” (“the reason is to ...”).

Structure: + Purpose , Subject + Action · Action + + Purpose

{zh: |wèi le|for the sake of / |qián|money / |tā|he / |shén me|anything / |dōu|at all / |yuàn yì|is willing / |zuò|to do / 。 }

For money, he’ll do anything.

{zh: |wǒ|I / |zhè me / |zuò|did this / |shì / |wèi le|in order to / |bāng|help / |nǐ|you / 。 }

I did all this in order to help you.

Remember: = the goal you’re aiming AT (forward-looking); = the cause you’re coming FROM (backward-looking). “ health, I exercise” (purpose) vs “ I’m ill, I rest” (reason). The here is glued into the word — not the aspect particle.

Watch out

- The phrase usually sits at the **front** of the sentence.

18 Comparison Patterns

18.1 ... () — “compared with”

To **lead with** a comparison, open with **A** (), then comment on B — “compared with A, B is ...” It sets the yardstick first, then makes the point. (≈ here; is slightly more common.) B can also start the sentence.

Structure: + A + () , B + Comment

{zh: |gēn|compared with / |Shàng hǎi|Shanghai / |bǐ / , |wǒ|my / |lǎo jiā|hometown / |de / |wù jià|prices / |hěn|very / |dī|low / 。 }

Compared with Shanghai, prices in my hometown are very low.

{zh: |mèi mei|the younger sister / |gēn|compared with / |jiě jie|the elder / |bǐ qǐ lái / |yǒu diǎn|a bit / |hài xiū|shy / 。 }

Compared with her elder sister, the younger one is a bit shy.

Remember: A = “**holding it up against A...**” — the benchmark first, the verdict second. Note that unlike a bare sentence, this framing *allows* (), because it’s a comment, not a direct A- -B.

Watch out

- For a plain “A is more X than B,” the basic is enough: A B .

18.2 ... / — “even more”

In a comparison, drop or before the adjective to mean the first thing is **even more** so — often with a sly hint that “(B is already very ..., and A beats it).”

Structure: Noun 1 + + Noun 2 + / + Adjective

{zh: |Shàng hǎi|Shanghai / |bǐ|than / |Niū yuē|New York / |rén kǒu|population / |gèng|even / |duō|bigger / 。 }

Shanghai’s population is even bigger than New York’s.

{zh: |tā|he / |bǐ|than / |Yáo Míng|Yao Ming / |hái|even / |gāo|taller / 。 }

He’s even taller than Yao Ming.

Remember: / = “**even more.**” especially smuggles in “(and the other is already sky-high)” — quietly admits Yao Ming is already a giant. Crucial rule: a sentence **never** takes / — degree comes from / / .

Watch out

- + is a classic mistake: say or , never .

18.3 ... + — “much more”

To stress a **big** gap, close a comparison with (or /) — “much more ...” also works on its own: (“much better”).

Structure: Noun 1 + + Noun 2 + Adjective + / /

{zh: |pīn yīn|pinyin / |bǐ|than / |Hàn zì|characters / |róng yì|easy / |duō le|much / 。 }

Pinyin is much easier than characters.

{zh: |zuò|taking / |gāo tiě|the bullet train / |bǐ|than / |zuò|taking / |fēi jī|the plane / |fāng biàn|convenient / |de duō|much more / 。 }

The bullet train is much more convenient than flying.

Remember: size the gap at the **end**: **big gap** → / / ; **small gap** → (, “a little easier”). And, again, never / inside a sentence.

Watch out

- / / all sit *after* the adjective: , — never .

18.4 A + + B + + ? — “as ... as?”

can do more than “have” — in a comparison it means “**as ... as**”: “A B + Adj” = “A is as [Adj] as B.” It lives mostly in **questions**, where B is the benchmark you’re measuring against, often with / .

Structure: A + + B + (/) + Adjective + ?

{zh: |tā|he / |yǒu|as / |wǒ|me / |shuài|handsome / |ma / ? }

Is he as handsome as me?

{zh: |tā|he / |yǒu|as / |Yáo Míng|Yao Ming / |nà me|that / |gāo|tall / |ma / ? }

Is he really as tall as Yao Ming?

Remember: = “**reaches as far as**” (as ... as); = “**falls short of**” (not as ... as). The question ... ? asks “does A measure up to B?”; the answer is / (, “not as handsome as you”).

Watch out

- Used mainly in **questions and negatives**, not plain statements. For a plain statement use ... (“the same as”) or (“more than”).

19 Complex Sentence Patterns

19.1 ... () — “except” or “besides”

Here’s a word that means **two opposite things** depending on its partner. X () sets X aside; then the adverb in the second clause decides what happens to it. With , X is **left out** (“everyone *except* X”); with / , X is **kept and more is piled on** (“*besides* X, also ...”). The is optional.

Structure: + X (+) , Subject + / / ...
{zh: |chú le|except for / |tā|him / |wǒ men|we / |dōu|all / |qu guo|have been / 。 }

Except for him, we’ve all been there.

{zh: |chú le|besides / |Zhōng wén|Chinese / , |tā|he / |hái|also / |huì|can / |shuō|speak / |Rì yǔ|Japanese / 。

Besides Chinese, he also speaks Japanese.

Remember: the second word flips the meaning. ... = “except” (X is thrown out); ... / = “besides” (X stays, plus more). Read on to the / before you decide which “ ” it is.

Watch out

- (or) is optional and changes nothing.

19.2 ... — “if”

... wraps a condition — “if ...” Think of as a spoken bracket that **closes** the *if*-clause: opens it, shuts it. The is conversational and **optional** — and it can even appear with no at all.

Structure: + Condition + , () + Result
{zh: |rú guǒ|if / |míng tiān|tomorrow / |xià yǔ|rains / |de huà / , |wǒ men|we / |jiù|then / |bù|not / |qù|go / |le / 。

If it rains tomorrow, we won’t go.

{zh: |bù|not / |xiǎng|want to / |qù|go / |de huà|if / |jiù|then / |bié|don’t / |qù|go / |le / 。

If you don’t feel like going, then don’t.

Remember: and are a **pair of brackets** around the condition — and Chinese lets you use *either or both*. You can even drop both and just imply the “if”: (“call me if anything comes up”).

Watch out

- is conversational — fine to drop it and keep just

19.3 ... — “if ... then ...”

The backbone conditional is ... — “if A, then B.” The key placement rule: lives in the **second** clause, opening the result — not next to .

Structure: + Condition , + Result
{zh: |rú guǒ|if / |yǒu|have / |kùn nán|difficulty / |jiù|then / |gěi / |wǒ|me / |dǎ diàn huà|call / 。

If you run into any trouble, then call me.

{zh: |rú guǒ|if / |tā|he / |zhī dào|knew / , |nà|then / |tā|he / |yí dìng|surely / |huì|would / |gào su|tell / |wǒ|me / 。

If he knew, he’d surely tell me.

Remember: opens the “if,” opens the “then” — and always rides with the *result*, hugging its verb. () can stand in for with an “in that case” flavour.

Watch out

- Don’t park next to — it belongs in the second clause, before its verb.

19.4 ... — “not only ... but also ...”

... stacks a second, stronger point on the first — “not only A, but also B.” The two halves share the **same subject**, and B should push *further* than A (more extreme, more surprising).

Structure: Subject + + A , + B
{zh: |zhè ge|this / |dōng xi|thing / |bú dàn|not only / |guì|expensive / , |ér qiě|but also / |nán|hard / |mǎi|to buy / 。

This thing is not only expensive, but also hard to get.

{zh: |zhè dào|this / |cài|dish / |bú dàn|not only / |hǎo kàn|pretty / , |yě|also / |hǎo chī|tasty / 。

This dish isn’t only pretty, it’s tasty too.

Remember: = “not only,” = “but also,” and B must out-do A (escalate, don’t just repeat). swaps freely for / :, ...

Watch out

- Keep **one subject** across both halves (... , ...); if the subject changes, moves in front of the subject (, ...).

20 Comparing similar adverbs

20.1 vs — “late / hard” vs “early / easy”

These two adverbs are a matched pair pulling in **opposite directions**. Both sit before the verb after a time or condition, but says something happened **later or with more effort than expected** (often a touch impatient), while says it happened **sooner or more easily than expected**.

{zh: |lǎo bǎn|the boss / |shí yī diǎn|eleven / |cái|not until / |dào|arrived / 。 }

The boss didn’t get in until eleven.

{zh: |tā|he / |liù diǎn|six / |jiù|already / |dào|arrived / |le / 。 }

He was already here by six.

Remember: drags late (no); jumps early (+). A neat tell: the lines up with (“already happened, ”) and avoids (“late, nothing tidily completed, ”).

Watch out

- = slower / later / harder than expected (sometimes annoyed); = faster / earlier / easier.
- The verb after takes **no** ; in the “already” sense usually **does**.

20.2 vs — adverb vs time word

Same “just,” two different word-classes. is an **adverb** (“just,” sitting right before the verb); is a **time noun** (“a moment ago,” roughly the last 1–30 minutes) that can stand on its own and even modify a noun.

{zh: |lǎo bǎn|the boss / |gāng|just / |zǒu|left / 。 }

The boss just left.

{zh: |nǐ|you / |gāng cái|just now / |shuō|said / |shén me|what / |le / ? }

What did you just say?

Remember: = adverb, glued to the verb (); = noun, free-standing (, “the thing just now”). often skips when the verb already carries a result; is firmly past and pairs with .

Watch out

- Before an **adjective**, only / works: (“the sky just cleared”) — never .

20.3 vs — “a bit too” vs “a little (more)”

Both translate as “a bit,” but they sit on **opposite sides** of the adjective and carry opposite moods. () goes **before** an adjective with a hint of **complaint** (“a bit too ...”); () goes **after** an adjective to mark a small **amount or degree** (in comparisons or requests).

{zh: |jīn tiān|today / |wǒ|I’m / |yǒu diǎn|a bit / |lèi|tired / 。 }

I’m a bit tired today.

{zh: |qǐng|please / |shuō|speak / |màn|slowly / |yì diǎn|a little / 。 }

Please speak a little more slowly.

Remember: + **Adj** = **a grumble before** (“a bit *too* tired”); **Adj** + = **a measured amount after** (“a little slower”). Position tells you the mood: before = complaint, after = neutral nudge.

Watch out

- + **Noun** = “a little (of)”:
- / = “not at all”:

20.4 vs — future vs past “again”

Both mean “again,” but they split cleanly on **time**: is “again” for something **not yet done** (a future or intended repeat); is “again” for something that **has already happened**.

{zh: |huān yíng|welcome / |zài|again / |lái|come / ! }

Come again!

{zh: |nǐ|you / |yòu|again / |chí dào|late / |le / 。 }

You’re late again.

Remember: looks forward (plan/intend, no); looks back (already repeated, usually +). (please come again) vs (here you are again). The sides with .

Watch out

- also means “another” () and “(do A) then (B)” (...); also stacks qualities ().

21 Comparing similar conjunctions

21.1 vs — “or” in questions vs statements

This is the single most-tested “or” distinction in Chinese, so make it automatic. Both words mean “or” and present a choice, but they split by **sentence type**: offers the choice in a **question** (you’re asking someone to pick); lists alternatives in a **statement** (you’re just telling).

{zh: |nǐ|you / |hē|drink / |chá|tea / |hái shì|or / |kā fēi|coffee / ? }

Do you want tea or coffee?

{zh: |chá|tea / |huò zhě|or / |kā fēi|coffee / |dōu|either / |xíng|is fine / 。 }

Tea or coffee — either’s fine.

{zh: |wǒ|I / |bù|don’t / |zhī dào|know / |tā|he / |zhī chí|supports / |hái shì|or / |fǎn duì|opposes / 。 }

I don’t know whether he’s for or against.

Remember: ? → , . → . Asking someone to choose takes ; stating open options takes . And a *hidden* question — “I don’t know whether A or B” — still counts as a question inside, so it keeps .

Watch out

- That embedded-question case (...) trips people up — there’s no question mark, but the choice is still being *asked*, so stays.

22 Comparing similar time words

22.1 vs vs — three kinds of “after / then”

All three brush against “after / then,” but each owns a different slot — so the trick is to match the situation to the word:

- “after / from now on,” and it can point to the **future**: (“I want to start a company *someday*”).
- “and then,” joining the **next step** in a sequence (any time frame):
- “later, afterwards,” narrating the **next thing that happened — in the past only**.

{zh: |wǒ|I / |yǐ hòu|in future / |xiǎng|want to / |kāi|start / |gōng sī|a company / 。 }

I want to start a company someday.

{zh: |xiān|first / |chī fàn|eat / , |rán hòu|and then / |kàn|watch / |diàn yǐng|a film / 。 }

Eat first, and then watch a film.

{zh: |hòu lái|later / |tā|he / |qù|went / |lè / |Měi guó|the US / 。 }

Later he went to the US.

Remember: the quick test — **future** → , **next step** → , **past story** → . Only is locked to the past; can reach into the future, and chains steps in any time frame.

Watch out

- and can both translate as “later,” but only narrates what has **already** happened — never a future “then.”