

# How to Impress Your Sister with (Mandarin) Chinese: Part I

With help from Claudia Ross, Baozhang He, Pei-chia Chen, & Meng Yeh

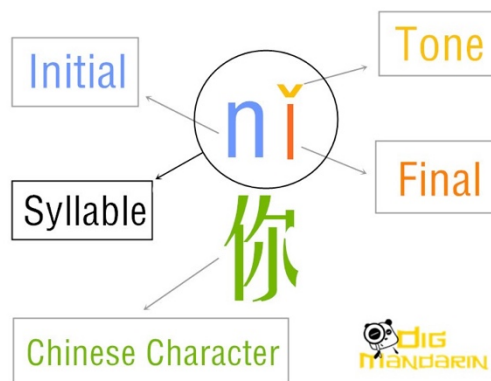
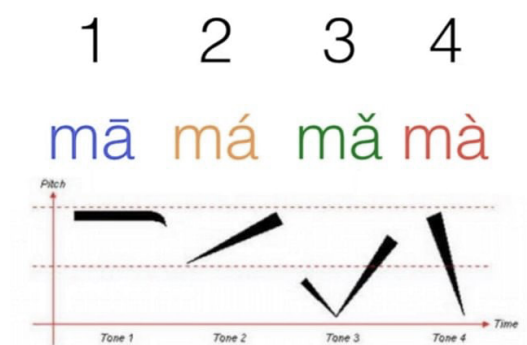
## Syllable Structure

### Initials

b	d	g	j	zh	z
p	t	k	q	ch	c
m	n	h	x	sh	s
f	l			r	

### Finals

a	a, ai, ao	an	ang	
e	e, ei	en	eng	er
o	(o), ou		ong	
i	i, ia, iao, ie, iu/iou	ian, in	iang, ing, iong	
ü	ü, üe	üan, ün,		
u	u, ua, uai, ui/uei, uo	uan, uen	uang, ueng	



Sauce:

<https://www.iwillteachyoulanguage.com/learn/chinese/chinese-tips/demystifying-chinese-tones>

Sauce 2: <https://www.digmandarin.com/chinese-pronunciation-guide.html> (Recommend this source to practice/listen to pronunciations)

Syllables and words (many words are monosyllabic) are comprised of an initial, final, and then tone, which is marked above the final (vowel) in writing pinyin. Tone is not marked in characters, which is annoying.

\*What is Pinyin: Since Chinese is not a phonetic writing system (no specific sounds assigned to specific characters), someone just learning the language, in this case, you, wouldn't have any idea how to pronounce 我小猫很可爱！

## Basic Vocabulary

Pronouns (note, characters are simplified, if applicable)

I	wǒ	我
You	nǐ	你
He/She/It	tā	她, 他

## Introduction to Characters

<https://omniglot.com/chinese/types.htm>

<https://www.mandarinblueprint.com/6-types-of-chinese-character/>

**Pictograph** – Looks, or looked, like what it is.

口,	日,	人,	山,	雨
kǒu,	rì,	rén,	shān,	yù
mouth	sun	person	mountain	rain

**Simple Ideograph** – Represents the abstract

上	下	中	一	三
shàng	xià	zhōng	yī	sān
On/above	Under	Middle	One	Three

**Compound Ideograph** – Represents abstract more abstractly

木 - mù, tree, 林 - lín, forest

**Semantic-Phonetic Compound** – make up about 80-90% of characters. One component represents sound, one represents meaning, can be pretty abstract. See also: radicals. You can see the 口 'kǒu' radical, (see above), which is a mouth, which adds a semantic element to each word it's part of. (the radical in these cases is that rectangle on the left half of the character)

叫	jiào	To call, be called
吃	chī	To eat
味	wèi	To taste, taste
唱	chàng	To sing

Combining for words you might recognize.

Shanghai – 上海, Shànghǎi, lit. on the sea. 上 shàng – preposition 'on', 海 hǎi 'sea', ocean')

China – 中国 zhōngguó. 中 zhōng, middle, and 国 guó, country, kingdom. The Middle Kingdom

Japan – 日本, Rìběn. 日 rì, sun, and 本 běn, root, origin. Land of the Rising Sun.

America – 美国, měiguó. 美 měi, beauty, and 国 guó again. Also a phonetic approximation to sound like 'America'

Google Translate works in a pinch, but these are better:

Grammar:

[https://resources.allsetlearning.com/chinese/grammar/Main\\_Page](https://resources.allsetlearning.com/chinese/grammar/Main_Page)

Dictionary w/stroke order, idioms:

<https://www.mdbg.net/chinese/dictionary>

Dictionary

w/etymology:

<https://www.yellowbridge.com/chinese/character-dictionary.php>

Vernacular translator:

<https://www.deepl.com/en/translator>

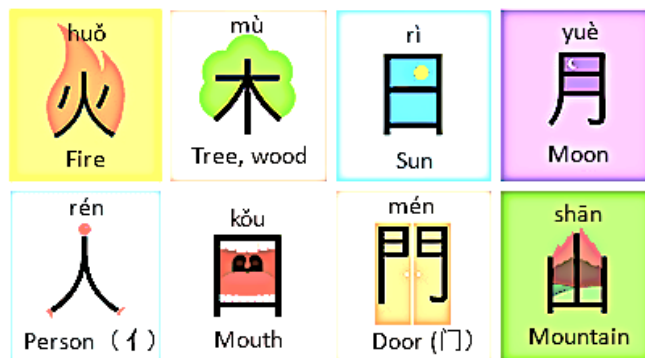
## Explanations of 'Radicals' from around the Internet

Note that radicals are also different in the simplified versus traditional character system.

<https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcREAFixfbuFu44qkRoAQKX3OPth4C0-j6-n7A&usqp=CAU>

A radical, or key (= 部首, bùshǒu), is a graphical component of a Chinese character. This means that every Chinese character contains a radical, but what does it tell you about the character?

When you find the radical in the Chinese character it will give you an indication of the meaning (and/or pronunciation) of that character. Complex characters are made up of radicals. This means that it's important for beginners to know the radicals and their meaning. The modern system of Chinese radicals has 214 elements. So basically, every character in modern Chinese can be divided into these elements. Simple, right? The more you know the radicals, the easier you will be able to remember how to combine them with each other to form other characters.



For example, the character for good, 好, consists of 2 radicals. 女(woman) and 子(son). These exist as characters on their own, but form a different one when put together.

Source: <https://blog.hutong-school.com/the-system-of-chinese-radicals/>

**10 Most Common Radicals** – adapted from <https://www.thebeijinger.com/blog/2018/01/22/mandarin-monday-get-know-your-chinese-radicals> Radicals appear either in character form (standalone) or radical form (part of a compound character). It's best to familiarize yourself with both.

### 1. The Grass Radical "艸" (草)

Radical form: 艹 cǎo

Used in character like: 草 (cǎo, "grass"), 花 (huā, "flower"), 茶 (chá, tea)

### 2. The Water Radical "水"

Radical form: 氵 shuǐ

Used in characters like: 海 (hǎi, "ocean"), 江 (jiāng, "river"), 河 (hé, "stream")

### 3. The Wood Radical "木"

Radical form: 木 mù

Used in characters like: 树 (shù, "tree"), 林 (lín, "forest"), 本 (běn, "original"), 未 (wèi, "not"), 来 (lái, "to come")

### 4. The Hand Radical "手"

Radical form: 扌 shǒu

Used in characters like: 推 (tuī, "to push"), 拉 (lā, "to pull"), 提 (tí, "to carry"), 把 (bǎ, the "subject-object-verb" helper word), 打 (dǎ, "to hit")

## 5. The Mouth Radical "口"

Radical form: 口 *kǒu*

Used in characters like: 呢 (*nē*, a particle), 只 (*zhī; zhǐ*, a measure word or "only"), 古 (*gǔ*, "old"), 喉咙 (*hóulóng*, "throat")

## 6. The Heart Radical "心"

Radical form: 心 *xīn*

Used in characters like: 怪 (*guài*, "strange"), 忆 (*yì*, "memory"), 忘 (*wàng*, "forget"), 必 (*bì*, "must")

## 7. The Insect Radical "虫"

Radical form: 虫 *chóng*

Used in characters like: 蝴蝶 (*húdié*, "butterfly"), 蚂蚁 (*mǎyǐ*, "ant"), 螃蟹 (*pángxiè*, "crab"), 独 (*dú*, "only")

## 8. The Bamboo Radical "竹"

Radical form: 竹 *zhú*

Used in characters like: 笼 (*lǒng*, "cage"), 箱 (*xiāng*, "box"), 笑 (*xiào*, "laugh") 答 (*dā*, "answer"), 等 (*děng*, "wait")

## 9. The Speech Radical "言"

Radical form: 讠 *yán*

Used in characters like: 说 (*shuō*, "speak"), 词 (*cí*, "speech"), 语 (*yǔ*, "language")

## 10. The Silk Radical "糸"

Radical form: 纟 *sī*

Used in characters like: 纸 (*zhǐ*, "paper"), 给 (*gěi*, "to give"), 红 (*hóng*, "red")

## 11. The Food Radical (bonus because it's food, so it's important.

Radical form: 饣 *shí*

Used in characters like: 饿 (*è*, hungry) 饭 (*fàn*, cooked rice, food, meal) 饼 (*bǐng*, cookie, pastry, mooncake), 饱 (*bǎo*, to be full after a meal)

### Bonus: Chinese words in Avatar: the Last Airbender (a few that stood out to me, at least)

- 1) **Heibai** – you might remember the black and white Panda/monster spirit from Book One.

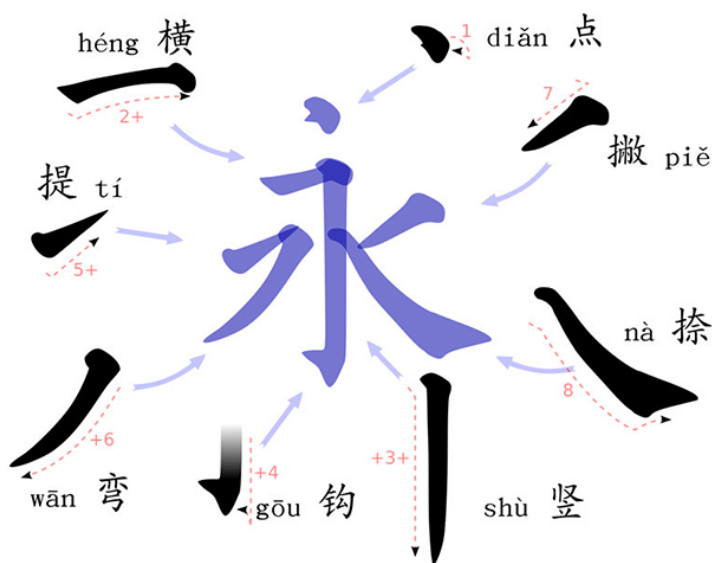
黑 – *hēi*, black, 白 – *bái*, white.

- 2) **Yue** – 月, *yuè*, month, moon. Probably doesn't need much more explanation, but here's a bit of the etymological evolution of the character (Oracle bones are super old, seals are less super old)

Oracle Bone Script	Seal Script	Clerical Script	Semi-Cursive Script	Cursive Script	Regular Script (Traditional)	Meaning
						Moon

- 3) **Dai Li**, the sketchy Earth Kingdom Agents - A pun (had to double check). 戴笠, *dài lì*, to wear a hat, specifically the cone bamboo rain hats, and 代理, *dàilǐ*, a proxy or agent.

## How to Impress Your Sister with Chinese: Part II

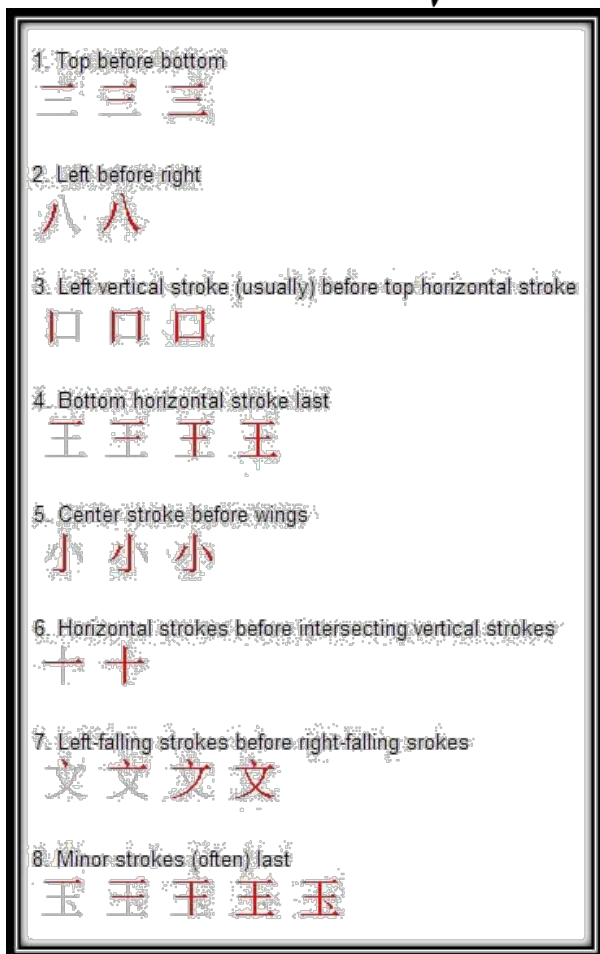


Some Stroke Order Basics (since you asked). The names of each stroke, I've never needed to know, but voilà.

[https://subsites.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-03/28/c\\_208733.htm](https://subsites.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-03/28/c_208733.htm)

While proper stroke order was developed for efficiency and to help teach literacy and calligraphy/writing mechanics in general, among those learning Chinese as a second language (or third etc.), enforcing proper stroke order is somewhat more difficult. It's not mandatory to learn, but it will help. There's just something satisfying about seeing a complicated character, and being able to recognize and break down its components, based on stroke order.

Also, if you write wrong and actual Chinese people see, they will judge you.



Simplified Pinyin English Definition

我 I / me / my

Character	Tot Str Rad / Str	Mandarin Pinyin	UniHan Definition standalone and in compounds	Jyutping Cantonese	Variant Four corner Cangle
我	5 7	wǒ	my, we	ngo5	2355.0 HQI

The MDBG dictionary (internet) has a cool function where you can see the stroke order in .gif format, and there are also printable stroke order worksheets online that are easy to find. Click the character, then the box with the >> icon, then the little calligraphy brush to see stroke order.

Also note that in characters with enclosures, such as 国, guó, meaning 'country', the enclosure is the last part of the character you write, following the same order for box-like characters depicted earlier.

Dialogues:

你好！你是哪国人？

Nǐ hǎo! Nǐ shì nǎ guó rén?

Literal: “You good! You are what country(‘s) person?”

Vernacular: “Hello! Where are you from ? ”

你 – Nǐ – 2<sup>nd</sup> person, singular, ‘you’

好 – hǎo – adjective (more or less, more on that later) ‘good’

你 – Nǐ – 2<sup>nd</sup> person, singular, ‘you’

是 – shì – verb ‘to be’. You may know this, but there are no verb conjugations in Chinese! Yay!

哪 – nǎ, nǐ – question word, ‘which’ (which one)

国 – guó – noun, ‘country’. The enclosure is like the country’s border.

人 – rén – person. Looks like a person walking (with no head or arms, but then again, these *are* simplified characters)

我 是 (name).

Wǒ shì (name).

“I am \_\_\_\_\_”, to introduce yourself .

Alternately, you know: 叫 jiào, to be called, called.

我叫 (name). ‘Wǒ jiào \_\_\_\_\_’.

Option 3: 名字, míngzì

我 的 名字 是(name)

Wǒ de míngzì shì (name)

My name is (name)

的 ‘de’ is the possessive particle, equivalent of ‘s in English, but also tacks onto pronouns, since the pronouns don’t change form to accommodate anything except, occasionally, formality. (您 nín is the formal version of 你 nǐ, 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun).

Example:

我 的 小 猫

Wǒ de xiǎo māo

my small cat

(note, ‘x’ in Pinyin is pronounced similar to ‘s’, but more friction on the alveolar ridge, that bump where the roof of your mouth meets your upper teeth)

们 ‘men’ is the plural particle, mostly seen on pronouns. Best illustrated with charts, like many things.

#### Comparative Verb Charts for Present Tense

I	have	We	have
You	have	You (pl.) <sub>y'all</sub>	have
He/she/it	has	They	have

Yo	tengo	nosotros	tenemos
Tú	tienes	vosotros	tenéis
él/ella/usted	tiene	ellos/ellas/ustedes	tienen

我 wǒ	有 yǒu	我们, wǒmen	有 yǒu
你 nǐ	有 yǒu	你们, nǐmen	有 yǒu
他 / 她 tā	有 yǒu	他们/ 她们, tāmen	有 yǒu

我 有 一 个 小 猫。

Wǒ yǒu yī gè xiǎo māo.

I have a cat.

个 ‘gè’ is the catch-all classifier.

#### 他 VS 她

Both are third person pronouns, both pronounced the same. So what’s the difference? You can only tell in writing – the characters have different *radicals*.

亻 radical is rén (pronounced more like “run”, not Ren, like the Knights of Ren), which is 人 rén, but the strokes have shifted a bit. 人, as we know, means ‘human, man(kind), person).

女 ‘nǚ’ is the word for ‘woman’, also the female radical.

“Classifiers or measure words (liàngcí) are used in Chinese with nouns when specifying number. They have similarities to English expressions like a *pack* of cards, a *piece* of paper, and a *bottle* of beer. While such words are often optional in English - you can say "a beer" or "a bottle/glass of beer", in Chinese you have to use the classifier, e.g. 一杯/瓶啤酒 (yībēi/píng pǐjiǔ), whether you're talking about one or many things.

Measure words may be used for specific objects, shapes, people, animals, vehicles, events, groups, collections of objects or people, time, weight or money.

The most common classifier is 个 (箇) (gè), which originally meant bamboo stalks. It became used as a classifier for things with vertical, individual or upright qualities, and eventually became a general classifier for common nouns.” (<https://omniglot.com/chinese/classifiers.htm>)

我 是 美 国 人。

Wǒ shì Měiguó rén.

I’m an American (person).

美国 – Měiguó - America.

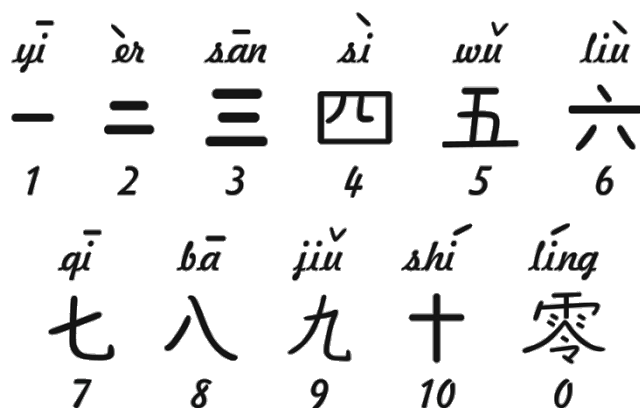
Literal: 美 Měi ‘beauty’, and 国, we know. Also, ‘Měiguó’ is somewhat phonetic, sounds like ‘Murica’.

中国 – zhōng guó – China.

Literal: 中 zhōng – middle, you can see how it’s divided down the middle. Think ‘Middle Kingdom’.



## The Low Down on Numbers



10	shí	十	20	èr shí	二十
11	shí yī	十一	30	sān shí	三十
12	shí èr	十二	40	sì shí	四十
13	shí sān	十三	50	wǔ shí	五十
14	shí sì	十四	60	liù shí	六十
15	shí wǔ	十五	70	qī shí	七十
16	shí liù	十六	80	bā shí	八十
17	shí qī	十七	90	jiǔ shí	九十
18	shí bā	十八	100	yī bǎi	一百
19	shí jiǔ	十九	1,000	yī qiān	一千

Chinese Vocabulary for Days/Week		
Sunday	星期天	Xīngqítiān
Monday	星期一	Xīngqī yī
Tuesday	星期二	Xīngqī'èr
Wednesday	星期三	Xīngqīsān
Thursday	星期四	Xīngqīsì
Friday	星期五	Xīngqīwǔ
Saturday	星期六	Xīngqīliù

Chinese Vocabulary for Months/Year		
January	一月	Yī yuè
February	二月	Èr yuè
March	三月	Sān yuè
April	四月	Sì yuè
May	五月	Wǔ yuè
June	六月	Liù yuè
July	七月	Qī yuè
August	八月	Bā yuè
September	九月	Jiǔ yuè
October	十月	Shí yuè
November	十一月	Shíyī yuè
December	十二月	Shí'èr yuè

Fun fact, the excessively complicated character for zero can be further simplified to one stroke.  
This: 0

Numbers above ten are simple and intuitive, and there are cool theories/papers out there about how Asians are so good at math because of how easy their number system is to learn (eleven, twelve are oddballs in English and many other western languages).

Should you have to count above 1,000, I ask you to consult the internet.

Now, what can we do with numbers in Chinese, besides math and counting?

Days of the week, months of the year! You're smart and can probably see the patterns for yourself already.

Fun facts!

星-xīng means 'star'

期-qí is 'period of time'

xīngqī means, as show, 'weekday'.

月-yuè should be familiar because 1) Sokka's first girlfriend, 2), original character was a crescent.  
Translates to 'month' or 'moon'.

生-sheng is 'life, living, birth'

日-rì is 'sun', it looks like a sun, kind of. Japan is 日本 rìběn, which is 'sun' and 'origin/root'. (yay etymology!!)

号-hào is a suffix (more or less) for an ordinal number, such as a day of the month.

我的生日是七月二十八号。  
Wǒ de shēngrì shì qī yuè èrshíbā hào.

我的生日是\_\_\_\_月\_\_\_\_号。

Wǒ de shēngrì shì \_\_\_\_ yuè \_\_\_\_\_ hào.



## How to Impress Your Sister with Chinese: Part III

### Small Talks, Prepositions, Questions

早上好！

Zǎoshàng hǎo!

Good morning!

下午好！

Xiàwǔ hǎo!

Good afternoon!

晚上好！

Wǎnshàng hǎo!

Good evening!

晚安。

Wǎn'ān.

Good night (as a farewell)

再见。

Zai jiàn.

Bye.

昨天 – zuótiān – yesterday

今天 – jīntiān – today

明天 – míngtiān – tomorrow

昨年 – zuónián

今年 – jīnnián

明年 – míngnián

现在 – xiànzài

工作怎么样？





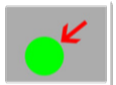

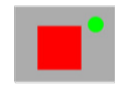
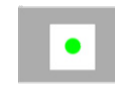




Gōngzuò zěnmeyàng?

How is work.

今天的工作怎么样？

Jīntiān de gōngzuò zěnmeyàng?

How is today's work? (How is work today?)

<p>下</p>  <p>xià down</p>	<p>上</p>  <p>shàng up</p>	<p>左</p>  <p>zuǒ left</p>	<p>右</p>  <p>yòu right</p>
<p>这</p>  <p>zhè this</p>	<p>那</p>  <p>nà that</p>	<p>外</p>  <p>wài outside</p>	<p>里</p>  <p>lǐ inside</p>
<p>无</p>  <p>wú un-, non-, -less</p>	<p>旁</p>  <p>páng near, nearby</p>	<p>面</p>  <p>miàn face, surface</p>	<p>边</p>  <p>biān side, edge</p>

<https://www.digmandarin.com/all-about-location-words.html>

Notice the prepositions 上 shàng and 下 xià in the terms for 'good morning/afternoon/evening', and how the prepositions are metaphorical in the expressions. Lots of Chinese words/terms employ prepositions as such.

Another example: the preposition for 'outside' (外面 wàimiàn, lit. 'outside surface', to say you're outside a building or something.

The word for 'foreigner' is 外国人, wàiguó rén. 国 guó, 人 rén we've mentioned briefly before, 国 guó meaning 'country', the character complete with its enclosure box, representing the country's borders, and 人 rén, meaning 'person', and looks like a person.

我很累。

Wǒ hěn lèi.

I'm tired.

(I'm very tired)

我也很累。

Wǒ yě hěn lèi.

I also am (very) tired.

我很饿。

Wǒ hěn è.

I'm hungry

I'm (very) hungry.

很 hěn by itself means 'very', and acts as an intensifier, but has come to fit grammatically into state-of-being statements naturally. (pronounced like 'hun' the traditional bad guys in Mulan, not 'hen', like the female chicken.

### Question Formation

你呢？

Nǐ ne?

And you?

This is one of the simplest ways to form a question – with the question particle 呢 ne. note that it has no tone, or neutral tone.

你好吗？

Nǐ hǎo ma?

How are you?

The 吗 ma is the more common question particle, and tags onto the end of a statement to make it a yes/no question. 你好吗？ Nǐ hǎo ma? literally is you-good-yes/no?

对不对？

Duì bù duì?

Right not right? / is it right? / right? (rhetorically)

This is the last (common) way to form questions, a pattern of Verb-‘not-‘Verb’, with the same verb being repeated. 不 bù is important – it's the main negation word in Chinese, although it's exact translation to English varies depending on context (no, not, have not, etc)

Homophones – there are a ton in Chinese, for reasons previously discussed. We have a concrete example with this new vocabulary.

作 zuò in 工作 gōngzuò, work (noun)

昨 zuò in 昨天 zuótiān (yesterday)

Notice how the two ‘zuò’ characters are different with regards to the lefthand radical.

昨 zuò has the ‘sun’ radical (日 rì, which we’ve covered briefly), which makes sense semantically as a ‘time of day’ term.

天 tiān (n.) means ‘day’, and translates literally to ‘sky’, among a few other things.

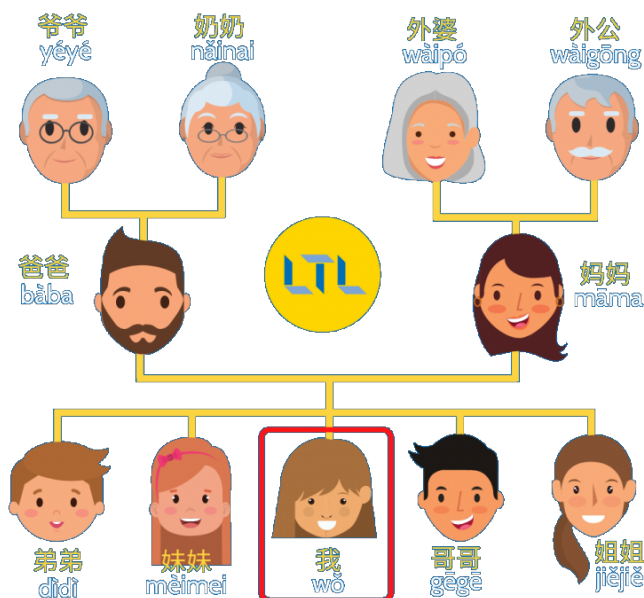
工 gōng (n.) means ‘labor(er)’ or ‘work(er).

作 zuò here has the 亻 rén radical, or ‘person’, which is the same as 人 rén, the same character in non-radical form. It's pretty easy to see that how, when 人 rén becomes a radical, it just shifts around a bit. This ‘person’ radical makes sense in this 作 zuò, as doing work requires a person to be doing that work (this is from a time period without machine drones to do the work for you, unlike us Amazon grunts). Hopefully you're starting to see the intuition/logic behind the characters.

## How to Impress Your Sister with Chinese: Part IV

Kinship Terms (simplified, because there are TONS of them) and some holiday stuff

### The Basic Chinese Family Tree



妈妈 – māma, mom

爸爸 – bàba, dad

哥哥 – gēge, older brother

弟弟 – dìdì, younger brother

妹妹 – mèimei, younger sister

阿姨 – āyí, aunt, also a polite/generic term for a woman (like, a kid came up to me in a bookstore once and tried looking at the book I was holding, and her mom pulled her away and said, “this is Ayi’s”)

伯伯 – bóbo, uncle

奶奶 – nǎinai, grandma

爷爷 – yéye, grandpa

这是我\_\_\_\_\_

Zhè shì wǒ ...

This is my ... ( mom, older brother, younger sister)

他 / 她是我\_\_\_\_\_

Tā shì wǒ ...

(S)he is my ...

你是我\_\_\_\_\_

Nǐ shì wǒ ...

You are my ... (日光, rìguāng, sunshine, but we’re sticking to familial terms for now)

陆客，我是你爸爸。

Lùkè, wǒ shì nǐ bàba.

Luke, I am your father. (Except I think he would have used 父亲, fùqīn, which is more formal, like ‘father’, not ‘dad/papa’)

Now, you’ll probably notice in the family tree that there are different words for uncles/aunts/cousins/grandparents etc. depending on whether they’re on mom’s side as opposed to dad’s side. Then there are different terms for cousins depending on if they’re from an older or younger sibling, and that sibling is a brother or a sister, then there’s terms for inlaws and so on. Google ‘Chinese Kinship Terms’ and you’ll get a better and crazier explanation. The YouTube channel ‘Off the Great Wall’ has a good video on this, if I remember correctly.

Other generic terms related to family:

父亲	fùqīn	father (more formal)
母亲	mǔqīn	mother (more formal)
父母	fùmǔ	parents (alternatively, 爸妈, bà mā, can be used informally)
家人	jiārén (家, jiā, house, home family)	Family ('family people')
丈夫	zhàngfū	husband
太太	tàitai	wife
孩子	háizi	child
儿子	érzi	son
女儿	nǚ'ér	daughter
独生子女	dúshēngzǐ nǚ	only child
大家	dàjiā (大, dà, big)	everyone . A common greeting is 大家好, dàjiā hǎo, 'Hello, everyone'.

祝你。。。。

Zhù nǐ ...

Wish you ...

This works for birthdays and holidays, probably weekends etc. The lyrics to happy birthday are literally 祝你生日快乐, Zhù nǐ shēng rì kuàile, 'wish you birthday happy'.

周末快乐! Zhōumò kuàile! – have a good weekend!

Note on 周 zhōu – shorter term for 'week', mostly interchangeable with 星期, xīngqī, also 'week', literally 'star' 'period'. Instead of 星期一, xīngqī yī for 'Monday, you can simply say 周一 'zhōuyī'.

圣诞节 – Shèngdànjié – Christmas. (圣 shèng, 'holy, sacred', 诞 dàn, 'give birth, bear child', 节 jié, holiday). Consumer Christmas is definitely a thing in China, at least urban China.

双十一, shuāng shíyī – this was the holiday I didn't know existed. As the name implies, it's on November 11. That is, 11/11. The name shuāng shíyī is 'double eleven', 'shuāng' being an ideograph for 'pair, double', as you can probably see. The holiday was originally anti-valentine's day, 'singles day', because of the 1's, but it's basically become their black Friday, with crazy shopping deals. (Note, I didn't really hear anyone wish anyone else a happy Single's Day, it's just an interesting cultural thing that felt relevant)

Chinese New Year (春节, chūnjié, Spring Festival) is world-famous, the one with the fireworks and dancing dragons, with the Chinese Zodiac and everything.

Mid-Autumn festival is known for its moon cakes (literally 中秋, zhōngqiū, and you'll remember 中 zhōng, 'middle', from 中国 zhōngguó, 'China', the Middle Kingdom).

## How to Impress Your Sister with Chinese: Part V

### More Verb Stuff

So if you've ever studied another language, odds are that you're familiar with the term 'verb conjugation', sometimes called 'verb agreement'. Many languages have verb agreement, and many languages have very complex aspects inflected on the verb (time or tense, subject(s), whether or not the verb has a direct or indirect object, and so on, but that's a bit outside the scope of our discussion). In English, it looks something like this, and this should look familiar from Part II of this lesson series:

#### Basic Verb Review

\*Disclaimer: like with most things in life, but especially grammar and languages, there are exceptions to be found, sometimes in abundance. For the sake of the discussion, here's a simplified overview of how our native English speaker brain puts verbs to use in everyday language. Hang in with me through this, because I think it's important to be able to compare the two verb systems. But I thought it best to review what we should already know before diving into something new.

Basic verb conjugation chart. Notice the organization of subject pronouns by first/second/third person and singular/plural.

Subject	Verb	Subject	Verb
I (1 <sup>st</sup> person singular)	verb	We (1 <sup>st</sup> person plural)	verb
You (2 <sup>nd</sup> person singular)	verb	You (2 <sup>nd</sup> person plural)	verb
He/she/it (3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular)	verbs	They (3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural)	verb

(The present/past tense can also be translated as I verb, I do verb, I am verbing, and I verbed, I was verbing, I did verb).

What this looks like with an actual verb. (yes, there are regular and irregular verbs in most languages with verb conjugations. For the sake of simplicity, we'll be talking about the regular patterns to identify the verb endings, which are highlighted for you.

To eat, present tense, English				To eat, past tense, English			
I	eat	We	eat	I	ate	We	ate
You	eat	Y'all	eat	You	ate	Y'all	ate
He/she/it	eats	They	eat	He/she/it	ate	They	ate

It's pretty easy to see that the verb, 'eat' doesn't change form very much, from subject to subject in English.

And if you're familiar with other western languages, you probably know the new world that is compound tense agreement. (tengo, tienes, tiene, etc. in Spanish, or j'avais mangé, tu t'es préparé in French, and so on. If you're not familiar, then no problem, and you have more brain space for what's to come.

Good job! Hopefully most of that grammar stuff was review for you and you didn't even need it and you were annoyed you were even expected to read it. But just in case, it doesn't hurt to have a thorough(ish) handout. On to the good news.

Chinese doesn't have any of *that*. Wanna see a 'verb chart' in Chinese?

吃 chī, 'to eat', Mandarin					
Subject			Subject		
wǒ	我	吃	wǒmen	我们	吃
nǐ	你	吃	nǐmen	你们	吃
(nǐn)	您		(nǐnmen)	您们	
tā	他	吃	tāmen	他们	吃
	她			她们	

\*note: nǐn 您 is the formal version of nǐ 你。

Also note the 口 kǒu, mouth radical that's part of the verb 吃. Wonder why that is...

To form verb tense or talk about when the action occurred is also simple. You just need to put the time word at the beginning of the sentence to give context. The only stipulation is the addition of the 了 ‘le’ particle. It’s similar to the 吗 ma, question particle (你好吗? how are you?), or the 吧 ba, suggestion particle (走吧, zǒu ba!, let’s go!). 了 le indicates a completed action. However, it is not a ‘past tense’ marker.

1. 现在 我 吃饭。

Xiànzài wǒ chī fàn.

Now I (am) eat(ing) food. (literally, eating rice)

2. 昨天 我 吃饭 了。

Zuótiān wǒ chī fàn le.

Yesterday I eat food (completed action particle)

3. 明天 我 想要 吃饭。

Míngtiān wǒ xiǎngyào chī fàn.

Tomorrow I want (to) eat food.

4. 你 吃饭 了吗?

Nǐ chīfàn le ma?

Have you eaten? (a really common greeting, akin to ‘what’s up?’)

5. 吃了 is the analogous response to ‘not much’, literally, ‘ate’.

Which raises a good point – A common question is how do you say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in Chinese? And the answer is that it depends (this is the most common answer to most questions, just so you know). It depends on the verb used in the question asked, and you just respond yes/no by affirming the verb again or not.

Question	Answer
你 好吗 ? Nǐ hǎo ma? Are you good?	好. Hǎo. Good. (yes, good) (kind of a clunky, literal translation)
你是不是美国人 ? Nǐ shì bù shì měiguó rén? Are you American?	是 (美国人) shí, yes I am  不是 (美国人) bù shì, no, am not
你有没有那本书 ? Nǐ yǒu méiyǒu nà běn shū? Do you have that book?	没有。 méiyǒu. Don’t have.
有 – yǒu, to have 没 – méi, negation only for 有 * 那 – nà, that *terms and conditions apply	本 – běn, classifier for books, files, periodicals. pronounced more like ‘bun’, or a combination of ‘ben’ and ‘bun’ 书 – shū, book

## How to Impress Your Sister With Chinese: Part IV

### Useful Verbs, Compound Verbs, and Questions

Verb (Simplified)	Verb (Pinyin)	English	Example
爱	ài	to love	晚安！晚安！我爱你。 Wǎn'ān! Wǒ ài nǐ. Good night! I love you.
学习	xuéxí	to study	学习好 Xuéxí hào. Study well.
去	qù	to go	你去哪儿？ Nǐ qù nǎ'ér? Where are you going?
来	lái	to come	昨天你来工作了？ Zuótiān nǐ lái gōngzuò le? Did you come to work yesterday?
是	shì	to be	我是美国人。 Wǒ shì měiguó rén. I'm American.
有	yǒu	to have	我有很多的朋友。 Wǒ yǒu hěnduō de péngyǒu. I have many friends.
要	yào	to want	我要吃鸡肉。 Wǒ yào chī jīròu. I want to eat chicken.
想	xiǎng	would like to, to think, to miss	好想你。 Hǎo xiǎng nǐ. (I) miss you.
需要	xūyào	to need	需要帮助吗？ Xūyào bāngzhù ma? Do (you) need help?)
帮助	bāngzhù	help, to help	我可以帮助你吗？ Wǒ kěyǐ bāngzhù nǐ ma? Can I help you?
可以	kěyǐ	may, can (permission)	我可以去？ Wǒ kěyǐ qù? May I go?
能	néng	able to, ability	你能吃三碗米饭吗？ Nǐ néng chī sān wǎn mǐfàn ma? Can you eat three bowls of rice?



会	huì	able to, can (learned or trained)	你会说中文吗？ Nǐ huì shuō zhōngwén ma? Can you speak Chinese? (一点点, yī diǎndiǎn, a little bit)
应该	yīnggāi	should	你应该学习好。 Nǐ yīnggāi xuéxí hào. You should study well.
做	zuò	to do, make	怎么做？ Zěnmē zuò? How to do ...
走	zǒu	to walk	怎么走？ Zěnmē zǒu? How to go (to place)
写	xiě	to write	写拼音. 写汉字。 Xiě pīnyīn. Xiě hànzi. Write Pinyin. Write characters.
读	dú	to read	我喜欢读。 Wǒ xǐhuān dú. I like to read.
听	tīng	to hear, listen	我听说。。。. Wǒ tīng shuō... I've heard it said... 我喜欢听音乐。 Wǒ xǐhuān tīng yīnyuè. I like to listen to music.
说	shuō	to speak	他说话 说的很快。 Tā shuōhuà shuō de hěn kuài. He speaks quickly.
看	kàn	to see, look, watch	看起来, kàn qǐ lái, seems like 看起来, kàn guò lái, look over here
喜欢	xǐhuān	to like	你有什么爱好？ Nǐ yǒu shéme àihào? What are your hobbies? 我喜欢。。。. Wǒ xǐhuān... I like
工作	gōngzuò	to work	我不喜欢做工作。 Wǒ bù xǐhuān zuò gōngzuò. I don't like to do work.

喝	hē	to drink	你应该喝水。 Nǐ yīnggāi hē shuǐ. You should drink water.
吃	chī	to eat	你吃饭了吗？ Nǐ chī fàn le ma? Have you eaten?
睡觉	shuìjiào	to sleep	你睡觉好了吗？ Nǐ shuìjiào hǎo le ma? Did you sleep well?
知道	zhīdào	to know	对不起，我不知道。 Dui bù qǐ, wǒ bù zhīdào. Sorry, I don't know. (Important phrase, I used it daily) Also: 真不好意思。Zhēn bù hǎo yìsi. Sorry (has slight connotation of being embarrassed) 没问题。Méi wènti. No problem.
懂	dǒng	to understand	我不懂。 Wǒ bù dǒng. I don't understand.
用	yòng	to use	不可以用手机在这里。 Bù kǐyǐ yòng shǒujī zài zhèlǐ. (You) can't use cell phones in this place.
问	wèn	to ask	想要问你。。。 Xiǎngyào wèn nǐ... I want to ask you... 我有一个问题。 Wǒ yǒu yī ge wènti. I have a question.
给	gěi	to give	请你给我。。。 Qǐng nǐ gěi wǒ... Please give me...
开始	kāishǐ	to begin	开始吧。 Kāishǐ ba. Let's start.
开车	kāichē	to drive (car)	我不知道怎么开车。 Wǒ bù zhīdào zěnmē kāichē. I don't know how to drive (a car).
等	děng	to wait	等一下！ děn yī xià! Wait a minute!

Questions			
谁	shéi	who	那是谁？ Nà shì shéi? Who's that? 他是谁？ Tā shì shéi? Who's he? 谁喝完了我的啤酒？ Shéi chī wánle wǒ de píngguǒ? Who ate my apple?
什么	shé me	what	这是什么？ Zhè shì shéme? What is this? 那是什么？ Nà shì shéme? What is that?
哪里	nǎ lǐ	where	你在哪里？ Nǐ zài nǎlǐ? Where are you? 哪里哪里？ nǎlǐ, nǎlǐ, 'where, where', expression of modesty when receiving a compliment.
那个, 哪些	nǎ ge, na xiē	which one(s)	你要那个？ Nǐ yào nàgè? Which do you want?
什么时候	shéme shíhou	when (what time)	开始什么时候？ Kāishǐ shéme shíhòu? What time did it/does it start?
为什么	wèi shé me	why (for what)	为什么你很累？ Wèishéme nǐ hěn lèi? Why are you tired? 因为 我睡觉睡得不好。 Yīnwèi wǒ shuìjiào shuì dé bù hǎo. Because I slept badly.
怎么	zěnmē	how	图书馆怎么走？ Túshūguǎn zěnmē zǒu? How do you get to the library?
多少	dōushǎo	how many, how much	电脑多少钱？ Diànnǎo duōshǎo qián? How much is the computer? 真的吗？ Zhēn de ma? Really?? 太贵了！ Tài guì le! Too expensive. 可以便宜一点？ Kěyǐ piányí yī diǎn? Can you make it a bit cheaper? (how a stereotypical bartering exchange goes)