Learn a Chinese Phrase

Supplementary Learning Guide

Confucius Institute
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan
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Learn a Chinese Phrase

Note to the Instructor

The Learn a Chinese Phrase video series has been produced with the idea that if a phrase is fun or amusing, the learner will be more likely to remember it. Although many phrases we introduce may be memorable, as language instructors we realize that learners must ultimately utilize and regenerate the words and structures within these phrases if they are to become proficient in the language. In essence, we are drawing learners from the enticing (i.e. “sugar coated”) metaphorical phrase to the mechanics of learning individual words, their usage, and their potential expansion.

Verbs in one language seldom correspond perfectly with their alleged counterparts in another language. The verb “to know” in English, for example, is generally translated into Chinese as “zhī dào” when it means “to know a fact” or “to know a person by reputation”, but as “rèn shì” when it refers to “better knowing” or “meeting a person for the first time.” Because of these obvious linguistic differences and potential pitfalls, we have taken considerable pains to demonstrate as simply and as clearly as possible how targeted verbs should and should not be used.

Nouns, though less subject to change between languages (a rose is a rose is a rose!), generally offer a platform for vocabulary expansion in Chinese. Given the lack of cognates between Chinese and English, any chance to expand one’s vocabulary by easy association should be seized! Thus, when the noun “niú” is introduced as the Chinese word for “cow,” for example, we show the learner that several important compound words also include “niú”, such as “niú pāi” (“steak” or literally “cow ribs”), “niú ròu” (“beef” or literally “cow meat”), “niú nǎi” (“milk” or literally “cow milk”), and “niú pí” (“leather” or literally “cow skin”).

Of course, we realize that learning a language is an arduous and often uncomfortable process. We are also aware that in the quest to acquire a primary language, children crave comfort and repetition. With these two concepts in mind, we have placed a special emphasis on creating a highly consistent, visually pleasing, and unintimidating layout that will be of special help to visual learners. Our goal, thus, is to teach simple and concise lessons where possible, rather than to be highly thorough or exhaustive. Additionally, we understand that like a children’s book, a language study guide should be inviting and reviewed on a frequent basis!

It may be important to briefly address the question “Why idioms?” In addition to the assertion that they are fun, interesting, and a window on culture, it is critical to note that the majority of any given language is metaphorical or non-literal. Beyond ordering food, asking for directions and simple negotiation, there is a never-ending world of culturally-based metaphors and idioms to be encountered in daily conversation. This highly important aspect of language cannot be ignored.

In sum, we hope that our Learn a Chinese Phrase videos, supplementary videos, and Supplementary Learning Guide will help provide Chinese language learners not only with phrases to pepper their conversations and amuse their Chinese-speaking friends, but with multiple platforms on which they can build their vocabulary and generate new sentences, which is so very critical in the language learning process!
Video Links

In the upper left-hand corner of each of the following pages are Youtube and Youku links to the respective video for each lesson. Where a supplementary video exists, there will also be corresponding Youtube and Youku links in the upper right-hand corner. At present, we are producing a supplementary video for each lesson, but these learning tools may take some time to complete. We promise to update this learning guide periodically and to incorporate links to the new supplementary videos as they are uploaded to our Youtube and Youku channel.

You may note some similarities as well as some differences between the supplementary videos and the supplementary learning guide. Such discrepancies are only likely to continue as the current learning guide is subject to frequent editing while the videos are not. Nevertheless, we hope that you will find both the supplementary videos and the supplementary learning guide helpful in your quest to learn or teach Chinese. 加油！

Abbreviations

1. lit: literal translation
2. mw: measure word
3. n: noun
4. v: verb
5. adj: adjective
6. prep: preposition
7. comp: complement

If you have any comments, suggestions or questions about our manual, please contact us at: ci@wayne.edu.
Blowing the Cow Hide

"Exaggerating"

Tā zài chuīniúpí.
Example: 他在吹牛皮。

chuī
吹 v. to blow; to inflate

Tā zài chuī qìqíu.
He is blowing up a balloon.

Xǐāoháí xīhuān chuī lào pào.
小孩喜欢吹泡泡。
Kids like to blow bubbles.

chuī
吹 v. to play (blow) a wind or brass instrument

Tā chuī sàkesī.
他吹萨克斯。
He plays (blows) the saxophone.

Tā chuī húlusī.
他吹葫芦丝。
He plays (blows) the Hulusi.

niú
牛 n. cow; ox; bull; bovine

niǔpái
牛排  steak  lit: cow rib

yī kuài niǔpái  a (piece of) steak

niúròu
牛肉  beef  lit: cow meat

yī pán niúròu  a plate of beef

niúnǎi
牛奶  milk  lit: cow milk

yī bēi niúnǎi  a glass of milk

niǔpí
牛皮  leather  lit: cow leather

yī zhāng niǔpí  a piece of leather

People of the Yellow River Bend would inflate cow or sheep hide to make a raft, which required a great deal of air. “Blowing the cow hide” has thus become the equivalent of the expression “to be full of hot air” or “windbag”. Additionally, blowing cow hide also refers to inflating an object to a size larger than originally intended, thus providing the equivalent of “exaggerating”.
Driving at Night

Wǒ zuówǎn kāiyèchē (le).

Example: 我昨晚开夜车（了）。

kāi
开 v. to drive

kāi
开 v. to open; to turn on

chē
车 n. car mw: 辆

Wǒ huì kāi chē.
我会开车。
I can drive a car.

Qǐng kāi mén.
请开门。
Please open the door.

Qǐng kāi dēng.
请开灯。
Please turn on the light.

kǎchē
卡车
truck

huǒchē
火车
train
lit: fire car
gōngjiāochē
公交车
bus
dānchē / zìxíngchē
单车 / 自行车
bicycle

yè
夜 n. night

yèshì
夜 市
night market

guǎng yèshì
逛夜市
to visit the night market

yèbān
夜 班
night shift

zhí/shàng yèbān
值 / 上 夜 班
to be on the night shift

yèwǎn
夜 晚
night

(a more formal variation of wǎnshàng, “晚上”)

Cultural Note:

Driving at night implies that one is doing something urgent or additional at a time usually meant for rest. “Kāiyèchē” is usually used when cramming for an exam or finishing a work assignment after hours. “Pulling an all nighter” and “burning the midnight oil” are equivalents.
Wǒ bèi chǎoyóuyú (le).

Example: 我被炒鱿鱼(了)。

chǎo

炒 v. to fry

Wǒ huì chǎo jīdàn.
我会炒鸡蛋。
I can fry eggs.

Tā jiāo wǒ chǎo miàn.
他教我炒面。
He teaches me to fry noodles.

chǎo

炒 v. be fired from a job

Wǒ bèi chǎoyóuyú le.
我被炒鱿鱼了。
I was fired.

Wǒ bèi chǎo le.
我被炒了。
I was fired.

Wǒ bèi lǎobǎn chǎo le.
我被老板炒了。
I was fired by my boss.

yú

鱼 n. fish or fishlike creature

tiáo qún
mw: 条(individual)/群(group of)

sānwén yú
三文鱼 salmon

shāyú
鲨鱼 shark

èyú
鳄鱼 alligator

jīngyú
鲸鱼 whale

Cultural Note:

When a squid is fried, it curls up, reminiscent of how one would roll up his or her bedding and belongings when packing and leaving. Since a fired employee would have to pack belongings in such a way, being made into fried squid became associated with being fired from a job or other employment situation.
dàdiē-yǎnjìng
大 跌 眼 镜

**Glasses Fell off**
“Taken Aback” / “Shocked”

Ràng rén dàdiē-yǎnjìng.
**Example:** 让人大跌眼镜。

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>diē</th>
<th>diē jìà</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>跌 (+ comp.)</td>
<td>跌 (+ 价)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. to tumble; to fall down</td>
<td>v. to fall in price</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tā diēdǎo le.
他跌倒了。
*He fell down.*

Tā diēshāng le.
他跌伤了。
*He fell down and injured himself.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>yǎn</th>
<th>yǎnjìng</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>眼 n. eye</td>
<td>眼镜 n. eyeglasses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

yǎnjīng
眼 睛
*eyes*

yi zhī/shuāng yǎnjīng
一 只 / 双 眼睛
*a eye/a pair of eyes*

yǎnxiàn
眼 线
*eye liner*

huà yǎnxiàn
画 眼 线
*put on eye liner*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>yǎnjìng</th>
<th>fù</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>眼镜</td>
<td>眼镜架</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

yǎnjìng
眼 镜
*eyeglasses lit: eye mirror*

tài yǎng yǎnjìng
太 阳 眼 镜
*sunglasses*

yǐnxíng yǎnjìng
隐 形 眼 镜
*contact lens lit: invisible glasses*

yǎnjìngjià
眼 镜 架
*eyeglass frame*
**shuō hǎohuà, shuō huàihuà**

**说 好话，说 坏话**

*Tā shuō le hěn duō nǐ de hǎohuà.*

**Examples:**

他 说 了 很 多 你 的 好 话。

*Tā shuō le hěn duō nǐ de huàihuà.*

他说了很多 你 的 坏 话。

**shuō**

**说 v. to speak or to tell**

Tā zài shuōhuǎng.
她在 说 谎。
*She is telling a lie.*

Tā zài shuōxiào.
她在 说 笑。
*She is joking (talking and laughing).*

**huà**

**话 n. spoken words or talk**

Mischa de huà hěn duō.
Mischa 的 话 很多。
*Mischa’s words are many. / Mischa is very talkative.*

Tā de huà hěn shǎo.
他 的 话 很 少。
*His words are few. / He is a man of few words.*

Tā de huà hěn yǒuyìsi.
他 的 话 很 有 意 思。
*His talk is very interesting.*

**Cultural Note:**

There are many ways to express “to tell” in Chinese. Here are a few to note:

To “tell”, in the sense of to “say” something to  shuō someone, use 说.

To “tell” (a story), use 讲.

To “tell” (someone to do something), use 叫 / 让.

To “tell”/“inform” (someone about something), use 告诉.

**huà**

**话 n. dialect**

Běijīnghuà
北京 话
*Beijing dialect*

Guǎngdōnghuà
广东 话
*Cantonese dialect*

jiāngxiānghuà
家乡 话
*regional dialect lit: hometown dialect*
géqiáng-yōuěr
隔墙有耳

Walls Have Ears
“Walls Have Ears”

Example: 隔墙有耳

Cultural Note:
China’s most famous wall, the Great Wall (ChángChéng, “长城”), actually means “long city” in Chinese.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>xǐnshàngrén</th>
<th>Person on Top of Your Heart</th>
<th>“Sweetheart”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tā yǒu xǐnshàngrén.</td>
<td>他有心上人。</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>xīn (心)</th>
<th>n. heart; mind; feeling; intention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kāixīn</td>
<td>开心</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nolan hěn kāixīn.</td>
<td>Nolan很开心.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shāngxīn</td>
<td>伤心</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie hěn shāngxīn.</td>
<td>Katie很伤心。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>shàng (上)</th>
<th>prep. on top of; in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yīfu zài chuáng shàng.</td>
<td>衣服在床上。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shū zài zhuōzi shàng.</td>
<td>书在桌子上。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhōng zài qiáng shàng.</td>
<td>钟在墙上。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shù shàng yǒu liǎng zhī xiǎoniǎo.</td>
<td>In/on the tree, there are two birds.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>xīn (心)</th>
<th>n. center; core</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>zhōngxīn</td>
<td>中心</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nolan jīngcháng qù yùndòng zhōngxīn.</td>
<td>Nolan经常去运动中心。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhōngxīn</td>
<td>重心</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zì zhàn hěn dī.</td>
<td>这辆车重心很低。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>héxīn</td>
<td>核心</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Lennon shì Beatles yuèduì de héxīn rénwù.</td>
<td>John Lennon是Beatles乐队的核心人物。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Lennon is the core person of The Beatles.</td>
<td>John Lennon是The Beatles乐队的核心人物。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
chīcù 吃醋

Eat Vinegar
“To Be Jealous”

Tā chīcù le. 他吃醋了。

**Example:** Tā chīcù le. 他吃醋了。

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>chī 吃</th>
<th>v. to eat + food or non-liquid medicine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tā chī mǐfàn. 他吃米饭。 He eats rice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Tā chī yào. 他吃药。 He takes medicine  
  *lit: He eats medicine.* |
| Tā chī sù. 他吃素。 He is a vegetarian.  
  *lit: He eats vegetables.* |
| Tā chī hūn. 他吃荤。 He is a carnivore.  
  *lit: He eats meat.* |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cù 醋</th>
<th>n. vinegar  mw: 杯; 瓶</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mǐcù 米醋</td>
<td>rice vinegar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>báicù 白醋</td>
<td>white vinegar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>píngguǒcù 苹果醋</td>
<td>apple vinegar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| cútánzi 醋坛子 | an extremely jealous person  
  *lit: vinegar jar* |

Cultural Note:
There was allegedly a powerful prime minister in the Tang Dynasty who was said to be submissive to his wife. One day, the emperor sent him a beautiful girl to be his concubine, but the prime minister’s wife refused to accept the emperor’s decision. The wife said she would rather drink poison than accept her husband being with another woman. The emperor, touched by her courage and love, secretly filled a vial with vinegar and told her to drink it. After she gulped down the liquid and survived, the story spread and people began using the term, “吃醋” to refer to someone who was jealous of his/her lover.
Flower Prince

"Playboy"

Jason shì huāhuā-gōngzǐ.

Example: Jason 是花花公子。

huā huā - gōngzǐ

huā

花 n. flower mw: 朵
duǒ
táiyánghuā

太阳花 sunflower

mǔdānhuā *

牡丹花 peony

bāihéhuā

百合花 lily

méiguīhuā

玫瑰花 rose

huā huā

花 v. to spend (money or time)

Tā hěn huā qián.

他 会 花 钱。

He is very capable of spending money.

(He spends a lot of money.)

Tā huā le hěn duō qián gòu wù.

他 花 了 很 多 钱 购 物。

He spent a lot of money shopping.

Tā huā le hěn duō shí jiān kàn shū.

他 花 了 很 多 时 间 看 书。

He spent a lot of time reading.

Cultural Note:

gōngzǐ vs wángzǐ

公子 vs 王子

gōngzǐ

公子：Son of a feudal prince or high official in ancient China. Though seldom used in its literal form today, many Chinese politely refer to someone else’s son as “Nǐ/ tā jiā de gōngzǐ.”

你 / 他 家 的 公 子。

wángzǐ

王子：Today, “prince” (the son of a king) is generally translated as 王子.

mǔdānhuā *

牡丹花: national flower of China

12
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese Characters</th>
<th>English Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rén shān rén hǎi</td>
<td>People Mountain People Sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Huǒchēzhàn rén shān rén hǎi.</em></td>
<td>“Wall to Wall People”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td>火车站人山人海。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>rén</strong></td>
<td>人 n. people or person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>réncái</td>
<td>Tā shì gè réncái. He is a talented person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>人才</td>
<td>他是个人才。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a talented person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biérén</td>
<td>Tā hé biérén yìqǐ dǎ lánqiú. He plays basketball with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>别人</td>
<td>他和别人一起打球。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others / other people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rénlèi</td>
<td>Kē xué tuī dōng rénlèi de jīnbù. Science pushes humanity’s progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>人类</td>
<td>科学推动人类的进步。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mankind; humanity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>hǎi</strong></td>
<td>海 n. sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hǎijūn</td>
<td>yī zhī hǎijūn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>海军</td>
<td>一支海军 a navy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>navy lit: sea troops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hǎixiào</td>
<td>yī chǎng hǎixiào</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>海啸</td>
<td>一场海啸 a tsunami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tsunami lit: sea scream</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hǎiyáng</td>
<td>yī piàn hǎiyáng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>海洋</td>
<td>一片海洋 an ocean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ocean</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>shān</strong></td>
<td>山 n. mountain mw: 座</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xuěshān</td>
<td>雪山 snow covered mountain lit: snow mountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huǒshān</td>
<td>火山 volcano lit: fire mountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shānmài</td>
<td>山脉 mountain range lit: mountain arteries/veins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>