

Jimmy Du's Essential Chinese

Jimmy Du's Essential Chinese:

*Jimmy Du's Natural
Language Works
Second Edition*

By

Zhengming Du

Cambridge
Scholars
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CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
Welcome to Jimmy Du's Essential Chinese of Jimmy Du Natural Language Works	
Preparation.....	ix
Chinese Pinyin Spelling and Pronunciation	
Lesson 1 第一课.....	1
The Musical Chinese Tones (1) 你好(ni ³ hao ³) and 再见(zai ⁴ jian ⁴)	
Lesson 2 第二课.....	7
The Musical Chinese Tones (2) Listening and Speaking 听听说说 ting ¹ ting ¹ shuo ¹ shuo ¹	
Lesson 3 第三课.....	15
Personal Pronouns and the Light Tone 我们 wo ³ men, 你们 ni ³ men, 他们 ta ¹ men	
Extra Exercises	19
Lesson 4 第四课.....	25
Asking General Questions with “是不是” (shi ⁴ bu ² shi ⁴)	
Lesson 5 第五课.....	37
Talking about Language 你说什么语言? ni ³ shuo ¹ shen ² me yu ³ yan	
Lesson 6 第六课.....	49
Learning and Speaking a Language 学说语言 xue ² shuo ¹ yu ³ yan ²	

Lesson 7 第七课.....	63
We Are Learning	
我们在学习 wo ³ men zai ⁴ xue ² xi ²	
Lesson 8 第八课.....	73
I want, I need	
我想要, 我需要 wo ³ xiang ³ yao ⁴ ..., wo ³ xu ¹ yao ⁴ ...	
Lesson 9 第九课.....	81
How much is it?	
多少? duo ¹ shao ³	
Lesson 10 第十课.....	89
Please: 请..... qing ³ ...	
Lesson 11 第十一课.....	103
Meeting People	
会见 hui ⁴ jian ⁴	
Lesson 12 第十二课.....	117
Introduction	
介绍 jie ⁴ shao ⁴	
Lesson 13 第十三课.....	127
When?	
什么时间? shen ² me shi ² jian ¹	
Lesson 14 第十四课.....	145
From Here to There	
从这里到那里 cong ² zhe ⁴ li ³ dao ⁴ na ⁴ li ³	
Lesson 15 第十五课.....	161
Learn Chinese Well	
把汉语学好 ba ³ han ⁴ yu ³ xue ² hao ³	
Lesson 16 第十六课.....	173
Useful Indirect Collocations	
常用间接搭配 chang ² yong ⁴ jian ⁴ jie ¹ da ¹ pei ⁴	

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Jimmy Du's Essential Chinese of Jimmy Du Natural Language Works.

This is a specially designed self-teaching course to help you master Mandarin Chinese in the shortest time possible. We promise you will just “pick it up” if you spend only a little time following this course while relaxing at home, taking a walk, commuting to work or traveling. You don't have to sit in a classroom, consult the dictionary, study grammar, or do any written exercises. This least-effort principle is based on the understanding that we human beings all have an innate aptitude for acquiring any human language, native or foreign. All you need to do is keep learning what you can immediately understand, imitate, and put to use. The least effort means the highest efficiency. For this reason, we've provided easy-to-understand explanations and translations of everything in the text. The text contents are arranged in a natural order, beginning with the essential words, phrases and short sentences, all carefully selected so that they will not only serve as a basis for you to expand your vocabulary, but also help you learn the nature of the Chinese language and how it works. On this solid foundation, you will find no difficulty in developing your comprehension of more complicated structures and, ultimately, your fluency.

OK! Let's begin!

PREPARATION

CHINESE PINYIN SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

Standard Mandarin Chinese is also called Putonghua, which means “common speech”. As you come to learn it, you actually may not encounter as much difficulty as you expected because the letters used in Chinese Pinyin for spelling words are the same as those used in English, with only one exception: the letter “ü”. This “ü” is written as the letter “u” but with two dots on the top as in German. In computer input with Pinyin software, the key used for it is “v”, a letter which by coincidence is not used in Chinese Pinyin spelling.

Chinese Pinyin letters have two categories, the initials and finals. The initials are the same as the English consonant letters, and the finals use the English vowel letters. The two are usually combined to spell a word. This means that Chinese is basically an open-syllable language in which words will end with a vowel sound, as in Italian or Japanese.

There are only three exceptions to this general rule. They are the nasal sound letters “n” and “ng” and the retroflex sound “r”. Since many Pinyin letters are pronounced very much like those in English, we only have to make a few notes on those exceptions that are essentially different.

Let’s first go through the six basic Pinyin finals. They will be read twice after their corresponding English letters.

Letter a: a

Letter o: o

Letter e: e

Letter i: i

Letter u: u

Letter u with two dots on the top: ü

Now we can try some examples of the above Pinyin letters by combining each of them with an initial letter. Let’s pick out the letter “o” and the letter “e” for example.

b: b(o)
p: p(o)
m: m(o)
f: f(o)
d: d(e)
t: t(e)
n: n(e)
l: l(e)
g: g(e)
k: k(e)
h: h(e)

We can see that these initial letters have very similar pronunciations as the English consonant letters. However, since Chinese is an open-syllable language, they will end with the additional vowel sound “o” or “e” if they stand alone as Pinyin letter names.

OK! Now let’s come to some initials that are somewhat different from their English counterpart letters.

Letter z: z(i)

It is pronounced as “ds” as in the English “beds” or “words”.

Letter c: c(i)

It is pronounced as “ts” as in “its” or “let’s”.

The English letter “s” belongs to the same group as “z” and “c” in the Pinyin system, but it is not changed so much, except that it ends with a weak schwa. When followed by a final sound, it is similar to its counterpart in English, just as in “speak” or “say”.

Letter s: s(i)

Let’s now listen and repeat. And pay attention to the ending of these letters as open syllables.

z: z(i)

c: c(i)

s: s(i)

Letter j: j(i)

It is pronounced somewhat like the English “g” in “Jesus” or “jeep”

Letter q: q(i)

It is pronounced somewhat like the English beginning consonant in “cheese” or “cheap”.

Letter x: x(i)

It is similar in pronunciation to the beginning consonant in the English “sheep”, but with the tongue tip touching the root of the upper teeth.

In fact, what is special in the pronunciation of these three letters—“j, q, x”—is that they are all articulated between the tongue tip and the gums of the upper teeth. Let's listen again.

Letters j, q, x: j(i), q(i), x(i)

Now let's learn to pronounce the letter “r” in Pinyin. It has two different pronunciations. As a Pinyin initial it is pronounced in the same way as the second consonant in “pleasure” or “measure”; but when placed at the end of a vowel sound, it is the same as in the American English “worker” or “marker”. This is an exception to the rule that consonants will generally be the initial position in Chinese. Now listen and repeat.

Letter r in the initial position: r(i)

Letter r in the end position: r—(e)r

OK. Let's go on.

Letter w: w(u)

It is pronounced somewhat as in English “woo” in “the boy wooed the girl”, but with some friction between the lips.

Letter y: y(i)

It is pronounced similar to that in the English “yeast” in fermentation.

Now we see that these two Pinyin initial letters are pronounced exactly like two other final letters, that is, the English letters “u” and “i”. As a rule in spelling a word in Pinyin that has either “w” or “u”, or either “y” or “i”, both letters will be written.

OK. Now we have learned the basic single letters, let's have a review to make sure we remember them. Listen to repeat.

a: a

o: o

e: e

i: y(i)

u: (w)u

u with two dots on the top: (y)ü

z: z(i)

c: c(i)

s: s(i)

j: j(i)

q: q(i)

x: x(i)

b: b(o)

p: p(o)

m: m(o)

f: f(o)
d: d(e)
t: t(e)
n: n(e)
l: l(e)
g: g(e)
k: k(e)
h: h(e)
r in the initial position: r(i)
r in the end position: (e)r
y and i: y(i)
w and u: w(u)

Apart from these single letters that may be a little difficult in Pinyin pronunciation, there are also a few combinations that deserve our attention. Let's listen and repeat three such combinations in the initial position.

combination of c and h: ch(i)
combination of s and h: sh(i)
combination of z and h: zh(i)

Among these three combinations, the first two are comparable to their English counterparts, although in Pinyin they are pronounced with the tongue tip curled up.

ch: ch(i)
sh: sh(i)

The Pinyin combination of “z” and “h” doesn't exist in English. It is somewhat like the consonant sound in the English names “George” and “Joe” but pronounced in Chinese with the tip of the tongue drawn back and curled up. Now, let's listen again and repeat.

z and h: zh(i)
c and h: ch(i)
s and h: sh(i)

To some people, these three combinations may be confusing with the three single-letter initials that are counterparts of “j”, “q” and “x” in English. Let's compare them.

j and z-h combination: j(i); zh(i)
q and c-h combination: q(i); ch(i)
x and s-h combination: x(i); sh(i)

Have you noticed the differences? Yes. When you pronounce the single-letter initials “j”, “q” and “x”, your tongue tip is kept close to the ridge of the gums of the upper teeth; but when you pronounce the

combinations “zh”, “ch” and “sh”, you have your tongue curled up. Let's listen to the three pairs together and repeat.

Single Pinyin finals j, q, and x;

Initial Pinyin combinations zh, ch and sh: zh(i), ch(i) and sh(i)

There is one special rule to note about using the single initial letters “j”, “q”, and “x” in spelling. That is, when they are spelt with another final sound, there will always be the extra letter “i” attached at the end even though the pronunciation is not changed. Here are a few examples.

j plus a: j-i-a, jia

q plus a: q-i-a, qia

x plus a: x-i-a, xia

We should note that when the final letter “e” (counterpart of the English letter “e”) follows these three initials, its pronunciation is changed and will become somewhat like the English “e” as in “yes”.

j plus e: j-i-e, jie

q plus e: q-i-e, qie

x plus e: x-i-e, xie

Please remember: in pronouncing these three Pinyin sounds, you should start with the tip of the tongue closer to the ridge of the gums of the upper teeth, which makes the sounds different from the English consonants as in “just”, “chair” and “sheet”. Listen once more.

jie, qie, xie

All right! So far, we have learned almost all the Pinyin sounds that can pose a challenge to foreign learners. Although there are more final letter combinations, they are nevertheless much easier to imitate, because they are similar to the English diphthongs and triphthongs.

If you can remember all that we have learned, you can now immediately put them to use as you go on to Lesson 1. If you don't, you'd better go through it once more.

LESSON 1 第一课

THE MUSICAL CHINESE TONES (PART 1)

你好 (NĪ³HAO³) AND 再见 (ZAI⁴JIAN⁴)

As we know, Chinese is by nature a tonal language, in which the meaning of a word is not only determined by its pronunciation but also by its tone. In fact, there are many homophones in Chinese—words with the same pronunciations. Misuse of the tones may cause misunderstanding. Therefore, it is necessary to follow the exact tones in spoken Chinese as you learn the pronunciation, just as if you were learning to sing.

Let's now listen to the most common Chinese greetings. As you listen, pay attention to the ups and downs in the tones and try to repeat.

Hello! Or, how do you do? (informal speech)!

你好! nĭ³hǎo³!

Hello! Or, how do you do? (formal speech)!

您好! nín²hǎo³!

When you leave a friend, you say—

Goodbye!

再见! zài⁴jiàn⁴!

The musical pattern of 你好 and 您好 is rising up, dipping down, and then rising a little again. And the pattern of the tones in 再见 is a repetition of a falling tone.

In Mandarin Chinese, there are four pitched tones plus one that is not pitched. We simply call them the first, second, third, fourth and the light tone. The four pitched tones are marked in writing with their corresponding numbers in superscript. The light tone, also called the neutral tone, is just like any unstressed syllable in English. It is either left unmarked or marked by a “zero” in superscript.

Of the four pitched tones, we have now learned three, the second tone in 您, the third tone in 你 and 好, and the fourth tone in each syllable of 再见. Now let's take two words of the remaining first tone.

The first word in this tone is “ta”, which actually has three distinct written characters, respectively for the masculine and feminine third person pronouns and for the impersonal pronoun “it”.

他/她/它 ta¹

The second word in the first tone is a marker of a question used at the end of a sentence.

吗—ma¹

The function of 吗 is to change an indicative sentence into a general question without changing the order.

To speakers of English and other languages that are not tonal, probably the third tone is the most difficult. Let’s listen to it in the first person pronoun.

I or me, 我 wo³

Since the Chinese word for any form of the English linking verb “to be” is 是 (shì⁴), we simply say the following:

I am...

我是..... wo³ shì⁴...

You are...

你是..... nǐ³ shì⁴...

He is or she is...

他/她是..... tā¹ shì⁴...

In Chinese, sentence subjects are not always necessary. So we can reverse the word order of the above and say the following as complete sentences:

It’s me.

是我。 shì⁴ wo³.

It’s you.

是你。 shì⁴ nǐ³.

It’s he, or it’s she.

是他/她。 shì⁴ tā¹.

To make a negation, we simply say—

Not or no 不 bu⁴

I’m not.

我不是。 wǒ³ bù⁴ shì⁴.

You are not.

你不是。 nǐ³ bù⁴ shì⁴.

He is not or she is not.

他/她不是。 tā¹ bù⁴ shì⁴.

Here we should note that the negative 不 in 不是 is primarily a fourth tone word, although what you hear is in the second tone. This is because

the tone is naturally changed in the tonal context for easy and smooth flow of speech. In this course book, we will mark the original tones of words in the sentences, but you should follow the recording to find out occasional changes. So let's listen again—

No. It's not me.

不，不是我。bu⁴, bu⁴ shi⁴ wo³—bu⁴ shi⁴ wo³.

No. It's not you.

不，不是你。bu⁴, bu⁴ shi⁴ ni³—bu⁴, shi⁴ ni³.

No. It's not him or it's not her.

不，不是他/她。bu⁴, bu⁴ shi⁴ ta¹—bu⁴, bu⁴ shi⁴ ta¹.

We should know that the function of the Chinese 是 is not exactly the same with the English linking verb “to be”, because it has a strong affirmative function and can actually mean YES, OK or RIGHT. Let's listen to the following:

Is it or is it right?

是吗？shi⁴ ma¹?

Yes.

是。shi⁴.

Isn't it or isn't it right?

不是吗？bu⁴ shi⁴ ma¹?

No. It isn't.

不，不是。bu⁴, bu⁴ shi⁴.

Are you Mr. Wang?

你是王先生吗？ni³ shi⁴ wang² xian¹ sheng ma¹?

No. I'm not him.

不，我不是他。bu⁴, wo³ bu⁴ shi⁴ ta¹.

I'm not Mr. Wang.

我不是王先生。wo³ bu⁴ shi⁴ wang² xian¹ sheng.

I am; he is not.

我是，他不是。wo³ shi⁴. ta¹ bu⁴ shi⁴.

He is; I'm not.

他是，我不是。ta¹ shi⁴, wo³ bu⁴ shi⁴.

It is me, not him.

是我，不是他。shi⁴ wo³, bu⁴ shi⁴ ta¹.

It is he, not I.

是他，不是我。shi⁴ ta¹, bu⁴ shi⁴ wo³.

In fact, the affirmative function of 是 in Chinese is much more important than its function as a linking verb, simply because a Chinese sentence can directly take an adjective word without using a verb. For example:

Literally, “you good”, but in effect, “How do you do!”

你好! ni³hao³!

The weather is fine.

天气好! tian¹qi⁴ hao³!

I'm hard-working, or I'm diligent.

我努力。wo³ nu³li⁴.

He is intelligent.

他聪明。ta¹ cong¹ming.

We are all fine.

我们都好。wo³men dou¹ hao³.

OK!

We know that the Chinese tones are generally fixed, one tone for each syllable— that is to say, for each single character. However, there are occasional changes because tones may influence one another in the natural flow of speech. For instance, in a word or phrase of two third tones, the first will be changed to the second tone if you speak naturally fast. Now, listen to the simple Chinese greeting again and see this for yourself. It is read twice, first separately and then as connected speech.

How do you do! 你 (ni³), 好 (hao³): 你好 ni³ hao³!

Therefore, although the two words of the 2nd person pronouns 你 and 您 differ in tones, the difference no longer exists when they are followed by the 3rd tone word 好. Let's listen.

Formal greeting: How do you do! 您好! nin² hao³!

Casual greeting: How do you do! 你好 ni³ hao³!

Let's listen to some two-character combinations that repeat the third tone. They are read twice, first separately and then in combination.

Very good, very well 很 hen³, 好 hao³— 很好 hen³ hao³.

I think 我 wo³, 想 xiang³— 我想 wo³ xiang³

You and me 你 ni³, 我 wo³— 你我 ni³ wo³

You think 你 ni³, 想, xiang³— 你想 ni³ xiang³

In Chinese, there are many two-character words in which both characters are in the third tone, but in actual use, the first one is changed to the second. Let's listen and repeat.

Where or which place 哪 na³, 里 li³— 哪里 na³ li³

May or can 可 ke³, 以 yi³— 可以 ke³yi³

OK! Then what if more than two third tones follow one another? The answer is: it is usually the first character of the more closely related two that is changed. Let's just listen to some examples.

I'm very well, or I'm very good.

我很好。wo³ hen³ hao³.

I very much want or miss... Or I really want or miss...

我很想.....wo³ hen³ xiang³...

I want to write.

我想写。wo³ xiang³ xie³.

I miss you.

我想你。wo³ xiang³ ni³.

I miss you very much.

我很想你。wo³ hen³ xiang³ ni³.

For practice, let's now go through all the basic tones as we learn more Chinese words. Please try to repeat without changing the tones.

The first tone

Hear or listen 听 ting¹— 听 ting¹

Speak or say 说 shuo¹— 说 shuo¹

Hear people say, or it is heard 听说 ting¹ shuo¹

He or she 他/她 ta¹— 他/她 ta¹

He or she hears them say; he or she hears that 他/她听说 ta¹ ting¹ shuo¹

Listen to him or her say. Or, hear him or her say. 听他/她说 ting¹ ta¹ shuo¹.

The second tone

You (the polite form) 您 nin²— 您 nin²

Come 来 lai²— 来 lai²

Read 读 du²— 读 du²

Learn 学 xue²— 学 xue²

You come to read, or you please read.

您来读。nin² lai² du².

You come to learn, or you please learn.

您来学。nin² lai² xue².

The third tone

You 你 ni³— 你 ni³

I or me 我 wo³— 我 wo³

Good, or well 好 hao³— 好 hao³

Write 写 xie³— 写 xie³

Here again, we should know that the tone change of the first syllable in a word of two third-tone syllables is natural for easy flow of speech. You don't have to bother about this, because it would be hard for you to keep the original tones when you speak naturally fast with the least effort.

How do you do!

你好。ni³ hao³— 你好 ni³ hao³.

You and me 你我 ni³ wo³— 你我 ni³ wo³

You write 你写 ni³ xie³ — 你写 ni³ xie³

The fourth tone

Again, or once more 再 zai⁴ — 再 zai⁴

See or meet 见 jian⁴ — 见 jian⁴

Goodbye!

再见! zai⁴jian⁴!

Look 看 kan⁴ — 看 kan⁴

Look again.

再看 zai⁴kan⁴

See, or look and see 看见 kan⁴jian⁴

Here the single-character words 看 and 见 respectively mean “look” and “see”. When they are used together as a two-character word, the meaning is “see”.

All right! Now we have learned the four basic tones, all we need to do is practice them as we go on to the next lesson.

LESSON 2 第二课

THE MUSICAL CHINESE TONES (PART 2)

LISTENING AND SPEAKING

听听说说 TING¹TING¹SHUO¹SHUO¹

In this lesson, we will continue to consolidate our foundation in using all possible musical patterns of Chinese; we'll learn two other things that make the Chinese language even more musical, that is, the use of word repetition and the light tone.

When the same word is repeated, there is usually some additional nuance of meaning, depending on the function of the word. For example, if a verb is repeated, the additional meaning is to keep doing it for a while or give it a try. Let's listen and repeat.

1st tone repetition

Listen for a while or give it a try

听听 ting¹ ting¹

Speak for a while or give it a try

说说 shuo¹ shuo¹

Listen and speak for a while

听听说说 ting¹ ting shuo¹ shuo¹

2nd tone repetition

Read for a while or give it a try

读读 du² du²

Learn for a while

学学 xue²xue²

Read and learn for a while

读读学学 du²du², xue²xue²

3rd tone repetition, with the first syllable naturally changed to the 2nd tone.

Think for a while

想想 xiāng³ xiāng³

Write for a while

写写 xiě³ xiě³

Think and write for a while

想想写写 xiāng³ xiāng³ xiě³ xiě³

4th tone repetition

Take a look

看看 kàn⁴ kàn⁴

Go and have a look

去看看 qù⁴ kàn⁴ kàn⁴

Go and have a look again

再去看看 zài⁴ qù⁴ kàn⁴ kàn⁴

In the above repetitions, the Chinese word 一 (yī¹) for “one” could be put in the middle without changing the meaning. And the thing to note is that its tone is sometimes changed because of the influence of the preceding or succeeding tones. Let’s listen to the following.

Listen for a while or just for a try.

听一听 tīng¹ yī¹ tīng¹

Read for a while or just for a try.

读一读 dú² yī¹ dú²

Think for a while or just for a try.

想一想 xiāng³ yī¹ xiāng³

Take a look 看一看 kàn⁴ yī¹ kàn⁴

All right. Let’s do more practice.

You (polite form) come and learn for a short while or give it a try.

您来学学。nín² lái² xué² xué².

You (polite form) read 您读 nín² dú²

You (polite form) come and read for a try.

您来读读。nín² lái² dú² dú².

Goodbye, literally again see

再见 zài⁴ jiàn⁴

Look and see. Or simply see

看见 kàn⁴ jiàn⁴

Look again, literally again look

再看 zài⁴ kàn⁴

Since tones may influence one another in connected speech or occasionally change for special emphasis, the first-tone word 一 (yī¹) inserted in the verb repetitions is sometimes changed according to the tone of the repeated word. But you don’t have to worry about this, because you will tend to get the right tone if you just make the least effort when

speaking. So let's listen again. And as you listen and repeat, pay attention to the tone changes of the word 一 (yī¹).

Listen for a while or just for a try

听一听 tīng¹ yī¹ tīng¹

Read for a while or just for a try

读一读 dú² yī¹ dú²

Think for a while or just for a try

想一想 xiāng³ yī¹ xiāng³

Take a look

看一看 kàn⁴ yī² kàn⁴

Please note that the third-tone 好 may be repeated too, and then it means “seriously” or “well”. It actually has two different tone patterns, determined by whether it is used in formal speech or informal speech. In informal speech, there is usually the “er” syllable added to the end. So, let's listen and repeat.

Listen seriously and well (formal speech)

好好听 hǎo² hǎo³ tīng¹

Listen seriously and well (informal)

好好儿听 hǎo³ hǎo³ r² tīng¹

Speak seriously and well (formal)

好好说 hǎo² hǎo³ shuō¹

Speak seriously and well (informal)

好好儿说 hǎo³ hǎo³ r² shuō¹

Read seriously and well (formal)

好好读 hǎo² hǎo³ dú²

Read seriously and well (informal)

好好儿读 hǎo³ hǎo³ r² dú²

OK! Now, after learning so much of repetitions of single-character or single-syllable words, we should know that the two-character words can also be repeated. Here are a few examples.

Learn or study 学习 xué²xi²

Learn or study for a while

学习学习 xué²xi² xué²xi²

Consider or think 考虑 kǎo³lǔ⁴

Take time to consider or think for a while

考虑考虑 kǎo³lǔ⁴ kǎo³lǔ⁴

Take a rest 休息 xiū¹xi

Take some rest or rest for a while

休息休息 xiū¹xi xiū¹xi

Take a real good rest

好好休息休息 hao³hao³ xiu¹xi xiu¹xi

In the two-syllable word 休息, the second syllable is actually a synonym to the first and is only complementary; it is uttered in the light tone. For the same reason, we repeat 休息 as one word. However, if the relation between the two is coordinating or contrasting, then each character is repeated separately, and the original tones are kept unchanged. For example—

Listen and read 听读 ting¹ du²

Listen and read for a while

听听读读 ting¹ ting¹ du² du²

Read and write 读写 du² xie³

Read and write for a while

读读写写 du² du² xie³ xie³

Eat and drink 吃喝 chi¹ he¹

Keep eating and drinking, indulge in food and comfort

吃吃喝喝 chi¹ chi¹ he¹ he¹

Talk and laugh, be happy 说笑 shuo¹ xiao⁴

Enjoy talking with friends and be happy

说说笑笑 shuo¹ shuo¹ xiao⁴ xiao⁴

Play and be merry 玩乐 wan² le⁴

Enjoy pleasures

玩玩乐乐 wan² wan² le⁴ le⁴

Pretty, nice, or beautiful 漂亮 piao⁴ liang⁴

Very pretty, nice or beautiful

漂漂亮亮 piao⁴ piao⁴ liang⁴ liang⁴

Serious or seriously 认真 ren⁴ zhen¹

Very serious or seriously

认认真真 ren⁴ ren⁴ zhen¹ zhen¹

All right! From the above, we see how repetitions contribute to the musicality of the Chinese language. In fact, not only verbs can be repeated, but also nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. However, when words of different parts of speech are repeated, the change of meaning will be different.

Let's first learn repetitions of some nouns that are related to time.

Day (informal) 天 tian¹

Day by day, every day (informal)

天天 tian¹ tian¹

Day (formal) 日 ri⁴

Day by day, every day (formal speech)

日日 ri⁴ ri⁴

Night 夜 ye⁴

Night by night, every night

夜夜 ye⁴ ye⁴

All days and nights, all time

日日夜夜 ri⁴ri⁴ ye⁴ye⁴

Time, hour 时 shi⁴

Time and again, now and then

时时 shi²shi²

A quarter of an hour 刻 ke⁴

Every quarter of an hour

刻刻 ke⁴ ke⁴

Every now and then, often

时时刻刻 shi² shi² ke⁴ke⁴

Month 月 yue⁴

Every month

月月 yue⁴yue⁴

Year 年 nian²

Every year

年年 nian²nian²

Each year and each month, all time

年年月月 nian²nian² yue⁴yue⁴

OK! These are repetitions of time words. The following examples are some words related to people.

Person, man 人 ren²

Each person, everybody

人人 ren²ren²

Family, home or house 家 jia¹

Every family, all families

家家 jia¹jia¹

Male and female 男女 nan²nv³

All males and females, all the people

男男女女 nan²nan² nv³nv³

Mountain and water, the landscape 山水 shan¹ shui³

All mountains and waters

山山水水 shan¹shan¹ shui³shui³

Street and alley 街巷 jie¹xiang⁴ All streets and alleys, the whole town

街街巷巷 jie¹jie¹ xiang⁴xiang⁴

Next, let's see some repetitions of words that can be used as adjectives and adverbs.

Big, large 大 da⁴

Quite big, considerably large

大大的 da⁴da⁴ de

Small 小 xiao⁴

Quite small

小小的 xiao² xiao³ de

Of big and small, of various sizes

大大小小的 da⁴da⁴ xiao⁴xiao⁴ de

Long 长 chang²

Quite long

长长的 chang²chang² de

Short 短 duan³

Quite short

短短的 duan³ duan³ de

Long and short, of various lengths

长短短的 chang²chang² duan³duan³ de

Tall, high 高 gao¹

Low, short 低 di¹

Of various heights

高高低低 gao¹gao¹ di¹di¹

Red 红 hong²

Quite red, fairly red

红红的 hong²hong² de

Green 绿 lv⁴

Quite green, fairly green

绿绿的 lv⁴lv⁴ de

Of various colors, colorful

红红绿绿的 hong²hong² lv⁴lv⁴ de

Blue 蓝 lan²

Quite blue, fairly blue

蓝蓝的 lan²lan² de

Yellow or brown 黄 huang²

Quite yellow or brown

黄黄的 huang²huang² de

Often 常 chang²

Quite often, very frequently

常常 chang²chang²

Fast, quick 快 kuai⁴

Quite fast, fairly quick

快快 kuai⁴kuai⁴

Slow 慢 man⁴

Quite slow, taking one's time (in doing something)

慢慢 man⁴man⁴

Now quick, now slow; at different speeds

快快慢慢 kuai⁴kuai⁴ man⁴man⁴

Clear, easy to see or understand 清楚 qing¹ chu³

Very clear and easy to see or understand

清清楚楚 qing¹qing¹ chu³chu³

Clean 干净 gan¹ jing⁴

Very clean

干干净净 gan¹gan¹ jing⁴jing⁴

Orderly, in good order 整齐 zheng³ qi²

In very good order

整整齐齐 zheng²zheng³ qi²qi²

Very good! We have now learned many words and their repetitions. You can practice a few times to get used to the interesting play of Chinese tones in actual use. However, we should know that not every word in Chinese can be repeated, and so it is still necessary to learn from native speakers what words actually can be.

LESSON 3 第三课

PERSONAL PRONOUNS AND THE LIGHT TONE

我们 wo³MEN, 你们 ni³MEN,
他们 ta¹MEN

In this lesson, we will learn more about the musicality of Mandarin Chinese through the use of the light tone and word repetition. The light tone is also called as the neutral tone. It is easier to learn than the pitched tones simply because it is just like any unstressed syllable in English. Characters using the light tone are usually those that serve the function of word suffixes or particles that only have a complementary meaning. Let's first take the plural suffix of personal pronouns for example.

The plural suffix of personal pronouns 们 men²

As we hear, this character is pronounced in the second tone— that is, the rising tone. However, it is often changed to the unstressed light tone in natural speech if the plurality is not emphasized. Let's listen.

I or me 我 wo³

We or us 我们 wo³men²— 我们 wo³men

You (singular) 你 ni³

You (plural) 你们 ni³men²— 你们 ni³men

He or she 他/她 ta¹

They or them 他们 ta¹men²— 他们 ta¹men

When the plural meaning is especially emphasized in contrast to the singular, the original second tone of 们 (men²) is kept unchanged. For example:

It's me, not us.

是我, 不是我们。shi⁴ wo³, bu⁴ shi⁴ wo³men².

It's you in the singular, not you in the plural.

是你, 不是你们。shi⁴ ni³, bu⁴ shi⁴ ni³men².

In Chinese, this suffix can be added to a noun referring to people. Please listen and repeat.

Person or man 人 ren²

People 人们 ren²men
 Male, man 男人 nan²ren
 Men 男人们 nan²renmen
 Female, woman 女人 nv³ren²
 Women 女人们 nv³ren²men
 Friend 朋友 peng²you
 Friends 朋友们 peng²youmen
 Child 孩子 hai²zi
 Children 孩子们 hai²zimen

As we hear, the light tone is actually used not only in the plural suffix 们, but also in the second syllable of the two-syllable words. This often happens when the second syllable is only complementary in meaning, or when it is affected by the preceding tone for the sake of natural and effortless flow of speech.

So let's listen again.

People 人们 ren²men
 Male, man 男人 nan²ren
 Men 男人们 nan²renmen
 Female, woman 女人 nv³ren²
 Women 女人们 nv³ren²men
 Friend 朋友 peng²you³
 Friends 朋友们 peng²you³men
 Child 孩子 hai²zi
 Children 孩子们 hai²zimen

The single character word 子 (zi) which is originally pronounced in the third tone also changes to the light tone, since it's used as a suffix. For example:

Son 儿子 er²zi
 Grandson 孙子 sun¹zi
 Wife 妻子 qi¹zi
 Now let's change them into the plural form by adding the suffix 们 men
 Sons 儿子们 er²zimen
 Grandsons 孙子们 sun¹zimen
 Wives 妻子们 qi¹zimen
 Children 孩子们 hai²zimen

Apart from the suffixes, the repetition of the same noun words often changes to the light tone, especially when it adds no meaning except suggesting an informal way of talking. Let's listen and repeat.

Dad 爸爸 ba⁴ba
 Mom 妈妈 ma¹ma