

EFFORTLESS CHINESE / PRACTICAL LANGUAGE

Survival Chinese

100 real sentences for getting around, asking for help, ordering, paying, and sounding human in Chinese.

实用中文急救包

Before you start

You know some Chinese. You have done the tones, the characters, the tests. And then someone at a counter says nine syllables at you and everything you learned goes quiet.

That is not a sign you are bad at Chinese. It is a sign your brain is doing something genuinely hard, in real time, with no pause button. Everyone goes through it. It gets easier — and it gets easier faster when you are carrying a handful of sentences you do not have to think about.

That is all this is. Not a course. A pocket.

HOW TO USE IT

- **Do not learn all one hundred.** That is not how any of this works.
- Open the one situation you will actually be in this week. Learn those ten.
- Say them out loud. Out loud is the whole thing — reading them silently builds nothing you can use at a counter.
- Look for the **Literally / Actually** boxes. Sixteen of these sentences mean something quite different from what the words say. Those are the ones that make people smile when you get them right.

01 When you're lost in the conversation

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SITUATION 01

When you're lost in the conversation

Learn these ten first. They buy you time, and time is everything.

01 我没听懂。

Wǒ méi tīngdǒng.

I didn't catch that.

02 你说慢一点，可以吗？

Nǐ shuō màn yìdiǎn, kěyǐ ma?

Could you speak a little slower?

03 麻烦你再说一遍。

Máfan nǐ zài shuō yí biàn.

Could you say that again?

04 你能写下来吗？

Nǐ néng xiě xiàlái ma?

Can you write it down?

05 这个字怎么念？

Zhège zì zěnmē niàn?

How do you pronounce this character?

06 什么意思？

Shénme yìsi?

What does that mean?

07 我的中文不太好。

Wǒ de Zhōngwén bú tài hǎo.

My Chinese isn't very good.

LITERALLY My Chinese is not too good.

ACTUALLY A handshake, not a confession. Say it and people will immediately tell you your Chinese is excellent. They are being warm, not grading you.

08 我在学中文。

Wǒ zài xué Zhōngwén.

I'm learning Chinese.

09 用中文怎么说?
Yòng Zhōngwén zěnmě shuō?
How do you say that in Chinese?

10 你会说英文吗?
Nǐ huì shuō Yīngwén ma?
Do you speak English?

SITUATION 02

Hello, and the small talk around it

Half of these are not questions. Answering them literally is the classic mistake.

01 你好。
Nǐ hǎo.
Hello.

02 你吃了吗？
Nǐ chī le ma?
Have you eaten?

LITERALLY Have you eaten?

ACTUALLY “Hey, how are you?” Nobody wants your menu. “吃了，你呢？” — Chī le, nǐ ne? — closes it perfectly.

03 好久不见。
Hǎojiǔ bú jiàn.
Long time no see.

04 最近怎么样？
Zuìjìn zěnmeyàng?
How have you been lately?

05 你叫什么名字？
Nǐ jiào shénme míngzi?
What's your name?

06 我叫……，你呢？
Wǒ jiào ……, nǐ ne?
I'm ……, and you?

07 我是意大利人。
Wǒ shì Yìdàlì rén.
I'm Italian.

08 认识你很高兴。
Rènshi nǐ hěn gāoxìng.
Nice to meet you.

09 你去哪儿?

Nǐ qù nǎr?

Where are you going?

LITERALLY Where are you going?

ACTUALLY Another way of saying hi — not an interrogation. “出去一下” — chūqù yíxià, “just heading out” — is a complete answer.

10 你先忙。

Nǐ xiān máng.

I'll let you get on with it.

LITERALLY You be busy first.

ACTUALLY How you end a conversation without the awkwardness of a goodbye. Warm, and completely final.

Ordering food

The scenario you will be in most often, and the one class prepares you for least.

01 服务员！

Fúwùyuán!

Excuse me! (to a waiter)

LITERALLY Service person!

ACTUALLY Calling out across a restaurant feels rude in the West. In China it is simply how you get served. Nobody is offended — waiting silently just means waiting longer.

02 有什么推荐的？

Yǒu shénme tuījiàn de?

What do you recommend?

03 我要这个。

Wǒ yào zhège.

I'll have this one.

04 不要辣。

Bú yào là.

No chili, please.

05 微辣。

Wēi là.

Mildly spicy.

06 少糖少冰。

Shǎo táng shǎo bīng.

Less sugar, less ice.

07 有素的吗？

Yǒu sù de ma?

Do you have anything vegetarian?

08 我不吃……

Wǒ bù chī

I don't eat

09 打包。
Dǎbāo.
To go, please.

10 买单。
Mǎidān.
The bill, please.

SITUATION 04

Paying

China runs on QR codes. These ten cover almost every counter you will stand at.

01 多少钱?

Duōshao qián?

How much is it?

02 可以扫码吗?

Kěyǐ sǎomǎ ma?

Can I scan to pay?

03 你扫我。

Nǐ sǎo wǒ.

You scan me.

LITERALLY You scan me.

ACTUALLY Not as strange as it sounds. It means “here is my QR code, point your phone at it.” You will hear this five times a day.

04 能用现金吗?

Néng yòng xiànjīn ma?

Can I pay in cash?

05 可以刷卡吗?

Kěyǐ shuākǎ ma?

Can I pay by card?

06 能开发票吗?

Néng kāi fāpiào ma?

Could I get a receipt?

07 一共多少?

Yíòng duōshao?

How much altogether?

08 我来吧。

Wǒ lái ba.

Let me get this.

LITERALLY Let me come.

ACTUALLY The line people say while reaching for the bill. Expect a friendly fight over it — that fight is the point, not the money.

09 AA吧。

AA ba.

Let's split it.

10 好像找错了。

Hǎoxiàng zhǎo cuò le.

I think the change is wrong.

SITUATION 05

Shopping, and gently haggling

Two of these are polite ways to say no. Knowing which is which saves you a lot of time.

01 我看看。

Wǒ kànkàn.

I'm just looking.

LITERALLY I look look.

ACTUALLY Your escape hatch. The moment a shop assistant appears at your shoulder, this sentence buys you back your afternoon.

02 能便宜一点吗？

Néng piányi yìdiǎn ma?

Could you make it a bit cheaper?

03 太贵了。

Tài guì le.

That's too expensive.

04 有别的颜色吗？

Yǒu bié de yánsè ma?

Do you have other colors?

05 有大一点的吗？

Yǒu dà yìdiǎn de ma?

Do you have a bigger one?

06 可以试试吗？

Kěyǐ shìshi ma?

Can I try it on?

07 这个怎么卖？

Zhège zěnmě mài?

How much for this? (at a market)

08 我再想想。
Wǒ zài xiǎngxiang.
Let me think about it.

LITERALLY I'll think again.

ACTUALLY This is a no. A soft, face-saving, everyone-walks-away-comfortable no. Say it and leave; nobody expects you to come back.

09 可以退吗？
Kěyǐ tuì ma?
Can this be returned?

10 就这个吧。
Jiù zhège ba.
I'll take this one.

SITUATION 06

Taxis, the metro, and getting un-lost

Written down, shown on a screen, or said out loud — all three work.

- 01 去这里。
Qù zhèlǐ.
Take me here. (show your phone)

- 02 发个定位给我。
Fā ge dìngwèi gěi wǒ.
Send me your location pin.

LITERALLY Send a location to me.

ACTUALLY Nobody in China gives directions any more. They send a pin. Learning to ask for one solves more problems than learning street names.

- 03 到了叫我。
Dào le jiào wǒ.
Let me know when we arrive.

- 04 在这儿停。
Zài zhèr tíng.
Stop here, please.

- 05 好像走错了。
Hǎoxiàng zǒu cuò le.
I think we've gone the wrong way.

- 06 地铁站在哪儿？
Dìtiě zhàn zài nǎr?
Where is the metro station?

- 07 怎么走？
Zěnmē zǒu?
How do I get there?

- 08 远吗？
Yuǎn ma?
Is it far?

09 走路多久?
Zǒulù duōjiǔ?
How long is it on foot?

10 我下车。
Wǒ xià chē.
I'm getting off here.

SITUATION 07

Checking into a hotel

Ten minutes of your trip, but the ten minutes where not knowing the words costs you most.

01 我要办入住。
Wǒ yào bàn rùzhù.
I'd like to check in.

02 我有预订。
Wǒ yǒu yùdìng.
I have a reservation.

03 这是我的护照。
Zhè shì wǒ de hùzhào.
Here is my passport.

04 押金多少？
Yājīn duōshao?
How much is the deposit?

05 几点退房？
Jǐ diǎn tuìfáng?
What time is checkout?

06 能寄存行李吗？
Néng jìcún xíngli ma?
Can I leave my luggage here?

07 WiFi 密码是多少？
WiFi mìmǎ shì duōshao?
What's the WiFi password?

08 空调坏了。
Kōngtiáo huài le.
The air conditioning is broken.

09 能换个房间吗?
Néng huàn ge fángjiān ma?
Could I change rooms?

10 有热水吗?
Yǒu rèshuǐ ma?
Is there hot water?

WeChat and your phone

Where most of your Chinese will actually happen – in text, at your own pace.

01 加个微信吧。
Jiā ge wēixìn ba.
Let's add each other on WeChat.

02 扫我。
Sǎo wǒ.
Scan my code.

03 我发你。
Wǒ fā nǐ.
I'll send it to you.

04 发个语音吧。
Fā ge yǔyīn ba.
Just send a voice message.

05 收到了。
Shōudào le.
Got it.

06 在吗?
Zài ma?
Are you there?

LITERALLY Are you present?

ACTUALLY The universal warning shot. When someone opens with 在吗, a request is about thirty seconds behind it.

07 稍等。
Shāo děng.
One moment.

08 我这边信号不好。
Wǒ zhèbiān xìn hào bù hǎo.
My signal is bad here.

09 手机没电了。
Shǒujī méi diàn le.
My phone is dead.

10 能借个充电宝吗？
Néng jiè ge chōngdiànbǎo ma?
Could I borrow a power bank?

SITUATION 09

When you need help

Start with the first one. It opens almost any request in China.

01 麻烦你。

Máfan nǐ.

Sorry to bother you.

LITERALLY I'm troubling you.

ACTUALLY The all-purpose opener. Put it in front of any request and the request becomes polite. It is the closest thing Chinese has to a magic word.

02 请问……

Qǐngwèn

Excuse me, may I ask

03 帮我一个忙。

Bāng wǒ yí ge máng.

Could you do me a favor?

04 这个怎么用？

Zhège zěnmeyòng?

How does this work?

05 我迷路了。

Wǒ mílù le.

I'm lost.

06 我找不到我的……

Wǒ zhǎobudào wǒ de

I can't find my

07 洗手间在哪儿？

Xǐshǒujiān zài nǎr?

Where is the bathroom?

08 能帮我拍张照吗？

Néng bāng wǒ pāi zhāng zhào ma?

Could you take a photo of me?

09 我需要帮助。

Wǒ xūyào bāngzhù.

I need help.

10 快叫救护车！

Kuài jiào jiùhùchē!

Call an ambulance, quickly!

SITUATION 10

Being polite, the Chinese way

The last ten are the ones that make people warm to you. Worth more than vocabulary.

01 谢谢。
Xièxie.
Thank you.

02 不客气。
Bú kèqì.
You're welcome.

03 不好意思。
Bù hǎoyìsi.
Excuse me / sorry.

LITERALLY Not a good feeling.

ACTUALLY Not an apology — a social lubricant. Squeezing past someone, arriving late, asking a small favor: 不好意思 covers all of it. 对不起 is for real mistakes. You'll use this one twenty times a day.

04 对不起。
Duìbuqǐ.
I'm sorry. (for something real)

05 没关系。
Méi guānxi.
It's nothing.

06 辛苦了。
Xīnkǔ le.
Thanks for your hard work.

LITERALLY You have suffered hardship.

ACTUALLY Say it to your driver, the delivery guy, a colleague at the end of a long day. Two syllables that acknowledge somebody's effort — one of the warmest things you can say in Chinese.

07 麻烦你了。
Máfan nǐ le.
Thanks for going to the trouble.

08 随便。
Suíbiàn.
Whatever you like.

LITERALLY As you please.

ACTUALLY Careful. It means “you choose, I trust you” — not “I don't care.” Tone decides which one people hear.

09 你先请。
Nǐ xiān qǐng.
After you.

10 慢走。
Màn zǒu.
Take care. (to someone leaving)

LITERALLY Walk slowly.

ACTUALLY Nobody is commenting on your speed. It means “don't rush, get home safe.” It is how a host says goodbye, and it is quietly lovely.
