

2.4 Nouns and modification

This section begins with some additions to your repertoire of inanimate nouns. You will have a chance to practice these in context later in this unit as well as subsequently.

yàoshi	keys	yǎnjìng	glasses (eye-mirror)
shū	books	shūbāo	backpack (book-bundle)
hùzhào	passport	xié	shoes [xiézi in the South]
xíngli	luggage	<yǔ>sǎn	[rain]umbrella
bǐ	pen	bǐjìběn	notebook (pen-note-book)
qiānbǐ	pencil (lead-pen)	shǒujī	cell-phone (hand-machine)
màozi	cap; hat	xìnyòngkǎ	credit card (credit-card)
píbāo	wallet (leather-pack)	dōngxi	[physical] things
tiānqì	weather (sky-air)	yīfu	clothes
bào<zhì>	newspaper (report-paper)	zìdiǎn	dictionary (character-records)
zìxíngchē	bike (self-go-vehicle)	chēzi	small vehicle; car
dānchē	bike (unit-vehicle)	qìchē	car; automobile

2.4.1 Measure-words

Nouns lead to the subject of ‘measure-words’. In English, one can distinguish two kinds of nouns: those that can be counted directly, and those that can only be counted in terms of a container or amount.

countable

[can be counted directly]

book →	2 books
fish →	1 fish
pen →	3 pens

non-countable:

[counted by way of a container, amount, etc.]

wine →	10 bottles of wine
soup →	4 bowls of soup
tea →	5 cups of tea

It is true that wine, soup and tea can also be counted directly if the meaning is ‘varieties of’: 10 wines; 4 soups; 5 teas. But otherwise, such nouns need to be measured out. In Chinese (as well as in many other languages in the region, including Thai, Vietnamese and Burmese), all nouns can be considered non-countable, and are counted through the mediation of another noun-like word. [The vocabulary in these examples is only for illustration – it need not be internalized yet.]

shū → sì běn shū
book 2 spine book
2 books

jiǔ → shí píng jiǔ
wine 10 bottles wine
10 bottles of wine

yú → yì tiáo yú
fish 1 length fish
a fish

tāng → sì wǎn tāng
soup 4 bowls soup
4 bowls of soup

bǐ → sān zhī bǐ	chá → sān bēi chá
pens 3 stub pen	tea 3 cup tea
3 pens	3 cups of tea

Often a distinction is made between ‘measures’ and ‘classifiers’. The phrases on the right all involve measures, which serve to portion out a substance that is otherwise not naturally bound; all the examples are, in fact, liquids. Chinese often uses Measures where English would use them, as the examples show. Classifiers, on the other hand, are rare in English; perhaps ‘block’ is an example, as in ‘block of apartments’. Classifiers serve to classify nouns along various physical dimensions. Tiáo for example is a classifier used typically for sinuous things, such as roads, rivers, and fish:

yì tiáo lù	‘a road’	liǎng tiáo yú	‘2 fish’
sān tiáo hé	‘3 rivers’	sì tiáo tuǐ	‘4 legs’

Interestingly, in many cases, the original impetus for a particular classifier has been obscured by cultural change. Items of news, for example, are still classified with tiáo (yì tiáo xīnwén ‘an item of news’) even though news is no longer delivered by way of a sinuous tickertape. The use of tiáo for watches may also be a relic of those days when people carried a fob watch on long, sinuous chains.

Rather than keep the notional distinction between classifiers and measures, both will be referred to as ‘Measure-words’, abbreviated as M’s. Before you encounter M’s in sentences, it will be useful to practice them in phrases. We begin with the default M, gè (usually untuned). It appears with many personal nouns, including rén ‘person’ and xuésheng ‘student’. Note that when combined with an M, the number ‘two’ (but not a number ending in ‘two’, such as 12 or 22) is expressed as liǎng (‘pair’) rather than èr: liǎng ge ‘two [of them]’. And as that example shows, in context, the noun itself may be omitted.

Recall that the tone of yī ‘one’, level when counting or when clearly designating the number ‘1’, shifts to either falling or rising when yī is in conjunction with a following M. The basic tone of gè is falling (hence yí gè) and even though, as noted, gè is often toneless, it still elicits the shift before ‘losing’ its tone: yí ge.

The following sets can be recited regularly until familiar:

yí ge rén	liǎng ge rén	sān ge rén	wǔ ge rén	shí ge rén.
1 person	2 people	3 people	5 people	10 people
yí ge xuésheng		liǎng ge xuésheng		sān ge xuésheng
1 student		2 students		3 students
yí ge	liǎng ge	dì-yī ge	dì-èr ge	dì-sān ge
1 of them	2 of them	the 1 st [one]	the 2 nd [one]	the 3 rd [one]

The particle le following phrases like these (as in the main dialogue below) underscores the relevance of the ‘new situation’: Sì ge rén le. ‘So that’s 4 [people].’

Another particularly useful M is kuài ‘lump; chunk; piece’, which in the context of money (qián), means *yuan* , generally translated as ‘dollar’. The yuán is a unit of the currency known as rénmínbì [MB] ‘people’s currency’.

yí kuài qián liǎng kuài qián sān kuài qián wǔ kuài qián shí kuài qián
yí kuài liǎng kuài sān kuài wǔ kuài shí kuài

2.4.2 Possessive pronouns

In English, possessive pronouns have quite a complicated relationship to ordinary pronouns (eg ‘I > my > mine’; ‘she > her > hers’), but in Chinese, they are formed in a perfectly regular fashion by the addition of the ‘possessive marker’, de: wǒ ‘I’ > wǒ de ‘my; mine’. The full system is shown below:

wǒ de	wǒmen de	my; mine	our; ours
nǐ de	nǐmen de	your; yours	your; yours [plural]
tā de	tāmen de	his; her; hers	their; theirs

These may combine with nouns, as follows:

wǒ de zìdiǎn	my dictionary
tā de hùzhào	her passport
wǒmen de xíngli	our luggage
wǒ de xié<zi>	my shoes
nǐ de dōngxi	your things

The possessive marker de may also link noun modifiers to other nouns:

xuésheng de shūbāo	students’ bags
lǎoshī de shū	teachers’ books
Zhāng lǎoshī de yǎnjìng	Professor Zhang’s glasses
zuótiān de tiānqì	yesterday’s weather
jīntiān de bào<zhi>	today’s newspaper

2.4.3 Demonstrative pronouns

Demonstrative pronouns (‘this’ and ‘that’) and locational pronouns (‘here’ and ‘there’) are shown in the chart below. Examples in context will follow later in the unit.

<i>proximate</i>	<i>distal</i>	<i>question</i>
zhè ~ zhèi ‘this’	nà ~ nèi ‘that’	nǎ ~ něi ‘which’
zhèr ~ zhèlǐ ‘here’	nàr ~ nàlǐ ‘there’	nǎr ~ nǎlǐ ‘where’

Notes

- a) The forms, zhèi, nèi and něi, are generally found only in combination with a following M: zhè but zhèi ge ‘this one’; nà but nèi ge ‘that [one]’.
- b) On the Mainland, where both forms of the locational pronouns occur, the *r*-forms are more colloquial, the *lǐ*-forms, more formal. Non-northern speakers of Mandarin, who tend to eschew forms with the *r*-suffix, either merge the locational pronouns with the demonstratives, pronouncing zhèr as zhè, nàr as nà, and nǎr as nǎ, or [particularly in Taiwan] use zhèlǐ, nàlǐ and nǎlǐ (> nǎlǐ). Notice that in all cases, the distal forms differ from the question forms only in tone: nà / nǎ; nèi / něi, etc.
- c) Before a pause, nà is often used in an extended sense, translated in English as ‘well; so; then; in that case’:

Nà, wǒmen zǒu ba. Well, let’s go then. (so we leave BA)
 Nà, nǐ de xíngli ne? So how about your luggage then?

Exercise 2.

Provide Chinese equivalents for the following phrases and sentences:

my wallet	3 teachers	their clothes
her glasses	2 people	the newspaper on July 4 th
his things	4 students	Prof. Zhang’s passport
yesterday’s paper	2 dollars	her bike

How’s Liáng Zhìfǔ doing today? / She’s better.
 How was the weather yesterday? / It was ‘freezing’ cold!

2.5 Identity

Statements such as ‘Today’s Monday’ or ‘I’m Oliver’ or ‘She’s an engineer’ involve identity or category. In English, the primary verb that serves to identify or categorize is ‘be’ (whose forms include ‘is’, ‘are’, ‘was’, etc.). In Chinese, the relationship is sometimes expressed by simple juxtaposition, with no explicit linking verb. Dates, for example, can be linked to days, as follows:

Jīntiān jiǔyuè bā hào.	Today’s the 8 th of September.
Zuótiān qī hào.	Yesterday was the 7 th .
Míngtiān jiǔ hào.	Tomorrow’s the 9 th .

But the addition of an adverb, such bù, requires a verb, and in such cases, shì [usually untoned] must be expressed:

Jīntiān bú shì bā hào, shì jiǔ hào.	It’s not the 8th today, it’s the 9th.
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And an untoned shì can also be present in the positive sentences:

Jīntiān <shì> jiǔyuè shí hào.	Today's September 10 th .
Míngtiān <shì> Zhōngqiū Jié.	Tomorrow's the 'Mid-Autumn Festival'. [ie the 'Moon Festival']

Naming and other kinds of identification sometimes omit shì in fast speech, but more commonly it can be heard as a toneless whisper, 'sh'.

Tā shì Wáng Shuò, wǒ de lǎoshī.	He's Wang Shuo, my teacher.
Wǒmen shì xuésheng, tā shì lǎoshī.	We're students, he's a teacher.
Zhè shì jīntiān de bào.	This is today's paper.
Shì nǐ de yàoshi ma?	Are [these] your keys?
Bú shì wǒ de sǎn, shì tā de.	[That]'s not my umbrella, [it]'s his.
Tāmen dōu shì xuésheng.	They're all students.

But don't forget, shì is not required with SVs:

Xuésheng zǒngshì hěn lèi, duì bu duì?	The students are always tired, right?
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2.5.1 Questions

Now we can introduce the question words shéi (or shuí) 'who, whom' and shénme 'what' (which, like zěnmé, is pronounced [shéme], without the 'n'). Unlike English, where question words generally appear at the head of the sentence, in Chinese, they remain in the position of the information supplied in the answer. Note the differences in word order between the English sentences and the Chinese:

Tā shì shéi? Tā shì wǒ de lǎoshī.	Who's that? That's my teacher.
Nà shì shénme? Nà shì wǒ de hùzhào.	What's that? That's my passport.
<Shì> shéi de yàoshi? <Shì> wǒ de – xièxie.	Whose keys are [these]? [They]'re mine – thanks.
<Shì> shuí de xíngli? <Shì> wǒmen de.	Whose luggage? It's ours.

Zhè shì shéi de?
Shì wǒ de.

Whose is this?
It's mine.

Shéi shì dì-yī ge?
Tā shì dì-yī ge.
Dì-èr ge ne?
Tā shì dì-èr ge.

Who is the first [one]?
He's the first.
And the second?
She's the second.

2.5.2 Hedging your answer

Frequently, when asked about identity, the answer is less than certain, so you may want to hedge your reply with a word like hǎoxiàng 'seems like (good-resemble)'. The following short interchanges involve trying to guess the contents of a series of wrapped packages by feeling them:

Dì-yī shì shénme?
Dì-yī hǎoxiàng shì yàoshi.

What's the first?
The first seems like keys.

Zhè shì shénme?
Hǎoxiàng shì shū.

What's this?
Seems like a book.

Nà, zhè shì shénme?
Hǎoxiàng shì xiézi.

Well, what's this?
Seems like shoes.

2.5.3 Naming

Naming is also a form of identification. And in fact, if you were to go round the classroom naming all your tóngxué 'classmates', you could do so with the verb shì as follows:

Nà shì Máo Xiān'ān.

That's Mao Xian'an.

Nà shì Léi Hànbo.

That's Lei Hanbo.

Nà shì Lǐ Dān.

That's Li Dan.

Nà hǎoxiàng shì Luó Zhìchéng.

Looks like that's Luo Zhicheng.

Nǐ shì bu shì Luó Zhìchéng?

Are you Luo Zhicheng?

Tā shì Léi Fēng!

He's Lei Feng.

Exercise 3.

Provide Chinese for the interchanges:

Q
Is it the 29th today?
Is this your umbrella?
Who's first?
Are you all students?
Is that your bike?

A
No, it's the 30th.
No, that's Prof. Zhang's.
Seems like Wáng Jié is 1st and Liú Guózhèng is 2nd.
Yes, we're all Prof. Wèi's students.
No, it's Léi Fēng's.

2.6 Names and titles

Names need not be introduced by shì. In some contexts more specialized verbs must be used. One you encountered in Unit 1: xìng ‘be surnamed’ (which also functions as a noun meaning ‘surname’). Another is jiào ‘to be named; to call’. But before we illustrate their use, we should add to the brief remarks about names and titles made in §1.6.1 and §1.9.1.

2.6.1 Names

Some common English names are directly transliterated into Chinese: Yuēhàn Shǐmìsī ‘John Smith’, keeping the English word order of given name before surname. Students of Chinese are usually given Chinese names, based on their own (either their surnames if they have enough syllables, or their full names), and these conform to Chinese types of two or three syllables. In such cases, Chinese word order, with surname before given, is followed. (In all but the first example below, English surnames are reduced to single syllables in the Chinese, as shown by the highlighting.)

Wèi Déli	Paul Wheatley
Táng Lìlì	Lily Tomlin
Máo Xiān’ān	Anne Mauboussin
Léi Hànbó	Robert Leonhardt
Lǐ Dān	David Lippmann

Such names are indistinguishable from names of actual Chinese, such as these:

Cuī Lín	Kāng Yòuwéi	Yuán Shào	Zhèng Chénggōng
Zhèng Hé	Máo Qíling	Wáng Lì	Bái Sùzhēn

2.6.2 Xìng

Chinese names consist of a surname, or xìng, in initial position, followed by a given name or míngzì, literally ‘name-characters’. Xìng are usually – but not always – single syllables. As a verb, xìng is almost always used when asking for, or responding with, someone’s surname:

Tā xìng shénme?	What’s her surname?
Tā xìng Huáng.	She’s surnamed Huang.
Xìng Wáng?	Wang?
Bú shì xìng Wáng, tā xìng Huáng.	No, not Wang, she’s named Huang.

When addressing someone directly, the honorific expression guìxìng ‘worthy-surname’ (cf. guì ‘expensive’), with or without a pronoun, is the usual question:

<Nín> guìxìng?	May [I] ask your surname [please]?
Wǒ xìng Wèi.	I’m surnamed Wei.

2.6.3 Jiào

In much of the English speaking world, where informality tends to be considered a virtue, the shift from surname to given name can proceed very quickly. However, in Chinese, address in a professional setting is likely to persist longer as xìng plus title. So under normal levels of politeness, you would question someone about their xìng, not about their míngzi. However, in the appropriate context, it is possible to seek someone's full name (regardless of the number of syllables). In such cases, the verb jiào 'be called' is used. Jiào can take either the person or the word míngzi as its subject; and it takes as its object at least two syllables of a name, never a single syllable. Below are some options, first for Lǐ Xiāngjūn, a three-syllable name, then for Zhèng Hé, with only two.

Q	A
Tā jiào shénme míngzi?	Tā jiào Lǐ Xiāngjūn.
Tā de míngzi jiào shénme?	Tā <de míngzi> jiào <Lǐ> Xiāngjūn.
Tā jiào shénme míngzi?	Tā jiào Zhèng Hé.
Tā de míngzi jiào shénme?	Tā <de míngzi> jiào Zhèng Hé.

2.6.4 Asking and giving a name

Typically, in face-to-face interaction, one asks politely for a surname, and in many cases, the response will be just a surname. However, where statuses are more or less matched, once the surname is provided, it is often followed by the full name, and this is a good model for the foreign student to copy:

<Nín> guìxìng?

[Bái Sùzhēn] Wǒ xìng Bái, jiào Bái Sùzhēn.

[Xǔ Xiān] Wǒ xìng Xǔ, jiào Xǔ Xiān.

2.6.5 Titles

Here is a short selection of titles to add to lǎoshī. All of them follow a xìng, though some may be used alone under certain conditions. Xiānshēng 'mister (first-born)' is the generic title for adult males. In Taiwan, or overseas communities, xiǎojiě 'Miss; Ms (small older-sister)' is quite a common title for unmarried women up to a certain age or, still with the woman's xìng, even for young married women. In the same communities, married women can be addressed, with the husband's xìng, as tàitai (etymologically related to tài, the adverb). The latter term is hardly ever used on the Mainland, and even xiǎojiě is used much less there. On the Mainland, if no professional title (such as lǎoshī) is available, the options are to use full name or míngzi, or simply to avoid direct address completely.

Shīfu, literally 'craftsman', but often translated as 'master', has shifted in its usage in the last few decades, but traditionally, it has been used to address blue-collar workers (male or female). Finally, jīnglǐ 'manager', is a professional title for males or

females, of the sort that might appear on a business card. Note the order *surname before title*:

surname	(given name)	title	
Wèi	<Bóyáng>	lǎoshī	Professor
Shí	<Jílóng>	xiānsheng	Mr.
Chén	<Yuè>	xiǎojie	Miss; Ms
Wáng	<Guóbào>	shīfu	'master'
Zhōu	<Lǐ>	jīnglǐ	manager

2.6.6 *Shì* with names

As noted above, while surnames [alone] can only be introduced with the verb xìng, full names can be introduced by shì as well as jiào. In fact, unlike the other two verbs, shì can also introduce name and *title*. The shì option identifies one of a known group, and as such, is often appropriate to a classroom setting:

Tā shì Lǐ Guānghuī; tā shì Wáng Shuò; tā shì Táng Bīn; wǒ shì Wèi lǎoshī.
Dì-yī ge shì Xiāo Míngzuǒ, dì-èr ge shì Lǐ Míng, dì-sān ge shì Xiè Jìng.

Nǐ shì bu shì Zhāng xiānsheng?	Are you Mr. Zhang?
Zhāng jīnglǐ, hǎo.	How are you, Manager Zhang?
Zhè shì Dù shīfu.	This is Master Du.
Wǒ shì Wáng lǎoshī; tāmen dōu shì wǒ de xuéshēng.	I'm Prof. Wang and these are my students.
Chén xiǎojie shì Běijīng rén.	Miss Chen is from Beijing.

Exercise 4.

a) Assuming you were an official of appropriate rank and eminence to address the question, write out how the following people might respond (in the modern world) to <Nín> *guìxìng*?

- Hú Shì, (20th C. philosopher and reformer, graduate of Cornell University): Wǒ xìng Hú, jiào Hú Shì.
- Sīmǎ Qiān (the Han dynasty historian):
- Zhāng Xuéliáng (Manchurian warlord):
- Hán Yù (Tang dynasty scholar):
- Yáng Guìfēi (courtesan, from the late Tang dynasty):
- Cuī Jiàn (rock musician):

b) Translate the following, being careful to follow Chinese word order:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. I'm a teacher. | 2. Who's she? |
| 3. Her surname's Sòng, her
full name's Sòng Měilíng. | 4. Hi, my name's Lǐ Dān. |
| 5. Who's he? / He's my teacher. | 6. That's Zhōu Lì. |
| 7. His surname's Chén, full
name, Chén Bó. | 8. And him? / His surname's Xǔ, full
name, Xǔ Xiān. |
| 11. This is master Wèi. | 12. Her name's Smith [Shǐmìsī]. |
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