

INTRODUCTION TO PERFORMANCE TEXT FOUR

Habits of Good Chinese Language Learners

By reaching this point in your study of Chinese, you have experienced nearly every sound and sound combination available in the language. You have practiced the language associated with dozens of social situations, negotiated interactions with different kinds of people, identified places and times, moved people and things around, and used Chinese to learn more Chinese. In this Unit, you will expand your ability to do all these and complete your tutorial on reading, writing, and using Chinese name cards.

You are on your way to being able to communicate in Chinese culture. Marking your achievements to this point, we have arrived at a good time to pause and reflect on the process of learning Chinese—in the past and in the future. In the course of teaching Chinese language for a few decades, I have noticed a dozen good habits that efficient learners of Chinese seem to demonstrate whether they are working on the spoken or written language. Let me share with you what a good learner of Chinese does. He or she...

1. Keeps in frequent contact with the language: No matter how intensely you are studying Chinese, frequency of contact with the language is important. Even if you can only study a few hours a week, spreading your contact with the language over the days of the week is much more effective than crowding the study hours into one or two days. So, for example, if you can only study 180 minutes every week, spending 20 minutes of quality study time for six days is more effective than 60 minutes three times a week or 90 minutes twice a week. This seems especially true for learning to recognize and write characters and listening to and comprehending the audio program.

2. Hears a lot of the language: It is crystal clear from my perspective that the learner who listens to the most Chinese develops the best Chinese skills. If a learner is spending most of his or her study time hearing Chinese and reacting to it by, say, repeating dialogs or responding to drills, the results are greater for the time spent. *Chinese: Communicating in the Culture* is designed to force you to listen—to first learn with your ears and then your eyes; so, if you have progressed this far with these materials, you have already heard a lot of Chinese. If you have spent your study time focused on the audio program, your brain has become familiar with the sound patterns of Mandarin and you should be able to repeat expressions of moderate length even if you do not understand them. Once you have covered the units and stages in these materials, you can also go online and listen to Chinese television and webcast programming. Rent and download Mandarin movies and TV programs and keep them on as background to your daily life. The more Mandarin you hear, the better you will manipulate the language in the future.

3. Practices Chinese by speaking in a normal voice: This may strike you as a strange “good habit”; however, I have observed many learners of Chinese practicing with an audio program by whispering their responses and have felt that to be a “bad habit.” Responding in your normal speaking voice accustoms you to hearing yourself speak the language and helps develop the practice of making yourself heard. Even if you lack confidence (and who would not from time to time?), you do not have to sound as if you do. Not too many years ago, a person speaking aloud in a public area would be considered odd; but today, most people will think you are speaking on a cell phone, so the odd factor has diminished. Just pretend that you are speaking Chinese with a tutor on the other end of a telephone call. Whether or not you strike people as odd, the gain from speaking in a full voice is too much to lose over a misplaced concern for the regard of strangers and overly conventional friends.

4. Learns redundantly: You build memories of an expression in all different ways your senses encounter it: by the sounds, by the rhythm of the tones and intonation, by the meaning of the words, the visual image you are seeing or imagining, by the print in the book you are using, by the social setting, by the taste of the coffee you are drinking at the time you encounter it.... All these and more can play a role in how you remember that particular bit of language. The more ways you can remember the language, the more likely you are to recall it when you need it. This is a good reason for going over the same material in different ways. You might first listen to the coaching and the target expressions, then go to the book and listen while looking at the pinyin of the dialogs and vocabulary, look at the illustrations and practice the expressions, then listen to the rehearsal audio and repeat and respond as much as possible, then practice the dialog while imagining yourself in one of the roles...using all the resources you have can multiply your approaches, giving you the ability to produce the expression. The more ways you employ to put the expression into your memory, the faster and more accurately you can retrieve it when you need it.

5. Visualizes the social contexts of the language being practiced: Learners who can imagine the setting of a dialog in Technicolor will remember more than those who imagine in black and white. If you are practicing a dialog, thinking about what you might be wearing and where you might be at the time can make it easier to remember what to say. Approaching a piece of language as if you were an actor in a big, elaborate production (if only in your own mind) can help you retain the language. The easier the context is to recall, the more likely you will recall the piece of language associated with it.

6. Creates a lifestyle that accommodates Chinese: To learn to communicate in Chinese culture, you must be involved with the project frequently and often for a long period of time. If you do not include exposure to China and things Chinese now, you will have to do so in the future. Finding a favorite restaurant where the staff will deal with you in Mandarin might be a good start. Starting a collection of Chinese films is relatively easy and inexpensive. Regularly

watching a Chinese program on television or on the Internet can bring the language and culture to you in a complex and interesting way. (Remember: you do not have to understand everything, just more than you did last week.) Involve Chinese friends in your social life. If they are not in the neighborhood, try to make on-line acquaintances. The more you change your lifestyle to include Chinese language and culture, the faster you will develop the ability to comprehend the way the language is used in social settings.

7. Uses feedback to increase accuracy: A student of Chinese is likely to meet with starkly contrasting types of feedback. When being treated politely as an outsider who is attempting to use the language, you are likely to be over praised for a minimal performance. On the other hand, if you have a close friend or a teacher who is treating you as an insider, you can receive very direct criticism of your performance—the severity of which Americans seldom encounter. When someone over praises your performance in Chinese, take that as a sign that the person recognized that you are speaking Chinese and is avoiding getting too much involved. Whereas direct criticism that points out a very obvious failing on your part, may indicate that the person offering the criticism is taking you seriously and is assuming some responsibility for getting you on the right track. Being able to accept criticism and to use it to improve performance in the language is one of clearest indicators of an efficient learner of Chinese.

8. Makes frequent attempts to put the language to use: Being able to seek out opportunities to use Mandarin and then actually using the language is key to future success. Knowing that you may clearly discern what you know you can do and cannot do is a real step in the right direction. The Confucian dictum, “To know and act as if you know, to not know and act as if you do not know—this is the beginning of knowledge”¹ applies very well to this situation. Knowing that the learning of Mandarin is a journey and that every experience can get you closer to your destination will serve you well.

9. Reviews previously studied materials: Successful learners have the ability to go over previously studied materials with fresh eyes and find things there that they can put to use. Some simply review materials they have studied previously by listening to the audio and testing their comprehension. If they do well, they feel good about themselves; if they find that there is more to learn there, they are satisfied that they caught it. There are many ways to review previously studied materials: write out in hanzi the dialogs and passages that you learned to speak, review the vocabulary--Chinese to English and English to Chinese--from previous units and stages, follow a series of stages by the saga arrangement rather than the unit-stage order of the course, or become a tutor for someone who is earlier in his or her learning career than you are.

10. Helps learners who are earlier in their language learning career: Excellent learners often offer to help learners who are just starting out. It may be that good learners are confident enough to help others, or it may be that helping others helps make them excellent learners. However that may work itself out, if you take it on yourself to explain and practice Chinese with someone who knows less than you, it is very likely that you will benefit from the activity as much as your tutee does.

11. Develops set performances in the language: Good learners—even at the earlier stages of learning the language—have routines that they feel very good about. Of course, you should learn every dialog well and be able to perform them all at any given opportunity; however, there may be situations that you are particularly good at and that you can identify as your specialty. The trick is to continually expand that repertoire until it seems you do everything well.

12. Takes pleasure in putting the language to good use: The first line of the *Lun Yu*, the foundation text of Confucian thought, states the following proposition:

“To learn something and then at the right time try it out—this is indeed pleasure.”²

This astute observation of the self-motivating nature of learning suggests that learning and using what you learn has its own reward. We really do not need to have someone in the background shouting “good job” at us every time we complete a task. If we practice a particular move or technique—say, hitting a good backhand in tennis— and then successfully hit a point-scoring backhand in a game, we will feel the pleasure of the achievement without having to hear applause or praise. The same happens to a learner of a language. When we use an expression in the right context and others respond in an appropriate way, we have a sense of satisfaction that far exceeds the flattering comments of others or even a high mark in school. Efficient learners of Chinese find this pleasure in likely and unlikely places by seeking out every opportunity to put the language to use.

Now, you might take some time to consider a few of your own good habits that increase your efficiency in the learning of this language. Write them down.

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Notes:

- ¹ 知之为知之，不知为不知，是知也（zhī zhī wéi zhī zhī, bù-zhī wéi bù-zhī, shì zhī yě）。
- ² 学而时习之，不亦说乎（xuě ěr shí xí zhī, bú-yì yuè hū）。