

### 3.5 Yes and no

As observed throughout the first two units, where English tends to include ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in answers to ‘yes-no’ questions, Chinese often answers them by simply reiterating the verb, or verbal parts, in positive form or negative, as the case may be. Agreement can be emphasized by the addition of an initial duì ‘be correct’, though disagreement frequently requires a more subtle expression than the judgemental bú duì ‘wrong’.

Hǎotīng ma? <Dui> <i>hěn hǎotīng.</i>	Do you like [the music]? (nice-sound Q) <i>Yes, [I] do.</i>
Xǐzǎo le ma? <i>Hái méi ne.</i>	Have [you] bathed? <i>No, not yet.</i>
Tāmen yǐjīng shuìjiào le ma? <Dui> <i>yǐjīng shuì le, kěshì Léi Bīn hái méi ne.</i>	Are they in bed already? <i>Yes, he has, but Lei Bin’s still up.</i>
Léi Bīn a, Léi Bīn shì shéi? <i>Léi Bīn shì tāmen de tóngxué.</i> O, míngbai.	Lei Bin? Who’s Lei Bin? <i>Lei Bin’s their classmate.</i> Oh, I see.

When the main verb is itself shì, then shì confirms, with initial duì available for emphasis, and bù ~ bú shì denies:

Nǐ shì dì-yī ge ma? <i>Dui, wǒ shì dì-yī ge.</i>	You’re the 1st? <i>Yes, I am.</i>
Nà, tā shì dì-èr ge ma? <i>Bù, tā shì dì-sān ge.</i>	And...she’s 2nd? <i>No, she’s #3.</i>
Shì ma? <i>Shì, dì-sān ge shì tā.</i>	Is that so? <i>Yes, <u>she</u>’s 3rd.</i>
Tā shì Měiguó rén ba. <i>Dui.</i>	He’s American, I take it. <i>Right.</i>
Tā àiren yě shì ma? <i>Bú shì, tā shì Zhōngguó rén.</i> A, míngbai.	His spouse too? <i>No, she’s Chinese.</i> Oh, I see!

#### 3.5.1 Negative questions

So far so good: with ordinary yes-no questions, reiterating the verb in the positive confirms (with or without an initial duì); reiterating it in the negative denies. Negative questions, however, are not quite so forthright. Negative questions convey a change in expectations: Haven’t you eaten? [I thought you had, but apparently you haven’t.] The new expectation is a negative answer: Haven’t you eaten? / No, I haven’t. In Chinese, as in English, it is still possible to reiterate the verb – in the negative – to confirm the new expectation. But while English generally responds to a negative question with ‘no’

(anticipating the negative verb), Chinese responds with duì ‘correct’ (confirming the negative statement).

Nǐ hái méi chīfàn ma?

<Duì,> hái méi ne.

Haven’t you eaten yet?

No, not yet.

Tāmen bú shì Měiguó rén ba.

<Duì,> tāmen bú shì Měiguó rén.

They’re not Americans, right.

No, they’re not.

It is this incongruity between English and Chinese that gives rise to the observation that Chinese (along with Japanese and other languages in the region) has no equivalent to English ‘yes’ and ‘no’.

What if, in the last example, counter to new expectations (but in conformity to the original ones), the people in question turned out to be Americans after all? In that case, the responses in both Chinese and English are less predictable. But typically, Chinese would change the value of the verb to positive and put emphasis on it: Tāmen shì Měiguó rén. And an introductory negative – bù, bù – would indicate the change from the new expectations back to the old.

Tāmen bú shì Měiguó rén ba!?

Bù, bù, tāmen SHÌ Měiguó rén.

They’re not Americans, are they?

Yes they are.

Here again, while the English ‘yes’ matches the positive verb (‘they are Americans’), Chinese bù (or bú shì) denies the anticipated answer (‘it’s not the case that they aren’t Americans’).

Nà bú shì nǐ de hùzhào ma?

Duì, bú shì wǒ de.

Bù, bù, SHÌ wǒ de.

Isn’t that your passport?

No, it’s not.

Yes it is.

### 3.5.2 Tag-questions

Sometimes, it is appropriate to indicate doubt, or seek confirmation by the use of *tag-questions*. The addition of questions formed with shì or duì to the foot of the sentence serve such a function.

Sūzhōu zài Jiāngsū, duì ma?

Duì a, Sūzhōu zài Jiāngsū.

Suzhou’s in Jiangsu, correct?

[That]’s the case, Suzhou’s in Jiangsu.

Tā shì Yīngguó rén, shì bu shì?

Bú shì, tā shì Jiānádà rén.

He’s English, right?

No, he’s Canadian.

Nǐ de sǎn, shì bu shì?

Shì, xièxie.

[This] is your umbrella, isn’t it?

[It] is, thanks.

Tā shì Dài Sīyí, duì bu duì?  
*Duì, shì Dài Sīyí.*

That's Dai Siyi, right?  
*Right, Dai Siyi.*

### 3.5.3 Is it the case that...?

Shì bu shì can also be inserted before sentence elements to seek confirmation; and responses can be re-asserted by inserting a (fully stressed) shì 'it is the case that', as the following examples show:

Zhènjiāng shì bu shì zài Ānhuī?  
*Bù, Zhènjiāng zài Jiāngsū, lí  
 Nánjīng bù yuǎn.*

Is Zhenjiang really in Anhui?  
*No, it isn't. Zhenjiang's in Jiangsu,  
 not far from Nanjing.*

Shì bu shì in such sentences questions an underlying assumption: Zhenjiang's in Anhui. Shì in the response confirms it. These shì's are particularly common as a way of questioning adverbs:

Zhōngwén lǎoshī shì bu shì hěn yán? Is it the case that Ch. teachers are strict?  
*Duì, tāmen shì hěn yán.* *Yes, they [really] are!*

Zhèr de lǎoshī shì bu shì zǒngshì hěn lèi?  
*Tāmen shì hěn lèi, kěshì xuéshēng bú shì gèng lèi ma.* Is it the case that the teachers here are always tired?  
*They are quite tired, but aren't students even more tired?*

Tāmen shì bu shì dōu yǐjīng qǐlái le? Is it the case that they're all up already?  
*Bù, xiǎo Liáng hái méiyǒu qǐlái, tā yǒu yìdiǎnr bù shūfu.* No, young Liang isn't up yet, he's not very well.

The appearance of shì with SVs in such sentences should not undermine your understanding that shì does not appear with SVs in neutral, unemphatic contexts.

### Exercise 2.

Provide Chinese equivalents for the following interchanges:

You were born in Thailand, right?  
*Yes, but my nationality is American.*

Is it the case that Nanjing isn't far from Shànghǎi?  
*That's right, it isn't that far away, about 200 kms.*

Aren't they Chinese?  
*No, they're not. None of them is. Two of them are Korean, and two are Thai.*

Isn't that your umbrella?  
*No, it's not mine. / I think it is!*

Is Tianjin near Beijing?  
Yes it is. It's about 180 kms from Beijing.

### 3.6 Thanks and sorry.

#### 3.6.1 Responses to thanking

Thanking is not quite as perfunctory in Chinese as in English. In English, thanks are often given even after making a purchase, or when a waiter serves a dish or brings a drink. In Chinese, such transactions are more likely to be acknowledged with just hǎo 'fine' – if anything. Explicit thanking is not common, but where an action is worthy of thanks, then in informal or colloquial situations, xièxie or duōxiè (the latter, under the influence of Cantonese) suffices, while in more formal situations, the verb gǎnxiè 'feel thanks' can be used: hěn gǎnxiè <nǐ>. Responses to xièxie (or gǎnxiè), corresponding to English 'you're welcome', vary considerably in Chinese. The main ones are listed below, with literal meanings.

Xièxie <nǐ>.

Thanks.

You're welcome. >

*Bú xiè.*

*not thank*

*Bú yòng xiè.*

*not use thank*

*Bú kèqì*

*not be+polite*

*Bié kèqì!*

*don't be+polite*

*Bú yào kèqì.*

*not want be+polite*

*Bú yòng kèqì.*

*not use be+polite*

*Béng kèqì. [northern]*

*no-use be+polite*

*Yīnggāi de!*

*'[It]'s what [I] should [do]!'*

#### Notes

- a) Yòng's core meaning is 'to use'; yào's is 'want'. But in the above contexts, the meanings of both are closer to 'need'. Béng is a telescoped version of bú + yòng.  
b) Kèqì is composed of roots for 'guest' and 'air; spirit', so the literal meaning is, roughly, 'adopt the airs of a guest'. Kè appears in expressions such as qǐngkè 'entertain guests; to treat [by paying] (invite-guests)' and words like kèrén 'guest (guest-person)' and kètīng 'living room; parlor (guest-hall)'. Qì appears in words such as tiānqì 'weather' and qìfēn 'atmosphere'.

Tā hěn kèqì

(S)he's very polite.

Nǐ bié kèqì, wǒ qǐngkè.

Don't worry, I'm treating.

- c) Yīnggāi de, containing the 'modal verb' yīnggāi 'should; ought' (cf. gāi), is a common response to a serious expression of gratitude. Xièxie nǐ lái jiē wǒ! / Yīnggāi de!

When someone fills your glass when you are conversing at a meal, or at other times when you might want to indicate appreciation without actually saying anything, you can tap the index finger, or the index and middle fingers on the table to express thanks. The practice is said to represent with bent fingers, the act of bowing.

### 3.6.2 Sorry

Regret for minor infractions or potential shortcomings is most commonly expressed as duìbuqǐ, an expression built on the root duì ‘to face squarely’ (and hence ‘to be correct’), plus the suffix bùqǐ ‘not-worthy’. The typical response makes use of the culturally very significant noun, guānxi ‘connections’.

Duìbuqǐ!

*Méi guānxi.*

Sorry! [I didn’t hear, understand, etc.]

*Never mind.*

Duìbuqǐ, lǎoshī, wǒ lái wǎn le.

*Méi guānxi.*

Sorry, sir, I’m late. (come late LE<sub>new</sub> sit’n)

*Never mind.*

In a more serious context, regret may be expressed as hěn bàoqiàn ‘[I]’m very sorry’, literally ‘embrace shortcomings’.

### 3.6.3 Refusal

No matter whether you are stopping by someone’s home or office, or staying for a longer visit, your host will usually serve you tea or soft drinks, often together with some fruit or other snacks. Depending on the situation and the degree of imposition, it is polite to ritually refuse these one or more times, and then if you ultimately accept, to consume them without showing desperation (much as you would in other countries). Some phrases for ritual refusal are provided below:

hē yòng

drink use

yào

want

mǎi

buy

máfan

to bother; go to the trouble of

#### Offers

Lǐ Dān, hē yì bēi chá ba.

Li Dan, why don’t you have a cup of tea?!

Zhāng lǎoshī, hē diǎnr shénme?

Prof. Zhang, what’ll you have to drink?

#### Responses

Bú yòng le, bú yòng le.

No need, I’m fine. (‘not use’)

Bú yòng kèqì le!

Don’t bother! (‘not use politeness LE’)

Bié máfan le.

Don’t go to any trouble. (‘don’t bother LE’)

Often, phrases pile up: Bú yòng le, bié máfan le, wǒ bù kě le!

More abrupt refusals are appropriate when there is a perceived violation, as when merchants try to tout goods on the street:

Guāngdié, guāngpán!  
*Bù mǎi, bù mǎi!*  
*Bú yào, bú yào!*

CDs, DVDs!  
*Not interested ('not buy')!*  
*Not interested ('not want')!*

### 3.6.4 Don't

The several responses to thanking and apologizing actually provide examples of the three main words of negation, bù, méi, and a third found in imperatives [orders], bié 'don't'. The last can be combined with the verb wàng 'forget; leave behind', as follows:

Nǐ de sǎn, bié wàng le.  
*O, duì, xièxiè.*  
*Bú xiè.*

Your umbrella, don't forget [it]!  
*O, right, thanks!*  
 You're welcome.

Nǐ de píbāo, bié wàng le!  
*O, tiān a, wǒ de píbāo! Duōxiè,*  
*duōxiè.*  
*Bú yòng kèqì.*

Don't forget your wallet!  
*Oh, gosh, my wallet!*  
*Many thanks!*  
 You're welcome.

### Exercise 3.

Provide Chinese interchanges along the following lines:

Excuse me, whereabouts is the office?  
*The office is upstairs.*

Don't forget your passport!  
*O, 'heavens', my passport, thanks.*  
 You're welcome!

Your bookbag, don't forget [it].  
*Yikes, thanks!*  
 You're welcome.

Have some tea!  
*No, I'm fine, thanks.*

What'll you have to drink?  
*You have tea?*

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21G.101 / 21G.151 Chinese I (Regular)  
Spring 2006

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.