

## What Next? Notes to the Learner

Congratulations! Now that you've reached the end of this two-level course in spoken Chinese, sit back for a moment and reflect on the many things you now can do in Chinese that you couldn't do before. You've learned Mandarin pronunciation, Pinyin romanization, most of the grammar patterns of spoken Chinese, and the majority of high-frequency words in the language. You can handle sociolinguistic functions such as expressing thanks, apologizing, extending invitations, making or declining requests, and many more. And you've become familiar with Chinese behavioral culture and many of the conventions of cross-cultural communication between Americans and Chinese. Of course, there are still lots of things you can't say or do, but you should feel a sense of accomplishment and take pride in what you can do.

### What Comes Next

Now, if your goal is learning Chinese well enough to get around in a Chinese-speaking country – to introduce yourself, ask directions, go shopping, order meals and so forth, then you're pretty much done. On the other hand, if your goal is attending a Chinese university or using Chinese for professional purposes, then you've only completed the first leg of your journey. In that case, you'll still need to learn higher-level, more specialized vocabulary, including economic, political, and scientific terms; strengthen your formal-style grammar, as used by educated Chinese speakers in academic discussions and lectures; improve your discourse structure, so you can make persuasive arguments and give effective talks and speeches when needed; gain experience in understanding Mandarin spoken with different local accents; and, of course, you'll need to spend quite a bit of time honing your reading and writing skills. So what should you do next and how should you do it?

Quite possibly, you'll want to take a higher-level course in Chinese at your present institution or another local school or language institute. So long as there is a good mix of spoken and written instruction and classes are sufficiently interactive and challenging, this can be a good choice. One effective way to speed up your acquisition of Chinese is to take a summer intensive course; these are available both domestically and overseas, with the better ones allowing you to cover a year's worth of college-level work in only 8 or 9 very demanding weeks. If you do take a summer intensive course, it's important to continue studying or at least using Chinese right after, since otherwise you'll soon forget a large part of what you learned.

The fastest way for most learners to make further progress, after reaching the intermediate level, is by studying in country. Longer-term study in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Singapore for a semester, a year, or longer is well worth considering. If finances are a problem, you could possibly study Chinese part-time and teach English part-time. Be aware that simply going to China for a period of time and learning by "osmosis" doesn't work for most people. For at least the first year, you need to attend a rigorous, well-structured language program that balances academic training in class with experiential training in Chinese society, where learners are in close, daily contact with native speakers in both formal and informal settings. One special requirement of Chinese language training at the higher levels is small class size. Advanced conversation classes shouldn't be larger than 5 or 6 students, with classes of 2 or 3 being even better, and there need to be several hours of carefully organized tutorial time each week. The higher up on the proficiency scale you climb, the greater the need for specialization and individualization of the training, depending on your strengths and weaknesses, learning style, interests, and academic or job needs.

When you reach the point where you can communicate more or less comfortably in Chinese, don't stop there and ossify. Many foreigners who've spent 5, 10, 15 or more years in China have reached at best an intermediate level of proficiency that stopped improving after the first 2 or 3 years. It's important for you to keep reaching for the next rung of the proficiency ladder. Aim for increased precision of vocabulary, native-like control of formal as well as informal vocabulary and grammar, and the ability to follow and discuss lectures, films, news broadcasts, and other television and radio programs.

## Taking a Self-Managed Approach

As your level in Chinese rises, you'll need to take a larger role in directing your own language growth. Books, teachers, classes, and programs are all important, but by far the most important factor is you. Work at becoming a more self-managed, self-reliant, proactive language learner. For example, if you think your classes are not as interactive as you would like, there are things you can do to change that: ask more questions during and after class, give longer and more complex answers when called on, and listen carefully to all the instructor's questions and in your mind prepare an answer for each one, even if the teacher ends up calling on someone else.

Seek out all possible opportunities to speak and listen to Chinese, whenever and wherever you can. Rent or download Mandarin films and TV programs and view them carefully two or more times; take advantage of other multimedia resources on the Internet. By paying careful attention to the context, you can often guess the meaning even if you don't understand every single word. In the place you live, label everything in characters and Pinyin. Always have a small notebook with you and write down how Chinese people say things you've been wondering how to say, or any words and phrases that you've heard often and are curious about but still don't really understand; you can look them up later or ask teachers or friends. Many learners have found flash cards, whether paper or digital, to be helpful. Make an effort to meet Chinese people; in restaurants and stores, find Chinese who are willing to speak with you and talk with them as much as you can. Consider starting a language exchange, where you help a Chinese person with their English and, in return, they help you with your Chinese. And try to make some real Chinese friends, since you need personal relationships to deepen your knowledge of Chinese language and society.

## Making the Most of Your Time In Country

Once in China (or other Chinese-speaking societies), learn to become a good observer of language and society. Observe what Chinese people do and say in different situations and (in most cases) do as they do and say what they say. Don't be afraid of making mistakes. Because you're a non-native, most Chinese will make allowances and be forgiving of linguistic errors. China is a vast country with a huge population, so expect variation in language and customs from place to place. In a relatively short period of time, China has changed from being a traditional, largely rural society to becoming an increasingly industrialized and urban one, so there is a huge generation gap between the people above 60 or 70 and those below the age of 30. While we've tried to provide you with guidance in what many Chinese people would say and do in a given situation, understand that not everyone will say the same thing or act the same way; depending on the geographic region, urban or rural setting, and the age, sex, and educational level of the speaker, different Chinese will act differently. There exists a range of behavior, with traditional Chinese and Western-influenced ways of doing things often existing side-by-side. And, as you'll find out, in China things are not always as they at first appear to be, so be careful about making unwarranted assumptions and don't make up your mind about anything too quickly.

When you first arrive in China, you'll be under various kinds of stresses, so it's important that you eat well, drink enough, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep (sleep deprivation impairs learning and can also result in your more easily becoming depressed). Realize that acculturation typically takes place in several stages. When you first arrive, China will be new and exciting for you and you'll probably be very positive about everything. But after a while, as the newness rubs off and you have to get down to the business of managing your daily life, you'll inevitably encounter difficulties and feel frustrated at your inability to communicate in Chinese as effectively as you do in your native language. There is a tendency at this stage to commiserate with other foreigners and become very critical about everything Chinese; but doing this can be very counterproductive and prevent you from deepening your knowledge of Chinese language and culture.

In your relations with Chinese people, be sure to give as well as take. If people are helpful to you, you have an obligation to reciprocate. Be aware of the impression you leave on Chinese people; you may be the only foreigner they've ever met and, fairly or unfairly, to them you really do represent your compatriots. While it's certainly admirable to try to approach ever closer to the linguistic level of a native speaker, for linguistic

and cultural reasons it's usually not realistic for non-Chinese to make their goal "becoming" Chinese in the sense of always speaking and acting exactly as Chinese people do; this could even rub some Chinese the wrong way. Instead, a better goal would be to become a successful non-native who can function comfortably in Chinese society and achieve your personal and professional goals.

In days past, it was considered admirable, even highly unusual, for an American to be able to speak simple Chinese and recognize a couple hundred characters – and such a low level of Chinese proficiency was not infrequently sufficient for someone to be considered a "Chinese expert" and offered jobs with international corporations in Asia. But in today's world, that's clearly not enough. What we need is Americans and nationals of other countries who can truly function in Mandarin at professional levels.

Due to recent systematizations and simplifications in Chinese, advances in language pedagogy, improvements in educational technology, and the fact that languages and cultures seem to be moving closer together, Chinese today is considerably easier to learn than it used to be. In recent years, more and more students have been learning Chinese to ever higher levels of proficiency. Provided that you set your mind to it and work both hard and smart, there's no reason why you shouldn't be able to attain advanced proficiency in Chinese and accomplish your personal and professional goals. We wish you success and a pleasant journey!