
Chapter 1. Customs Surrounding

Marriage, Birth and Death

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Objectives

General

The purpose of the Module on Customs Surrounding Marriage, Birth and Death is to furnish you with the linguistic skills and cultural Background information you need to take part in conversations about changing attitudes and practices with regard to courtship, marriage, birth, divorce, death and funerals in China, and to conduct yourself in a culturally appropriate manner when you come in contact with Chinese people at the time of one of these significant events in their lives.

Before starting the MBD module, you should have at least completed the Arranging a Meeting Module. You may, of course, use this module at any later point in the course.

Specific

When you have finished this module, you should be able to:

1. Ask about the age when most people get married.
2. Ask about how a wedding is celebrated and what differences there are in marriage practices between the city and the country.
3. Ask about the current local customs regarding gifts for weddings, births, and funerals.
4. Ask about the frequency of divorce.
5. Talk about the functions and statuses of the people who play a role in arranging a present-day traditional marriage.
6. Ask questions about the bride, the groom, and the ceremony in a modern-day wedding.
7. Ask about population control efforts, changes in population control policy, restrictions on young people having children, what factors are taken into consideration in family planning, and how old most couples are when they have children.
8. Congratulate a new mother. Ask about a new-born infant's health, appetite, and weight, and describe the baby in terms of traditional values.
9. Talk about the traditional beliefs and practices with regard to the mother's health before and after giving birth.
10. Present condolences to someone whose relative has died, comfort and express concern for that person.
11. Ask, after deciding if appropriate, about the circumstances of the death and the funeral.
12. Apologize for not being able to attend a funeral.
13. Ask what attire and behavior are appropriate when attending a funeral.

Unit 1: Weather and Terrain

Part 1: Winter and Summer

Reference List

Reference Notes

Notes on Part 1

tíchàng: “to advocate, to promote, to initiate, to recommend, to encourage”

Zhè shì shéi tíchàngde?

Who advocates this?

niánqīng: “to be young” (literally “years-light” or “years green”. There are two different characters with the same sound used for the second syllable.)

Tā zhènmè niánqīng, zhènmè piàoliang!

She’s so young and so beautiful!

Wǒ niánqīngde shíhou, bù xīhuan kàn shū.

When I was young, I didn’t like to read.

Zhèxiē niánqīng rén dōu ài kàn diànyǐng.

These young people all love to go to the movies.

Nèige niánqīngde Zhōngguó rén, Yīngwén shuōde bú cuò.

That young Chinese person speaks pretty good English.

jiéhūn: “to get married”, also pronounced jiēhūn. Notice that in Chinese you talk of “getting married”, while in English we talk of “being married”. And it follows grammatically that jiéhūn is a process verb, not a state verb. Jiéhūn will always be seen with an aspect marker such as le or will be negated with méi.

Tāmen jiéhūnle méiyóu?

Have they gotten married yet? (This is the equivalent of ‘Are they married?’)

Nǐ jiéhūn duó jiǔ le?

How long have you been married?

Jiéhūn is a verb-object compound, literally meaning “to knot marriage”. Jié and hūn can be separated by aspect markers, such as de or guo.

Nǐ shì shénme shíhou jiéde hūn? OR Nǐ shì shénme shíhou jiéhūnde?

When did you get married?

Wang Xiānsheng jiéguo sāncì hūn.

Mr. Wang has been married three times.

To say “get married to someone” use the pattern gēn ... jiéhūn.

Tā gēn shéi jiéhūn le?

To whom did he get married?

Notes on №2

wǎnliàn wǎnhūn: “late involvement and late marriage”. Wǎnliàn is an abbreviation for wan liàn’ài, “mature love”, (liàn’ài means “romantic love, courtship”), and wǎnhūn is an abbreviation for wǎn jiéhūn, “late marriage”. This policy has been promoted since the 1960s, but only actively enforced since the 1970s. It is difficult to generalize about the required minimum marriage ages, as they differ from city to city and might be nonexistent in certain rural and national minority areas, where the government is trying to increase the population. The minimum age has been progressively raised over the years, until 1978 when the rules were eased a bit. In general, if the combined ages of the couple exceeds fifty years (or the female’s age exceeds the male’s), then the marriage is allowable.

Notes on №3

qīngnián: “youth, young person”. Do not confuse this noun with the adjectival verb niánqīng, “to be young”. (See Notes on No. 1)

In this sentence, the noun qīngnián is used to modify the noun lǎoshī, “teacher”.

A:	Wǒ jìde sānshinián yīqián nǐ tèbié ài chī táng.
	I remember that thirty years ago you especially loved to eat candy.
B:	Shì a, nèi shíhou wǒmen dōu háishi qīngnián. Xiànzài lǎo le, yá bù xíng le.
	Yes. Back then we were all young people. Now I’m old, and my teeth aren’t good any more.

nǜlì: “to be hardworking, to diligent”, or as an adverb, “diligently, be hard”.

Tā suīrán hèn nǜlì, kěshi tāde Yīngwen háishi bù xíng. Although he’s very hardworking, his English is still not good enough.

Wǒ děi nǜlì xué Zhōngwén.

I have to study Chinese very hard.

Notes on №4

nongcūn: “rural areas, countryside, village”.

Nóngcūnde kōngqì bǐ chéngli hǎoduō le.

The air in the country is much better than in the city.

Tāmen Jiā zài nongcūn zhù.

Their family lives in the country.

shíxíng: “to practice, to carry out (a method, policy, plan, reform)”.

Nǐ zhèige jihua hěn hǎo, kěshi wǒ xiǎng bù néng shíxíng.

This plan of yours is very good, but I don't think it can be carried out.

Zhèige bànfa yǐjīng shíxíngle sānge xīngqīle, kěshi jiéguǒ bù hǎo.

This method has been in practice for three weeks, but the results aren't good.

Notes on №5

chéng: “to constitute, to make, to become”.

Tāde xuéxí yizhí hěn hǎo, biyè yǐhòu ānpai gōngzuò bù chéng wèntí.

His studies have been good all along, so after he graduates, setting up a job for him won't constitute a problem.

Wǒde nǚer xiànzài chéngle jiějie, tā zhēn xǐhuan tāde xiǎo mèimei.

My daughter has become an older sister. She really likes her little sister.

fēngqì: “established practice, custom; general mood”.

Xiànzài yǒu bù shǎo qīngnián bú yào zài shāngdiànli mài dōngxì, zhèizhǒng fēngqì zhēn bù hǎo.

There are a lot of young people now who don't want to sell things in shops. This practice is really bad.

Xiànzài zài Zhōngguo, yòu yǒule niàn shūde fēngqì.

Now in China there is again a general atmosphere of study.

Notes on №6

hé: “with”. You have seen he used between two nouns or pronouns as a conjunction meaning “and”. Here you see it used as a prepositional verb meaning “with”. The word gēn, which you have seen, also has both meanings, “and” and “with”.

Formerly, gēn was the most frequently used word for “with” or “and” in the Mandarin spoken in North China, and he was more often written. But he has come into wide conversational use in pùtōnghuà. In addition to this variation, school children in Taiwan are sometimes taught to say hàn instead of he, which is the same character with another pronunciation.

Generally speaking, if you use hé or gēn you should not have any problem being understood by any speaker of Standard Chinese.

liàn'ài: “to fall in love, to be in love; romantic love, courtship”. This is the socially acceptable way to describe a romantic relationship between two people. Notice that liàn'ài can be used both as noun and as a verb. (Liàn'ài is written with an apostrophe to show where the syllable division is: liàn'ài, not lià nài.)

Tāmen liàn'ài le hǎojinián le.
They've been in love for quite a few years now.
Tāmen xiànzài kǎishǐ liàn'ài le.
They've just started to fall in love.
Womende liàn'ài zhī you sāntiān, jiù bù xíng le.
Our love is only three days old and already it's over.

The noun liàn'ài is often used in the phrase tán liàn'ài, “to be romantically involved” or more literally “to talk of love”.

Tāmen liāngge tán liàn'ài yǐjīng tánle hěn jiǔ le.
The two of them have been in love for quite a while now.
Wǒ méiyǒu hé tā tán liàn'ài.
I'm not in love with her.

In China young people tend to go out in groups. When two people are seen going out alone, then it is assumed that they have serious intentions for the future.

Notes on №7

kě: “really, certainly”. This is an adverb which intensifies state verbs. Kě can be used before a negative.

Tāmen liāngge kě hǎo le!
The two of them are very good friends.
Kě bú shì ma!
Isn't that so! (Really! or No kidding!)
Nà kě bù xíng!
That really won't do!
Nà kě bú shì yíjiàn hǎo shì.
That's really not a good thing.
Nǐ kě yào xiǎoxīn!

You've got to be careful!

Although some Chinese are fond of using the word *kě*, to other Chinese it may sound too full of local color with which they do not identify.

Dialogue in Peking

An American exchange student talks with her language teacher. They are both in their late twenties.

Notes on the Dialogue

...zài èrshiwǔliǔsùì yǐhòu cái jiéhūn: This is quite a change from Imperial times, when females might be married off at age thirteen and males at age six so as to insure the family fortunes or fend off economic difficulties later. Nonetheless, regulations are less strict in the countryside today, where one can marry perhaps at age twenty.

Part 2: Spring and Fall

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Notes on Part 2

yíshì: 'ceremony, function' This can be used to refer to a range of different ceremonies, from the signing of a treaty or agreement to the taking of marital vows.

In old China, marriages were celebrated extravagantly. It was not uncommon to find families going into debt because of the joyous occasion, which marked a new generation added to the family line. This elaborate ritual served to strengthen familial bonds and the newlyweds' feeling of obligation owed to the family.

In PRC cities of today, lack of extra money and coupons to purchase food for guests, celebration space, and free time for preparation limit the celebration often to procedural formality alone—registration with the local police bureau. Wedding dinners may still be enjoyed in the countryside, where there are fewer restrictions on time and food.

Notes on №9

qīnqī: 'relatives* Qīnqī is slightly different from the English word 'relatives' in that it does not include one's immediate family, that is parents or children, but is used to refer to all other relatives. (One's immediate family are called Jiālì rén.)

Nǐmen Jiā qīnqī duō ma?

Do you have a lot of relatives in your family?

Wǒmen Jiā qīnqī kě duō le!

We have lots of relatives in our family.

sònggei: 'give (a gift) to ...' The verb song has several meanings. One is 'to send', as in Wǒ bā nǐde xíngli sòngshàngqu le, 'I sent your luggage upstairs.' Another is to give someone something as a present.

Here you see song with the prepositional verb gěi 'for, to' after it. You have also seen Jiāogei, 'to hand over to ..., to submit to...'. When gěi is used after the main verb as a prepositional verb, it must be followed by the indirect object, that is, the person or thing to whom something is given. Gěi can also be used this way with jì 'to send', and mǎi 'to sell'.

Wǒ bǎ zhèjiǎn yīfu jìgei wǒ mèimei le.

I sent this piece of clothing to my younger sister.

Tā bǎ fángzi mǎigei wǒ le.

He sold his house to me.

In these examples the direct object, clothing or house, is up front in the sentence, making it necessary to use gěi to put the indirect object after the main verb. This usually happens in sentences where the object is specific and the bǎ construction is preferred. When song is followed by an indirect object, however, the gěi is usually optional.

Wǒ yǎo song ta yíge xiǎo lǐwù.

I am going to give him a small present.

Wǒ yǎo sònggei ta yíge xiǎo lǐwù.

I am going to give him a small present.

Part 3: Terrain

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