# How to Not Waste 6 Months Learning Chinese Naively (It's Hard!)

**Our mission is to make humanity more connected and empathetic**

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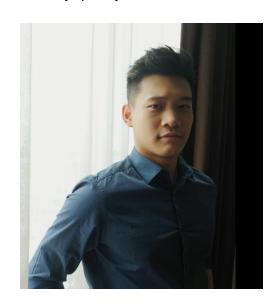
# Why are we publishing this?

A little while ago we were talking to a student who had been learning Chinese online when it came up that he felt that he wasn't making as much progress as he was expecting. He just wasn't "getting it" and like he was losing hope in his dream of eventually working in China.

As a language company this was worrying for us. Our mission is to build a more connected and empathetic world so if everyone felt the same, we will fail very quickly.

So we tried to learn more about his situation and what we found surprised us.

He'd complained about his study technique but we found there was nothing wrong with his method at all. Actually, he was a model student - studious, diligent and never skipped his classes.

The problem was that he didn't know what to expect going into Chinese learning and had insane expectations for himself. At that point, he'd only spent 16 hours learning Chinese over 4 months - nowhere near enough to become fluent yet.

We realised too that we'd made a mistake. A big mistake.

If we're serious about creating a bilingual world then we don't just need to offer teachers and classes, we need to educate people on how to help themselves learn too.

Our vision is for you to be informed before you begin your Chinese learning so you know what to expect, have a greater chance of falling in love with it and coming out the other side as a member of a **more connected and empathetic world.**

We know that this is a loaded document but we promise you this will be the most valuable time you spend on your Chinese learning before you start - and to sweeten the deal we've also included a little freebie at the end for you.

## Why should you listen to us?

Culturestride is an edutech company based in Sydney (Australia) and Hangzhou (China) whose mission is to make humanity more connected and empathetic. We do this by building a platform that helps you design your own language course for you to ultimately thrive anywhere.

We've spent the last 2 years doing hundreds of research interviews, talking to psychology PhD's and experimenting with what works for language learners in the process of designing our Chinese product.

Through that process, we've learnt an immense amount about motivation, psychology and the basic learning cycles that every student goes through which we use to inform how we build our own product.

We see consistent patterns in students that succeed or fail in achieving their language goals that they always wish they knew about earlier on in their learning.

We're not going to pretend like we know all the answers but we believe that we can share the key learning models and resources that will support you if you're starting out.

# What is Chinese learning?

For the majority of people, we learn Chinese to communicate to native speakers fast without systems of communication that are not audio-visual in Chinese. We'll define Chinese language learning as simply the progression to that goal.

If we take a hypothetical example of you asking a Chinese person directions to the Forbidden Palace, your Chinese journey is the progression from:

| Stage | Action | Systems of communication employed | Speed |
|---|---|---|---|
| Beginner | Pointing to a picture of the palace and asking 'where is this' in English | • Picture<br>• English | Slow |
| Intermediate | Pointing to a picture of the palace and asking 'where is this' in Chinese | • Picture<br>• Chinese | Medium |
| Advanced | Asking 'where is the Forbidden Palace' in Chinese | • Chinese | Fast |

# Why am I learning Chinese?

You belong to 1 of 4 categories of students that learn Chinese, each with differences in study behaviour that greatly influences how successful you will likely be.

We will go into the characteristics of each motivation to learn, how you can unlock it during your own Chinese learning and what to be careful of if you belong in certain groups.

If you're not sure why you're learning Chinese, we will help you define this later in the "How can I start learning Chinese?" section.

| 1 | Work | Motivation: Strong |
|---|------|--------------------|

If you're learning for work, you have some connection between Chinese and your career and generally have a strong drive to learn as your livelihood is connected to your ability to communicate in Chinese.

Something to look into if you are learning for work-related reasons is if your company can fully or partially fund your education to reduce your own personal financial burden.

If you don't inherently have any connection between Chinese and your career, see if you can mould some part of your work around Chinese. Perhaps you can work on a project with a Chinese coworker or perhaps you could manage some of your firm's Chinese clients.

If you succeed, the benefit is that your motivation to learn will skyrocket as you've created a **need** outside of the classroom setting that is self reinforcing as the people around you acknowledge you are learning the language.

To unlock this motivation, ask yourself:
- What can you do to integrate Chinese into your work?
- Do you want to work overseas in the future?
- Could your career or business benefit from exposure to Chinese-speaking markets or partners?

| 2 | Love | Motivation: Strong |
|---|------|--------------------|

If you're learning for love, you have a partner where their or their family's native language is Chinese.

Successful students here treat their partner as a teacher and change their main language of communication to Chinese wherever possible.

To unlock this motivation, ask yourself:
- Can I find a Chinese partner or will I die alone?
- Can I speak more to my partner in Chinese?

| 3 | Hobby | Motivation: Low/Medium |
|---|-------|------------------------|

If you're learning as a hobby, you're primarily learning for personal interest.

Hobbyists typically have extra obstacles to jump through because they tend to suffer from other life priorities getting in the way of Chinese learning.

Frequently we see hobbyist learners "take a break" during busy periods and their Chinese learning ends up on hold indefinitely. It's a sad reality because the effort they put in becomes wasted as they forget the language.

If you are a hobbyist learner, it's by no means impossible, you just need to be aware of these 3 things.

Firstly, avoid breaks like the plague. To borrow a concept from physics, Chinese learning has a mechanic similar to inertia, learners in motion stay in motion and learners at rest stay at rest.

We've seen how awful students feel when they've been making great progress for a couple of months only to take a break due to work and return devastated, finding they forgot most of what they know. This is especially the case at the beginner levels.

If you have a busy period, slow things down but never go to zero. Once you go to zero, your brain cannot be trusted to not procrastinate. You risk wasting all you've invested learning everything you know.

Secondly, find people to talk to in Chinese. This helps with making real what you're learning in class and creating real situations where you're using what you know. This could be language exchange, other students or Chinese friends/co-workers.

Finally, you need to find fun in it. If you're doing this for fun, it's, well, important you have fun. Try to discover what element you love about learning Chinese and then make sure that you don't lose it.

Some students love exploring deep topics or making new friends in Chinese. Whatever it is, do it.

| 4 | Heritage | Motivation: Low/Medium |
|---|----------|------------------------|

If you're learning for heritage, you're learning because your family or identity is tied to Chinese culture. Children of Chinese immigrants fall in this category.

You may be learning Chinese to teach to your own children, get a better understanding of your culture or connect with extended family.

Although it sounds counterintuitive, you will experience the same problems that hobbyist learners face so please refer to the above section for our insight on how to navigate this.

This is because your motivation to learn, albeit important in the long term, lacks urgency.

"I have a work deadline" trumps "I want to find myself" without the 3 actions in the hobbyist section above!

# Should I start learning Chinese?

The number #1 cause of failure we see in new learners is not understanding what is involved when they start. They either overestimate or underestimate the effort going in.

| 1 | Overestimation of effort | *It looks out of reach so I'm scared of starting!* |
|---|---|---|

There's a lot of media sensationalising polyglots ("This Polyglot Learnt 6 Languages In 12 Months!") which makes us feel like learning Chinese is a superhuman feat.

To debunk this, let us explain why we believe everyone can learn Chinese.

The concept is simple: Chinese is a simple (but hard) task and anyone can do simple tasks.

Each individual step of learning Chinese is easy. You might start learning numbers then go a little further to introductions before tackling restaurant lingo. If done right, each step is incremental and builds on the last. With the right system, it's simple, easy even at each step.

But learning Chinese as a whole requires hours of effort across a period of time. Despite each step being simple, the entire journey is long, thus inevitably some will give up along the way.

The simplicity of the task means that anyone can start but the difficulty of it means that not everyone will finish.

That's why everyone can learn Chinese but not everyone will succeed.

The simple factor that determines success is just whether you give up when things get busy. If you don't give up then you have a 100% chance of success in speaking Chinese conversationally.

| 2 | Underestimation of effort | *I'll just start for fun and see how we go!* |
|---|---|---|

You might be learning Chinese because of a shower thought or you've been roped in by a friend.

It's possible to succeed learning Chinese like this, however you will certainly lose motivation once the novelty wears off.

To succeed in learning Chinese, you will need to find some other reason to learn along the way.

For example, you might build a really strong bond with your teacher or you set a goal to work in China in the future.

If you're in this category, be on the lookout for ways to extend the novelty into longer lasting motivation as you begin!

**OK, What should I expect in Chinese learning then?**
A litmus test of whether you should learn Chinese now is to ask yourself whether you can block 3 hours every weekend for the next 6 months.

If you're the type of person who can love this part of your week then you're good to start!

If this is asking too much then you might have a tough time. You could look to starting a little bit later when you have more time or lower your expectations on the progress you'll make in the short term.

As a rule of thumb, 100 hours of teacher-led 1-on-1 class time is needed to progress from zero to the conversational level. This figure increases if you spread 100 hours over a longer period of time and shortens if you study more intensely.

For example, 100 hours over 7 years is not enough to be conversational but 100 hours over 3 months will be, as language skills decay over time.

Content-based approaches (app-based learning, self-study from a textbook) tend to be less time efficient versus teacher-led approaches so factor in more time if you want to do this.

# How can I start learning Chinese?

This section is a practical resource for those that have decided to commit to learning Chinese. You can skip this section if you're not learning now.

| 1 | Set the goal |
|---|---|

We can't stress how important this step is. Spending a 15 minutes writing these down will be the most productive 15 minutes of your next 6 months. It'll save you the heartache of not knowing the fruits of your labour and may even save you from giving up halfway.

**Set your why**
Ask yourself: What superpower do I gain by learning Chinese?

Defining your superpower connects you to why you're learning. Making it emotional, vivid and specific will make your success real.

You can refer back to our 4 main motivations (work, love, hobby, heritage) or come up with your own.

For example:
- I want to be able to do coffee catch ups in Chinese with my Malaysian coworker Waiyee
- I want to be able to finally drink and laugh with my uncles on my dad's side

**Set the impact**
Ask yourself: What impact will I have if I succeed in learning Chinese?
Ask yourself: What impact will I have if I fail to learn Chinese?

These 2 questions visualise the impact that your Chinese superpower will grant you. It helps you see exactly how your life will be better or worse based on how well you learn Chinese.

Again make it emotional, vivid and specific.

For example:
- "If I learn Chinese, I will be well-liked by my partners' parents and feel accepted that I'm contributing to our weekly dinner table conversations."

- "If I don't learn Chinese, I will continue to feel awkward and excluded as my partners' parents talk over me at our weekly family dinners."

**Set your endpoint**
Chinese is very (maybe infinitely) deep so we recommend you define clearly when to stop.

You can borrow one of the 4 goals that most students set or set your own:
- I want a basic understanding of the general concepts (HSK 2)
- I want to be able to have everyday conversations in Chinese (HSK 4)
- I want to become fluent in business situations in Chinese (HSK 5)
- I want to be indistinguishable from a native in Chinese (HSK 6)

The HSK levels are an international standard for Chinese proficiency and range from 1 (beginner) to 6 (advanced).

Then set a specific date in which to achieve it so you can time-box your goal.

If you're unclear if your goal is realistic, remember that it takes 100 hours to go from zero to conversational. Add on 40 hours for business fluency and another 60 hours for native fluency and you should have a rough idea of the amount of time you'd need to invest to achieve each goal.

For example, zero to native fluency will take 100 hours (conversational) + 40 hours (business) + 60 hours (native) = 200 hours in total.

If you're spending 2 hours a week in class, you'd expect to be studying 100 weeks which is roughly 2 years (52 weeks in a year).

For example:
- I want to be able to have everyday conversations in Chinese by December 31 2022

| 2 | Experiment to find an approach that works for you |
|---|---|

The current approaches available for learners are grouped as either social and content based.

Social approaches have a live synchronous human component to your learning. Content based approaches are asynchronous methods of learning in your own time generally without human interaction.

**Social**

1. *Teacher Platforms ($ - $$$$)*

Teacher platforms are teacher marketplaces where teachers have profiles of themselves for you to book in time with them to take lessons. Teachers usually set their own prices and can range from very cheap to very expensive.

The platforms aren't responsible for any of the experiences on the platform but instead quality check using a review system. Teachers build and teach their own content.

Most platforms offer only 1-on-1 tuition but there are options on the market that offer the choice between 1-on-1 and group classes.

2. *Language schools ($ - $$$$)*

Language schools typically are smaller collections of teachers but are actively managed by the school. Typically schools build teaching content and offer training to teachers to have some active control on the education.

Your language school options are studying online at an online-only language school, online at a physical language school (outside of your city) or in-person at a physical language school.

Generally physical language schools are more expensive and less flexible than online options.

3. *Language school/teacher platform hybrids ($ - $$$)*
Hybrid platforms take elements of both teacher platforms and language schools into a single experience.

They give you the flexibility to pick your teacher like a teacher platform but also actively manage teacher quality and have also built their own content and software to support them in teaching you. This is a new type of learning platform that Culturestride is an example of.

*4. Language exchange ($)*

Language exchange works by finding someone who wants to learn a language you know and teaching them that in exchange for them teaching you a language they know.

There are groups that regularly meet up in most cities and online options that help you find language partners across the world. Alternatively, if you have a close Chinese-speaking friend, you can find time to talk with them if they're also interested in this.

*5. Homestay/live in China ($$$$)*

Homestays and moving to a Chinese-speaking country is by far the most time efficient way to learn Chinese but it's also the most expensive and out-of-the-way option.

There are platforms to discover homestays and language courses you can take overseas.

*6. University courses ($$ - $$$)*

Some universities offer language courses for anyone to attend. They generally take a large group lecture and smaller tutorial approach to teaching and standardised materials.

Students who do university courses tend to enjoy good amounts of theory (especially reading and writing practice) but struggle to practice speaking and listening because of large group sizes.

**Content**

*1. Online self study courses ($-$$)*

This is guided interactive learning material that you do in your own time by yourself. They are accessible in mobile apps or through online courses found on course platforms.

These are great for people dabbling in Chinese learning and for building up basic reading, writing and listening skills. However, you'd struggle beyond the beginner level and for speaking practice where human communication becomes more important.

*2. Podcasts and videos ($)*

Podcasts and videos teach or tell stories in Chinese aimed at Chinese learners. You can find them in all the normal places you find video and audio content.

Generally students find it hard to rely on this as their primary form of education but it works as a passive resource.

   3.  *Self study a textbook ($)*
You can buy and find textbooks on the internet from publishing sources which you can study in your own time.

This has the same benefits and problems of online self-study courses.

| 3 | Optimise your approach for fun |
|---|--------------------------------|

The final step is an ongoing process of optimisation where you ask yourself: "is what I'm doing sustainable?"

If at any point you feel like the answer is "no", then it's time to adjust your learning approach to introduce novel elements to change things up. You can try any of the methods above to mix and match your way to enjoyment.

The goal is for yourself to continually enjoy the process of learning Chinese so you don't eventually feel so you never reach a point where you are so demotivated or bored that you decide to stop learning.

The best learning system is one that you'll stick with!

# How do I ensure my Chinese learning is efficient?

**The learning cycle concept**

To optimise your Chinese learning, we believe it's important that you know the core mechanics of what you're working with. This will help you identify where things are breaking and adjust your own learning without paying a teacher to tell you the same thing.

We believe the learning model can be understood most simply in the idea of a **learning cycle** comprised of 2 simple steps:

|  | Details | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Step 1 | Find knowledge gap | A friend is so excited because they just got a 猫 |
| Step 2 | Fill knowledge gap with new information | You look up what 猫 means in a dictionary and learn it means cat |

Find Knowledge Gap. Fill Knowledge Gap.

It might sound too simple but try to suspend your disbelief for a second and think about the last time you learnt a new word in any language or any new concept.

Perhaps you were at a Chinese restaurant and you wanted to order dumplings. Looking through the menu you find the English word 'dumplings' but next to it you see the chinese characters 水饺 (shuǐ jiǎo). By context, you infer correctly that 水饺 means 'dumplings'.

You've found a knowledge gap (not knowing dumplings in Chinese) and received information in the form of Chinese characters (水饺) that filled the knowledge gap. If you paid attention, you would've now learnt the link between dumplings and the Chinese characters 水饺 as meaning the same thing.

You can verify this against the last time you found yourself learning something and see whether this checks out against your experience.

You can measure the broad effectiveness of the learning cycle model on your language learning by looking at your weekly active usage of Chinese (WAU).  A students' WAU is

determined by the total time they spend in an 'active chinese state' from activities such as talking to other chinese speakers, taking classes or doing Chinese homework. Higher WAU correlates to more learning cycles which ultimately means greater progress in your Chinese learning.

In general, we see students of WAU above 2 hours a week to be an absolute minimum for sustainable progress over time. Students with lower WAU tend to not see the progress that they expect and end up feeling demotivated over time (and giving up on learning Chinese). 4 - 9 hours a week is a very good range to be in.

The learning cycle model is what we believe to be the perfect balance of easy to understand and usefulness. If you have thoughts, please reach out at content@culturestride.com and we'd gladly geek out with you to improve this language theory model.

**The 4 factors of the learning cycle model**
Weekly active usage (WAU) is a broad indicator of progress but more specifically, your rate of progress is determined by 4 factors:

- Frequency of learning cycles
- Accuracy of learning cycles
- Speed of learning cycles
- Retention between learning cycles

*Frequency of learning cycles*
The frequency of your learning cycles refers to how often you're going through learning cycles and acquiring new information.

The more frequent your cycles are happening, the more you are learning.

To illustrate this, imagine sitting in a kindergarten math class for 1 hour where they're learning the basics of addition and subtraction:

$$1 + 1 = 2$$

You're unlikely to come across any knowledge gaps (hopefully) so the number of learning cycles you've experienced in the field of mathematics is zero.

Conversely, if you are sitting in a first-year university lecture on differential calculus for 1 hour.

$$\frac{df}{dt} = \lim_{h \to 0} \frac{f(t+h) - f(t)}{h}$$

You will likely have very little idea about what is going on and experience many more learning cycles in at least beginning to understand the topic.

The best test is seeing if you're tired at the end of each class.

If you are, that means it wasn't so easy that you didn't have to put in effort but it wasn't too hard that you tuned out and it all whizzed over your head.

During your language classes, how often are you encountering knowledge gaps?

| If this happens | Consider doing this |
|---|---|
| Less than expected amount of knowledge gaps | <ul><li>Join a higher level class because your class content is too easy</li><li>Ask more questions in class  to actively discover more knowledge gaps</li><li>Be more curious about the world around you and learn outside of traditional learning environments (e.g. look up the menu at a restaurant)</li></ul> |
| Expected amount of knowledge gaps | Keep going! |
| More than expected amount of knowledge gaps | <ul><li>Join a lower level class because your class content is too hard</li><li>You might be pushing your knowledge too far too fast, look into solidifying your basics</li></ul> |

*Accuracy of learning cycles*
Accuracy is the quality of the information filling the knowledge gaps.

The more accurate and complete your information is, the less time spent later revisiting old content.

To illustrate this, Imagine if you're learning English and you look up the word 'crane', you're told it refers to the things at construction sites but not told that it is also a water bird. You will have to learn the water-bird definition later because your first learning cycle was incomplete.

During your language classes, how accurate is the stuff that you're learning?

| If this happens | Consider doing this |
|---|---|
| Content is not accurate, complete or relevant to how I want to use the language | <ul><li>Explore other language acquisition sources</li><li>Try to give feedback and help your teacher be more accurate and relevant to you</li></ul> |
| Content is perfect for what I need | Keep going! |

*Speed of learning cycles*
Speed is the time taken to complete each learning cycle from finding a knowledge gap to filling that gap with new information.

The faster the cycles, the better.

Consider if we had no online app dictionaries and you had to drive to the library and search through an English-Chinese dictionary every time you wanted to look up a new word. Your learning cycle time would be lengthened from 1-2 minutes to 1-2 days per new piece of knowledge.

| If this happens | Consider doing this |
| --- | --- |
| Speed of each learning cycles is slower than expected | <ul><li>Get an accessible online dictionary (i.e. mobile app) that you can reference quickly</li><li>Give feedback to your teacher to help them speed you up</li></ul> |
| Speed of each learning cycles is expected | Keep going! |
| Speed of each learning cycles is faster than expected | You're on cloud 9 - buy an island in the Bahamas (and send us a pic!) |

*Retention between learning cycles*
Retention is to how well you remember what you've learnt between learning cycles.

You want to maximise your retention of information week to week so you spend less time reinforcing old concepts and more time on new content in class.

This means you need to revise content, use what you learn in real scenarios and monitor the time between classes where you go without active Chinese learning.

Not having opportunities to practice Chinese outside of class is a huge problem for foreign language learners in lowering retention which has actually led to our student-to-student Practical conversation class concept.

| If this happens | Consider doing this |
| --- | --- |
| Forgetting the content that I'm learning every week between classes | <ul><li>Increase the amount of time outside of normal class where you're actively using Chinese</li></ul> |
| Remembering and building on the content I'm learning every week | Keep going! |

## One final concept that is more important than anything we've talked about

We've given you a model of learning, resources on how to start and how to tweak your learning when you run into obstacles.

But we couldn't talk here about the most important concept that governs every student's success in Chinese learning.

It's the umbrella concept that ties everything we've been talking about here.

We didn't want to share it here because this resource is already getting way too long so if you're interested you can find it in our free Beginner Chinese Starter Pack here. In it you'll find:

- PDF on this important umbrella concept and the counter-intuitive way to find learning motivation from this
- 5 full-length videos from our co-founder teaching you the first 5 units of HSK 1 Chinese
- A free ticket to a Culturestride 1-on-1 Theory Chinese class
- A free ticket to a Culturestride Practical Chinese conversation class