

5 Groups of Chinese Adjectives You're Probably Using Wrong

First Group

duǎn ǎi

1. 短 VS 矮 adj. short

[Explanation 1]

“矮” can be used to say the height of someone or something. The antonym of “矮” is “高”.

Examples:

Tā hěn ǎi.

他 很 矮。

he is short.

Wǒ bǐ dìdì ǎi, dìdì bǐ wǒ gāo.

我 比 弟弟矮, 弟弟比 我 高。

I am shorter than my younger brother. My younger brother is taller than me.

Tā zhù zài pángbiān nà ge ǎi fángzi lì, wǒ zhù zài zhè dòng gāo lóu lì.

他 住 在 旁边 那个矮 房子里, 我 住 在 这 栋 高 楼里。

He lives in that low-rise building on the side and I live in this tall building.

[Explanation 2]

However, “短” is usually used to describe the duration of time or the length of an object. The antonym of “短” is “长”.

Examples:

Zhè tiáo kùzi yǒu diǎn duǎn, yǒu cháng yìdiǎnr de ma?

这 条 裤子 有 点 短, 有 长 一点儿 的 吗?

These pants are a bit short. Do you have longer ones?

Wǒ zhè cì chū chāi de shíjiān hěn duǎn, liǎng tiān hòu wǒ jiù huí lái le.

我 这 次 出 差 的 时 间 很 短, 两 天 后 我 就 回 来 了。

This business trip will be pretty short. I will be back in two days.

Nǐ bié kàn diànshì kàn tài cháng shíjiān le.

你 别 看 电 视 看 太 长 时 间 了。

Don't watch TV for too long.

Second Group

lǎo jiù

老 VS 旧 adj. old

[Explanation 1]

The English for “老” and “旧” are both old. However, they are used differently in Chinese.

“老” is usually used to say the age of a person or a living being.

Examples:

Yéye lǎo le, tóufa dōu bái le.

爷爷 老 了, 头 发 都 白 了。

Grandpa is old and his hair is all grey.

Zhè zhī gǒu tài lǎo le, tā yǐjīng lǎode zǒubudòng le.

这 只 狗 太 老 了, 它 已 经 老 得 走 不 动 了。

This dog is too old and it can't move anymore.

[Explanation 2]

When “老” is used to describe relationship or things that have existed for a long time or from the past, it comes with certain emotions of nostalgia.

Examples:

Wǒ zài kāfēitīng yùdào le jǐ ge lǎo tóngxué.

我 在 咖 啡 厅 遇 到 了 几 个 老 同 学。

I ran into a few old classmates in the coffee shop.

Shànghǎi yǒu hěnduō piàoliang de lǎo fángzi.

上海 有 很 多 漂 亮 的 老 房 子。

There are many beautiful old houses in Shanghai.

Xià ge yuè, wǒde yí ge lǎo péngyou huì lái Běijīng kàn wǒ.

下 个 月, 我 的 一 个 老 朋 友 会 来 北 京 看 我。

Next month, an old friend will come to Beijing to visit me.

[Explanation 3]

“旧” is usually used to say non-living things that have changed in appearance because of wear-out or time.

Examples:

Māma bǎ jiù yīfu sònggěi le yǒu xūyào de rén.

妈 妈 把 旧 衣 服 送 给 了 有 需 要 的 人。

Mom gave the old clothes to people in need.

Wǒde shǒujī tài jiù le, wǒ xiǎng huàn ge xīn de.

我 的 手 机 太 旧 了, 我 想 换 个 新 的。

My cell phone is too old and I want a new one.

Nǐ zěnmē kànqǐlái zhème lèi?

A: 你 怎 么 看 起 来 这 么 累?

Why do you look so tired?

Wǒ zuìjìn zài bāng yí ge lǎo péngyou bān jiā.

B: 我 最 近 在 帮 一 个 老 朋 友 搬 家。

I have been helping an old friend move.

Tā yào líkāi ShēnZhèn le ma?

A: 她 要 离 开 深 圳 了 吗?

Is she leaving Shenzhen?

Duì. Suǒyǐ wǒ bāng tā mǎile hěn duō jiù jiājù.

B: 对。所以 我 帮 她 卖了 很 多 旧 家具。

Yes. So I helped her sell a lot of old furniture.

Third Group

pàng féi

胖 VS 肥 adj. fat

[Explanation]

In Chinese, we usually use “胖” to describe people but use “肥” to describe animals. If you say someone is very “肥”, then it will sound very sneering and derogatory.

Examples:

Zhè ge rén hěn pàng.

这 个 人 很 胖。

This person is big.

Wǒ bàba niánqīng deshíhou hěn shòu, dànshì xiànzài tèbié pàng.

我 爸爸 年轻 的时候 很 瘦, 但是 现在 特别 胖。

My dad was very thin when he was young, but he is very big now.

Zhè zhī māo zěnmē zhème féi?

这 只 猫 怎么 这么 肥?

Why is this cat so fat?

Zhè kuài ròu tài féi le, wǒ bù xiǎng chī.

这 块 肉 太 肥 了, 我 不 想 吃。

This piece of meat is too fatty. I don't want to eat it.

Fourth Group

rè tàng

热 VS 烫 adj. hot

[Explanation]

“热” is usually used to say a high temperature that's still bearable by humans. “烫” is hotter than “热”. “烫” is usually used to say a very high temperature that's unbearable and could hurt or injure someone.

Examples:

Tiānqì hěn rè.

天气 很 热。

The water is too hot.

Shuǐ hěn tàng, nǐ děng yíhuìr zài hē ba, bùrán nǐde shétou kěnéng huì shòu shāng.

水 很 烫, 你 等 一会儿 再 喝 吧, 不然 你的 舌头 可能 会 受 伤。

The water is very hot. Drink it later otherwise you might hurt your tongue.

Tiānqì tài lěng le, wǒ xiǎng hē yì bēi rè shuǐ.

天气 太 冷 了, 我 想 喝 一杯 热 水。

The weather is too cold. I just want to drink some hot water.

Fifth Group

gāoxìng kuàilè

高兴 VS 快乐 adj. happy

[Explanation 1]

“快乐” and “高兴” both mean happy, but in Chinese, they are slightly different.

“快乐” is usually used in blessings to say happy or content with one's life.

Examples:

Shēngrì kuàilè!

生日 快乐!

Happy Birthday!

Chūnjié kuàilè!

春节 快乐!

Happy Spring Festival!

Shèngdàn kuàilè!

圣诞 快乐!

Merry Christmas!

Wǒ xīwàng nǐ měi tiān dōu guòde hěn kuàilè.

我希望你每天都过得很快乐。

I hope you are happy every day.

[Explanation 2]

“高兴” is usually used to say happy, excited, in a good mood about something.

Examples:

Wǒ hěn gāoxìng rènshi nǐ.

我很高兴认识你。

It's very nice to meet you.

Tāmen zuótiān wánde hěn gāoxìng.

他们昨天玩得很高兴。

They had a great time yesterday.

Tīngshuō nǐ yào lái, wǒmen quánjiā dōu hěn gāoxìng.

听说你要来，我们全家都很高兴。

My whole family is very happy hearing that you are visiting.

Lili, zhù nǐ shēngrì kuàilè!

A: 丽丽，祝你生日快乐！

Lili. Happy birthday!

Xièxie! Kuài qǐng jìn.

B: 谢谢！快请进。

Thank you. Please come in.

Zhè shì wǒ sònggěi nǐde lǐwù, xīwàng nǐ xǐhuan.

A: 这是我送给你的礼物，希望你喜欢。

This is my gift for you. Hope you will like it.

Nǐ tài kèqì le! Nǐ néng lái wǒ yǐjīng hěn gāoxìng le.

B: 你太客气了！你能来我已经很高兴了。

You are so kind. I am already happy that you are here.

Exercise

Choose the right word to fill in the blanks:

Wǒ xīwàng wǒde háizi néng kuàilè de zhǎngdà. (gāoxìng kuàilè)

1. 我希望我的孩子能快乐地长大。(高兴, 快乐)

I hope my child can grow up happily.

Bàba shuō yào dài wǒ qù yóulèyuán, wǒ hěn gāoxìng. (gāoxìng kuàilè)

2. 爸爸说带我去游乐园，我很高兴。(高兴, 快乐)

Dad says he will take me to the amusement park. I am very happy.

Bàba de shūfáng lǐ yǒu hěn duō jiù shū. (lǎo jiù)

3. 爸爸的书房里有很多旧书。(老, 旧)

Dad's study room has a lot of old books.

Jīntiān xiàwǔ, wǒ yào qù jiàn yí ge lǎo péngyou. (lǎo jiù)

4. 今天下午，我要去见一个老朋友。(老, 旧)

I am going to see an old friend this afternoon.

Wǒ nǎinai bǎ jiālǐ de zhū yǎngde tèbié féi. (pàng féi)

5. 我 奶奶 把 家里 的 猪 养得 特别 肥。 (胖, 肥)

My grandma raises very fat pigs.

Tā suīrán hěn pàng, dànshì hěn línghuó. (pàng féi)

6. 他 虽然 很 胖, 但是 很 灵活。 (胖, 肥)

He is pretty agile even though he is very big.

Wàimiàn tài rè le. (rè tàng)

7. 外面 太 热 了。 (热, 烫)

It's too hot outside.

Guō hěn tàng, bié yòng shǒu mō, xiǎoxīn shòu shāng. (rè tàng)

8. 锅 很 烫, 别 用 手 摸, 小心 受 伤。 (热, 烫)

This pot is very hot. Don't touch it with your hands. Don't get hurt.

Tāde gèzi yǒudiǎnr ǎi. (ǎi duǎn)

9. 他的 个子 有点儿 矮。 (矮, 短)

He is pretty short.

Zhè tiáo qúnzi tài duǎn le. (ǎi duǎn)

10. 这 条 裙子 太 短 了。 (矮, 短)

This dress is too short.