

# Complete Cantonese

Hugh Baker and Ho Pui-Kei



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# 1

## 會面

*Wuih-mihn*

Encounters

In this unit you will learn

- *how to greet and address people*
- *how to ask questions*
- *how to use descriptive words*

### Dialogue 1

Mr Wong and his boss Miss Cheung meet in the lift on the way up to the office.

早晨，王先生。  
早晨，張小姐。你好嗎？  
我好好。你呢？  
(我)好好。  
你太太呢？  
佢都好，有心。

<b>Cheung</b>	Jóu-sàhn, Wòhng Sìn-sàng.	<i>Good morning, Mr Wong.</i>
<b>Wong</b>	Jóu-sàhn, Jèung Siu-jé. Néih hóu ma?	<i>Good morning, Miss Cheung. How are you?</i>

CD 1, TR 3

<b>Cheung Wong</b>	<b>Ngóh hóu hóu. Néih nē?</b>	<i>I'm very well. And you?</i>
<b>Wong</b>	<b>(Ngóh) hóu hóu.</b>	<i>I'm fine.</i>
<b>Cheung Wong</b>	<b>Néih taai-táai nē?</b>	<i>And your wife?</i>
<b>Wong</b>	<b>Kéuih dōu hóu, yáuh-sàm.</b>	<i>She's well too, thank you.</i>

## CD 1, TR 4

### QUICK VOCAB

早晨	<b>jóu-sàhn</b>	<i>good morning</i>
王	<b>Wòhng</b>	<i>a surname: Wong</i>
先生	<b>sìn-sàang</b>	<i>Mr, Sir, gentleman, husband</i>
張	<b>Jèung</b>	<i>a surname: Cheung</i>
小姐	<b>síu-jé</b>	<i>Miss, young lady</i>
你	<b>néih</b>	<i>you</i>
好嗎?	<b>hóu ma?</b>	<i>very; well, fine, OK, nice, good</i> <i>a word (a particle) that makes a statement into a question</i>
我呢?	<b>ngóh nē?</b>	<i>I, me</i> <i>a particle that repeats the same question about a different matter</i>
太太	<b>taai-táai</b>	<i>Mrs, wife, married woman</i>
佢	<b>kéuih</b>	<i>she, her, he, him, it</i>
都	<b>dōu</b>	<i>also</i>
有心	<b>yáuh-sàm</b>	<i>kind of you to ask</i>

Your first test

How would you address the person that Miss Cheung enquires about?

(The answer is, of course, **Wòhng Taai-táai**.)

## Insight

Is it **Wong** or **Wòhng**?

We don't mean to confuse you. The Yale romanization spells it **Wòhng**, and that tells you exactly how to pronounce it; but in everyday use almost everyone spells the name **Wong**, so we have, as it were, translated **Wòhng** into **Wong** for you. We have done the same with other names (Cheung for **Jèung**, Kwok Mei for **Gwok Méih**, Hong Kong for **Hèung Góng**, etc).

## Notes

### 1.1 IDENTIFYING PEOPLE AND THINGS

<b>ngóh</b>	<i>I, me</i>
<b>néih</b>	<i>you (singular)</i>
<b>kéuih</b>	<i>he, she, him, her, it</i>

Each of these *personal pronouns* can be made plural by the addition of **-deih**:

<b>ngóh-deih</b>	<i>we, us</i>
<b>néih-deih</b>	<i>you (plural)</i>
<b>kéuih-deih</b>	<i>they, them</i>

### 1.2 ADDRESSING PEOPLE

Unlike English, Chinese surnames are always given before titles:

<b>Wòhng Sìn-sàang</b>	<i>Mr Wong</i>
<b>Wòhng Taai-táai</b>	<i>Mrs Wong</i>
<b>Wòhng Síu-jé</b>	<i>Miss Wong</i>

## Insight

Why does the surname come first?

As well as Mr, Mrs, and Miss, other titles, such as president, doctor, professor, ambassador, sister, are also given after the surname. Personal names follow the surname too, so someone called Mr John Smith becomes *Smith John Mr* in the Cantonese order. It all fits in with the great stress which the Chinese people have traditionally placed on the family. The surname shows your family line and so it is the surname which comes first in the Cantonese order, as with **Wòhng Gwok Méih Sìn-sàang**, from which we can tell that Mr. Wong's personal name is Kwok Mei.

### 1.3 ADJECTIVES OR VERBS? BOTH!

Hóu means *good, nice, well, fine, OK* and so on. Just as in English, such words (they are *adjectives*) go in front of nouns, so a *good husband* is a **hóu sìn-sàang**. But in Cantonese all adjectives can also act as verbs to describe things (*descriptive verbs*) and so **hóu** means not only *good* but also *to be good*:

**Kéuih-deih hóu.**                      *They are well.*  
**Wòhng Sìn-sàang hóu.**        *Mr Wong is fine.*

Remember, it is not only the adjective **hóu** which is also a descriptive verb—all adjectives behave the same. So the word for *ugly* also means *to be ugly*, *difficult* can also mean *to be difficult* and so on.

### 1.4 SIMPLE QUESTIONS

In Mandarin (now usually known as *Putonghua*, the official common language of China) you can ask a question simply by putting the particle **ma?** on the end of a statement. Sometimes you will hear Cantonese speakers do the same, but it is not common.

However, in one expression you will hear this ‘spoken question mark’ very often, and that is in the polite question:

**Néih hóu ma?**     *How are you?*

The practice seems to be extending to asking after other people’s health as well:

**Jèung Taai-tái hóu ma?**     *Is Mrs Cheung OK?*

You will meet the most common way of asking questions later in this unit.

## Insight

### Relationships

You met **néih taai-tái** in the dialogue, meaning *your wife*. Her husband is **kéuih sìn-sàng**, and a woman refers to her own husband as **ngóh sìn-sàng**.

## 1.5 TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE

When you learned **hóu** you got double value, because it not only means *good, well* etc. but *very* as well. So **hóu hóu** means *very good*.

## 1.6 FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

A special kind of shortcut question is formed with the particle **nē?** **Nē?** asks a follow-up question without the tedium of repeating in full what went before:

**Jèung Taai-tái hóu ma?**

*Is Mrs Cheung OK?*

**Kéuih hóu hóu. Wòhng Síu-jé nē?**

*She’s very well. And how’s  
Miss Wong?*

## 1.7 DŌU ALSO

Dōu means *also, too*. It always comes just before a verb:

Ngóh hóu.            *I'm well.*  
Kéuih dōu hóu.    *She's well too.*

## 1.8 AND NOW FOR THE GOOD NEWS

It may have escaped your notice: verbs only have one form! The same word **hóu** was translated as *am well, is well* and *are well* in our earlier examples and it was no accident. **Hóu** only ever appears like that even though the English verb *to be well* takes many guises (*am well, is well, are well, will be well, have been well, was well, were well, etc.*). Regardless of the tense, the mood, the subject or anything else, the verb will always be simply **hóu**. And, better still, this applies to all verbs, there are no irregularities to make life difficult!

## Dialogue 2

When she gets to the office, Miss Cheung is surprised to find a visitor waiting for her.

CD 1, TR 5

噢，對唔住，貴姓呀？  
我姓何，你係唔係李小姐呀？  
唔係，我姓張。何先生，你係唔係美國人呀？  
唔係，我係英國人，我賣美國車：美國車好靚，你要唔要呀？  
唔要，唔要。美國車好貴：我要日本車。再見，何先生。  
你唔要，李小姐要唔要呀？  
李小姐都唔要。再見，再見。

**Cheung**      **Òu, deui-m̀h-jyuh,**      *Oh, excuse me, may I*  
                         **gwai-sing a?**                            *know your name, please?*

Ho	Ngóh sing Hòh. Néih haih m̀h haih Léih Síu-jé a?	<i>My name is Ho. Are you Miss Li?</i>
Cheung	M̀h haih, ngóh sing Jèung. Hòh Sìn-sàng, néih haih m̀h haih Méih-gwok-yàhn a?	<i>No, I am surnamed Cheung. Are you an American, Mr Ho?</i>
Ho	M̀h haih, ngóh haih Yìng-gwok-yàhn. Ngóh maaih Méih-gwok chē: Méih-gwok chē hóu leng. Néih yiu m̀h yiu a?	<i>No, I'm British. I sell American cars: they're very nice. Would you like one?</i>
Cheung	M̀h yiu, m̀h yiu. Méih-gwok chē hóu gwai: ngóh yiu Yaht-bún chē. Joi-gin, Hòh Sìn-sàng.	<i>No, no. American cars are very expensive: I want a Japanese one. Goodbye, Mr Ho.</i>
Ho	Néih m̀h yiu, Léih Síu-jé yiu m̀h yiu a?	<i>If you don't want one, does Miss Li want one?</i>
Cheung	Léih Síu-jé dōu m̀h yiu. Joi-gin, joi-gin.	<i>She doesn't want one either. Goodbye, goodbye.</i>

### ◀ CD 1, TR 6

噢	òu	<i>oh! (surprise)</i>
對唔住	deui-m̀h-jyuh	<i>I'm sorry; excuse me; pardon me</i>
貴姓呀?	gwai-sing a?	<i>what is your name? (lit: distinguished surname?)</i>
姓	sing	<i>surname; to be surnamed</i>
何	Hòh	<i>a surname: Ho</i>
係	haih	<i>to be</i>
李	Léih	<i>a surname: Li</i>
唔	m̀h	<i>not</i>
美國人	Méih-gwok-yàhn	<i>American person</i>
美國	Méih-gwok	<i>America, USA</i>
人	yàhn	<i>person</i>

呀?	<b>a?</b>	particle used at the end of a question
英國人	<b>Ying-gwok-yàhn</b>	<i>British person</i>
英國	<b>Ying-gwok</b>	<i>Britain, UK, England</i>
賣	<b>maaih</b>	<i>to sell</i>
車	<b>chē</b>	<i>car, cars</i>
靚	<b>leng</b>	<i>pretty, good-looking, handsome, of good quality</i>
要	<b>yi</b>	<i>to want</i>
貴	<b>gwai</b>	<i>expensive; distinguished</i>
日本人	<b>Yaht-bún-yàhn</b>	<i>Japanese person</i>
日本	<b>Yaht-bún</b>	<i>Japan</i>
再見	<b>joi-gin</b>	<i>goodbye</i>

Your second test

Having read Dialogue 2, can you say which of these statements is/are true and which false?

- a** *Jèung Síu-jé haih Méih-gwok-yàhn.*
- b** *Hòh Sìn-sàang ìh maaih Méih-gwok chē.*
- c** *Wòhng Sìn-sàang maaih chē.*
- d** *Jèung Síu-jé haih taai-táai.*

(Answers: All false.)

## Notes

### 1.9 PEOPLE AND COUNTRIES

**Yàhn** means *person* but it also means *people*. In fact, all nouns in Cantonese are the same whether single or plural and you can only tell which is meant from the sense of the conversation. There is usually no problem: by looking at the personal pronouns you can easily tell which is which in the following examples:

**Ngóh haih Ying-gwok-yàhn.**  
**Kéuih-deih haih Yaht-bún-yàhn.**

As you will have gathered, nationalities are shown simply by adding *-yàhn* to the names of the countries. Here are a few more:

<b>Ou-jàu</b>	<i>Australia</i>	<b>Dāk-gwok</b>	<i>Germany</i>
<b>Faat-gwok</b>	<i>France</i>	<b>Gà-nàh-daaih</b>	<i>Canada</i>
<b>Nàahm-fèi</b>	<i>South Africa</i>	<b>Sàn-sài-làahn</b>	<i>New Zealand</i>

## Insight

### More on surnames

You have already met a number of surnames (**Wòhng, Jèung, Hòh, Léih**) and you will of course meet others. It is interesting that although there are several thousand different surnames in existence, the vast majority of the Chinese share just a few dozen of them. You will certainly meet many people with the four surnames you've just learned, but the most common surname of all among Cantonese people is **Chan (Chàhn)**.

## 1.10 NEGATIVES

The word for *not* is **m̀h**. It always comes in front of the word it refers to:

<b>Wòhng Sìn-sàang m̀h leng</b>	<i>Mr Wong isn't handsome.</i>
<b>Ngóh m̀h yiu chē</b>	<i>I don't want a car.</i>

## 1.11 ANOTHER WAY TO ASK QUESTIONS

The most common way to ask a question in Cantonese is by using the positive and negative of a verb together and adding the little word **a?** at the end of the sentence:

<b>Kéuih leng m̀h leng a?</b>	<i>Is she pretty?</i>
-------------------------------	-----------------------

What you are really doing is offering your listener a choice of answers (*She pretty? Not pretty? Eh?*) and the answer is going to be either:

**Kéuih leng.**                    *She is pretty.*  
or **Kéuih m̀h leng.**        *She's not pretty.*

In the same way you can ask:

**Néih maaih m̀h maaih**        *Are you selling American cars?*  
**Méih-gwok chē a?**

Cantonese people like to have a comfortable noise to round off their sentences with and they have a whole string of little words (usually called *particles*) which they use. **A?** has no meaning on its own, it is just used to punch home the question which has been asked in the sentence. **Ma?** and **nē?** which we have already met are other examples of particles.

## 1.12 THE UNSPOKEN IF

There are various words for *if* in Cantonese, but quite often none of them is used, the meaning seeming to flow naturally from the context. In the dialogue the sentence **Néih m̀h yiu, Léih Síu-jé yiu m̀h yiu a?** (literally, *You not want, Miss Li want not want, eh?*) would be understood to mean *If you don't want one, does Miss Li?*

## TEST YOURSELF

### EXERCISE 1

Here's a fine mess! The following words have got all jumbled up. Sort them out and make meaningful sentences of them. For example, Taai-táai Wòhng leng hóu does not make sense, but rearranged into Wòhng Taai-táai hóu leng it is a correct sentence meaning *Mrs Wong is very beautiful*.

- a Hóu kéuih-deih hóu
- b Sìn-sàang Wòhng hóu
- c Dōu Jèung hóu Sín-jé

(Answers to all exercises and tests from now on are at the back of the book in the **Key to the Exercises** section.)

### EXERCISE 2

What would you reply?

- a Jóu-sàhn.
- b Néih hóu ma?
- c Joi-gin.

### EXERCISE 3

Fill in the blanks with words which will make sense. You will have to think a bit to work out what the sentence must mean!

- a Wòhng Sìn-sàang \_\_\_\_\_ yiu Méih-gwok chē.
- b Chàhn Sín-jé leng \_\_\_\_\_ leng a?

- c** *Kéuih-deih haih m̀h \_\_\_\_\_ Yaht-bún-yàhn a?*
- d** *Ngóh m̀h maaih Yaht-bún chē, ngóh maaih \_\_\_\_\_.*

**EXERCISE 4**

**Translate these simple sentences into Cantonese. If you can do so, you can really congratulate yourself on having mastered this unit.**

- a** *Japanese cars aren't expensive.*
- b** *He isn't nice.*
- c** *You are very pretty.*
- d** *Do they want cars?*
- e** *He is good-looking too.*
- f** *They are Americans.*
- g** *Mr Wong sells cars.*
- h** *British people don't sell American cars.*