

The 5 Patterns That Stop Children Speaking Chinese *(And what to do instead)*

An honest guide for parents
raising bilingual children

Yina | Raising Amphibians

**Most parents don't
fail because they
don't care.**

They fail because their system
isn't designed to work.

I was born in China and moved to the UK when I was 11.

My husband was born in Scotland but lived in China for 10 years.

Today, we are raising our children in Scotland – in both languages.

So far, our children are confident in Chinese and English.

Our twin girls (age 4) will happily cosy up for a Disney movie... in Chinese.

Our youngest, Jake, recognised the Chinese character for “horse” before he turned two.

But we didn't get here by accident.

Before we started, we spoke to many

Chinese parents who shared the same frustration:

“My child doesn’t want to speak Chinese and only answers me in English.”

We saw what was happening.

And we made a decision:

We would not leave our children’s language development to chance.

When our twins were approaching their first birthday, I stepped away from work to focus on raising them.

I know not every family is in that position.

And that matters.

Because the challenge you're facing is real

and shared by most families trying to raise bilingual children.

If you're experiencing resistance, pushback, or doubt:

You are not alone.

Most parents think the problem is:

“My child isn’t trying hard enough.”

“Maybe I didn’t start early enough.”

“Maybe I’m not teaching it properly.”

But the real issue is much simpler —
and much harder to see.

**Children don’t reject Chinese.
They respond to the environment.**

Chinese feels optional

→ they won’t use it

It feels difficult

→ they avoid it

It feels disconnected

→ they ignore it

Not because they don’t care.

They are adapting to what works.

Most families don't fail because they don't care.

They care deeply.

They try.

They want to share their language.

But without a system, effort turns into inconsistency.

It's not about effort.

It's about building a system that works.

And avoiding patterns that work against your goals.

The next pages walk through **five of the most common patterns that stop children speaking Chinese**

—even when you're trying your best.

Pattern 1: Chinese Isn't the Default

In most homes, English is or becomes the default.

It's faster.

It's easier.

It's what works.

Children don't choose the language that is important.

They choose the language that is easiest and the one that works best.

Living in an English-speaking environment, they are going to learn English.

So the question is not whether Chinese is present. It's whether it is useful.

What We Did Differently

In our home, Chinese is the family language. It is the default.

That means:

1. Everyday interactions are in Chinese
2. Routines are in Chinese
3. Connections are in Chinese

Chinese isn't just something we are trying to add.

It is what is used in our family to operate.

Why This Matters

At no point did we say:

“You have to speak Chinese.” or
“Can you say that in Chinese?”

Instead, we simply used the language:

你把杯子给爸爸可以吗？

(Can you give dad this cup?)

孩子们，过来！

(Kids, come here!)

谁要玩巧克力游戏？

(Who wants to play a chocolate game?)

Chinese is what we use to
communicate.

1. It is organic.
2. It is useful.
3. It is practiced.

It becomes part of our family culture
and values.

Importantly, the language isn't pushed onto them.

It is modelled by us – and strengthened through:

- Positive interactions
- Useful suggestions
- Repetition of content and phrases
- Daily predictable routines

The Shift

Instead of asking:

“How do I get my child to speak Chinese?”

Ask:

“Is Chinese the language our life runs through?”

Things to Try

Small step

Pick one interaction and do it in Chinese
(snacks, drinks, play, simple choices)

Big step

Try a full day in only Chinese – no English

Biggest step

Only respond in Chinese
(no matter what language they use)

Tips

If you're starting interactions in Chinese,
make them fun.

Treats and incentives shouldn't be the
main driver — **but they can help.**

Scott's first attempt getting our 18-
month-old twins to sit, stand, turn, and
come over involved small pieces of his
protein bar (video to come)

Try to avoid situations where children
have to generate language too early.

Think about how much they understand
before they can speak.

If interactions require too much output, it
can knock their confidence and push
them back to English.

Pattern 2 We Turn Language Into a Lesson

Even when parents successfully bring Chinese into the home... something often happens.

Chinese becomes a lesson.

“Say this.”

“Repeat after me.”

“Try again.”

The intention is good.

But the experience for the child is very different.

Instead of using Chinese to connect or do something... they are being asked to perform.

- To get it right.
- To remember.
- To respond correctly.

This changes how the child sees the language.

It becomes:

1. something they can get wrong
2. something they are tested on
3. something they want to avoid

Instead of a helpful tool they can use to navigate in the world.

What We Did Differently

We focused on:

1. communicating, not correcting
2. shared activity, not performance
3. understanding first, speaking later

Instead of asking them to produce language, we showed them what it looked like.

And got them to follow.

Why This Matters

Children don't need language to be explained.

They need it to be used.

Language is not something they study.
It's something they experience.

When Chinese feels like a lesson,
children disengage.

When it feels like part of life,
they lean in.

The Shift

Instead of turning language into a lesson...

focus on the purpose of the interaction.

Ask yourself:

**“What are we trying to do in
this moment?”**

Things to Try

Focus on shared activity: what can we do together? Think what fun things can I do with my kids, and then do it in Chinese.

Model the language you want them to use
— the pressure is on you not them

Adjust the level to match where they are.
Make it manageable.

Let understanding come before speaking.
Don't expect a lot and look for little wins.

Tips - How to

Dad: 我渴了。我去弄一杯牛奶，你要一杯吗？
*(I'm thirsty. I'm going to get a glass of milk
– do you want one?)*

At this level, the child only needs to respond and they get a drink!

Child: 要 (Yes)

Then you model further:

Dad: 谢谢爸爸 *(Thanks Dad)*

Not: “Say thank you”

But showing what it looks like.

And naturally, the child follows:

Child: 谢谢爸爸

Pattern 3: Chinese Becomes a Barrier, Not a Bond

In an ideal world, you speak to your child in Chinese.

Daily routines happen in Chinese.
Everyone is learning, enjoying it,
and becoming fluent together.

But in reality:

The child pushes back.

The parent feels it. And reacts with

“They’re rejecting the language.”

“They’re rejecting the culture.”

“They’re rejecting me.”

So the parent leans in harder.

“Say it in Chinese.”

“Why don’t you use Chinese?”

But the child is not rejecting you. They are telling you something simpler:

“This feels hard.”

And they are trying to communicate.

Which is a positive behaviour.

What We Did

Differently

We stopped treating resistance as something to correct.

And started treating it as something to understand.

Instead of pushing harder,
we focused on making Chinese feel easier to use.

We supported the moment —
rather than challenging the language choice.

Why This Matters

If English is:

- faster
- more familiar
- easier to express thoughts

And Chinese feels:

- slower
- harder to find words
- more effort to use

Then when children are excited, upset, or tired...

they will choose the language that feels easier.

Not because they are rejecting Chinese.

But because they are choosing what works.

If in that moment they are challenged —
because they didn't use the

“right” language

a close interaction can quickly turn into
correction.

The Shift

Instead of focusing on getting them to speak Chinese,

focus on creating good moments in the language.

We want to think about the 关系 (relationship) they have with Chinese.

And we want that to be a good positive relationship

Try This

Teach them how to express emotions in the language

Create meaningful moments in Chinese

Let them experience “I can do this” moments

Build confidence through success, not correction

Tips

If you ever feel like you have to choose between:

- a good relationship with your child
- or perfect Chinese

Choose the relationship.

That does **not** mean removing all challenge. It means finding the right level.

Too easy – and they don't grow.

Too hard – and they disengage.

If your child wants to interact with you often, and you interact in Chinese...

they will be drawn towards it.

But if Chinese becomes associated with frustration or negativity...

they may start to avoid not just the language – but the interaction itself.

Give them the tools to express themselves:

妈妈我感觉很**烦躁** (Mum, I feel frustrated)

爸爸我**害怕** (Dad, I am scared)

We taught our girls the word **害怕 (scared)** very early on.

It's a simple, but powerful word.

It allows them to quickly tell us they need comfort, reassurance, and safety.

Its a tool they can use to get help from us and express themselves.

Pattern 4: English Wins by Default

Bilingual parenting sounds balanced.

It isn't.

In an English-speaking country,
English is the default. And default wins.

It is human nature to do what is easiest.

English is:

- everywhere
- instant
- low effort
- socially rewarded

Chinese isn't.

So when there's a choice, your child won't choose Chinese.

They don't need to.

And children are relentless. They will:

- switch to English
- stay in English
- ignore Chinese
- wait you out

And they will outlast your energy.

So you push Chinese. They push English. And now we are fighting again about what language to speak.

That's a losing setup.

So lets fix it.

What We Did

Differently

We didn't try to compete with English.
We changed the environment.

If English is always available, that's what children will use.

So instead of pushing harder, we made Chinese the easier path and what was available.

The easiest way to avoid a debate about if we are having ice cream or chicken is for there to be no ice cream...

And lots of yummy chicken

Why This Matters

Language follows the easiest path.

Not intention.

Not values.

Ease.

If English is always easier,
your child will live in English.

If Chinese becomes the easier path
your child will use Chinese.

The Shift

You don't win with effort.

You win by changing the environment.

Try This

Remove the “easy English” option

Don't offer: “Chinese or English?”

Offer Chinese choices instead.

You want a film? We've got:

- Hercules (in Chinese)
- Mulan (in Chinese)
- 101 Dalmatians (in Chinese)
- Snow White (in Chinese)

Design, don't react

Decide in advance:

1. what films are available
2. what books are available
3. what routines run in

Don't decide in the moment.

More is better here

The stronger the Chinese environment,
the less you need to push.

The more fun the Chinese options the
more the pull factor

and for those worried about your child's
local language (in our case English)

English doesn't need your help.

Tips

What it looks like in action:

Ayla: 爸爸, can I have ice cream?

At this point Ayla's defaulting to English.

I am giving the option to continue the conversation about ice cream but I am going to use Chinese.

Key point here is I do not want to get into a discussion about why we wont use English. Or why we have to talk in Chinese.

I am just going to make it easy to her objective with Chinese

爸爸：你要吃冰淇淋是吗？

(Do you want ice cream?)

I am addressing her needs, but giving her the Chinese option and giving her the language she needs to resolve the problem.

Ayla: Yes

爸爸：你吃过你的饭吗？

(Have you eaten your dinner?)

Partly emphasising dinner before treats rule.
Partly an excuse for more language. Partly helping her get to her goal.

Ayla: Yes

爸爸：我们有冰淇淋吗？

(Do we have ice cream?)

Ayla: 不知道 (I don't know)

Presented Ayla with a new problem.

We need to find out if there is ice cream (dad knows there is).

But were would be the fun in that?

Much better to set up the oppotunity to talk with mum about the situation.

爸爸：你跟你妈说，你吃过饭了。能不能吃点冰淇淋。但是我们要先收桌子，好吗？ (Tell your mum you've eaten your dinner. Ask if you can have ice cream. But

we clear the table first, okay?)

Ayla: 好吧 (*okay*). 妈妈! 我们可以吃冰淇淋吗? (MUM, can we have ice cream?)

Nothing forced. No switching.

Chinese is the easiest path available.

**If English is always on
the table, no one is
having Chinese**

Pattern 5: Misalignment Weakens the System

Pressure puts strain on the system. And pressure comes from many places:

- tiredness
- pushback from the child
- grandparents
- visitors
- one parent not speaking Chinese
- one parent not fully on board

The problem is not the pressure, but pressure on a weak part of the system.

The weaker the alignment of the system the higher its chances of failure.

**When a system is aligned,
execution is hard enough.**

What We Did Differently

We didn't rely on one person to carry the language.

We treated Chinese as a shared system — not an individual effort.

We focused on alignment:

- between parents
- across situations
- beyond just one environment

So the system could hold — even under pressure.

Together Scott and I reinforce each other so we can buffer the pressure.

Why This Matters

Children don't follow instructions.

They follow patterns.

They watch:

- who uses the language
- when it's used
- whether it survives pressure
- whether it matters beyond one person

And they reach a simple conclusion:

Chinese is optional.

Or Chinese is part of life.

The Shift

Don't just ask:

“Are we raising a bilingual child?”

Ask:

“Is our system currently supporting or going against the language?”

Try This

1. Align as parents.

Agree on:

- what you're trying to do
- why it matters
- what language norms exist at home
- how you handle pushback

No alignment = weak system.

2. Plan for people who don't speak Chinese

Decide in advance:

- Can we teach granny a few words
- Can we do an everyone movie night in Chinese
- Letting others know what is going on

If we want to keep operating in Chinese but some people can't what is our strategy for those situations?

3. Expand the system

A small system is fragile.

Make it bigger:

- look at expanding the environment outside the home
- look for role models
- support the non-Chinese-speakers
- use books, films, music, etc.

The more inputs, the stronger it becomes.

4. Plan for problems

If Chinese only works when:

- everyone understands
- no one is visiting
- no one is tired

Then it doesn't really work. A real system works under pressure. So stress test it and see where the kinks are.

Tips

Ask yourself:

If the strongest Chinese-speaking parent disappeared for a week – would the system hold?

If not, it depends too much on one person.

When family visit, does Chinese stay – or disappear?

If it disappears, the child learns Chinese is potentially a barrier to a good relationship with the rest of the family.

Your child will notice. Is Chinese always welcome or taboo?

This part is most challenging. It requires you to look at issues you may have raising a bilingual family. It is important to address these head-on.

Closing

Bilingual parenting is not about trying harder.

It's about building a system that works.

Not: **“Say it in Chinese.”**

But: **“This is how we live.”**

If this resonated with you,
we'll be sharing more practical ways to
build your own system.

Feel free to reach out:

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