

Peculiarities of Expressing Rhetorical Questions in Chinese Through Adverbs

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Received: 13 June 2025; **Accepted:** 09 July 2025; **Published:** 11 August 2025

Abstract: This article analyzes the ways in which adverbs in the Chinese language are expressed in sentences and explains how this can help distinguish between words that are related to rhetoric and those that are not.

Keywords: 不 bù – “no, not”, 就 jiù – “immediately”, “only”, “already”, “as soon as”, 难道 nándào – “could it be that...?”, 何 hé – “who?”, 岂 qǐ – “how could...?”, “could it be that...?”, 还 hái – “still”, “yet”, 又 yòu – “again”.

Introduction: The main adverbs belonging to the adverb category in Chinese are 不 bù – “no, not”, 就 jiù – “immediately”, “only”, “already”, “as soon as”, 难道 nándào – “could it be that...?”, 何 hé – “who?”, 岂 qǐ – “how could...?”, “could it be that...?”, 还 hái – “still”, “yet”, 又 yòu – “again”. These adverbs serve to convey slight emphasis or meanings close to proof in sentences. All interrogative sentences expressed with these adverbs can be considered rhetorical questions. This is very helpful in distinguishing between words that are relevant to rhetoric and those that are not.

On the adverb 不 bù “no, not”

In addition to being used independently, 不 bù can also appear in forms such as 不是 bùshì, 不也是 bù yěshì, 不都是 bù dōu shì, 不就是 bù jiùshì, etc. Among these, rhetorical questions expressed with 不是 bùshì are more frequent, and in ordinary cases they are often accompanied by the interrogative particle 吗 ma (“...right?”, “isn’t it?”). Moreover, the construction 不 bù (也 / 都 / 就 yě / dōu / jiù) 是...吗 shì...ma? (“isn’t it...?”) also occurs.

Examples:

1. 北京现在条件这么好，你再不好好学习对得起谁？

Běijīng xiànzài tiáojiàn zhème hǎo, nǐ zài bù hǎo hào

xuéxí duìdéqǐ shéi?

— The conditions in Beijing are so good now; if you still don’t study well, what kind of person does that make you?

2. 别折腾了，你现在不是很好吗？

Bié zhēteng le, nǐ xiànzài bùshì hěn hǎo ma?

— Stop fussing, aren’t you doing just fine now?

3. 凭着崇高的理想，豪迈的气概，乐观的志趣，克服困难不也是一种享受吗？

Píngzhe chónggāo de lǐxiǎng, háomài de qìgài, lèguān de zhìqù, kèfú kùnnán bù yěshì yī zhǒng xiǎngshòu ma?

— With lofty ideals, heroic spirit, and an optimistic outlook, isn’t overcoming difficulties also a kind of enjoyment?

4. 不论德国还是中国，欧洲还是亚洲，法兰克福、科隆、柏林，还是北京、大连、乌鲁木齐，不都是在同一个地球上吗？

Bùlùn Déguó háishì Zhōngguó, Ōuzhōu háishì Yàzhōu, Fǎlánkèfú, Kēlóng, Bólin, háishì Běijīng, Dàlián, Wūlǔmùqí, bù dōu shì zài tóng yí gè dìqiú shàng ma?

— Whether it’s Germany or China, Europe or Asia, Frankfurt, Cologne, Berlin, Beijing, Dalian, or Urumqi—aren’t they all on the same planet?

In fact, 不也是 bù yěshì, 不都是 bù dōu shì, and 不就

是 bù jiùshì are all extended forms of 不是 bùshì. The adverbs 也 yě “also”, 都 dōu “all”, and 就 jiù “precisely, immediately” are inserted between 不 bù “no, not” and 是 shì “is/are”. These adverbs can also be omitted, but

once omitted, the rhetorical force of the sentence weakens.

The table below shows the possible combinations of 不 bù with adverbs:

Structure	Expressed Semantic Meaning	Example	Translation
不也是...吗 bù yěshì...ma	Emphatic form	有人说，书本上的文艺作品，古代的和外国的文艺作品，不也是源泉吗？ <i>Yǒurén shuō, shūběn shàng de wényì zuòpǐn, gǔdài de hé wàiguó de wényì zuòpǐn, bù yěshì yuánquán ma?</i>	Someone once said, aren't literary works in books—both ancient and foreign—also sources? ...Other people's children are like this, ours are like that—aren't all children the future citizens?
不都是...吗 bù dōu shì...ma	Generalizing form	...人家的孩子这样，咱们的孩子那样，孩子不都是将来的国民吗？ <i>...rénjiā de háizi zhèyàng, zánmen de háizi nàyàng, háizi bù dōu shì jiānglái de guómín ma?</i>	Isn't it simply that you didn't give him a gift?
不就是...吗 bù jiùshì...ma	Affirmative form	不就是没给他送礼吗？ <i>Bù jiùshì méi gěi tā sònglǐ ma?</i>	

On the Adverb 就 jiù (“immediately, in that case”)

The adverbial form 就 jiù (“immediately,” “in that case”) is not used independently or in isolation; rather, it is combined with other adverbs, interrogative pronouns, question-particle words, or verbs.

For example:

- “我哪回不是掉完眼泪，就拼命去干活儿？”
Wǒ nǎ huí bùshì diào wán yǎnlèi, jiù pīnmìng qù gàn huó er?
— When have I ever, even after shedding tears, not immediately thrown myself into work with all my might?
- “你怎么就光顾着你自己那点小利呢？”
Nǐ zěnmē jiù guānggùzhe nǐ zìjǐ nà diǎn xiǎo lì nē?
— How can you immediately complain about such a

small profit for yourself?

- “考不上大学就没有前途吗？”

Kǎo bù shàng dàxué jiù méiyǒu qiántú ma?

— If you fail to enter university, does that mean your future is ruined?

On the Adverb 难道 nándào (“could it be that”)

This adverb is typically used in rhetorical questions. However, not every sentence containing 难道 nándào can be considered rhetorical. For example:

- “难道你们闹矛盾了？”

Nándào nǐmen nào máodùn le?

— Could it be that you had a conflict?

(Here, there is no definite judgment; depending on context, the adverb may appear in rhetorical or

ordinary interrogatives.)

In rhetorical contexts, sentences with 难道 nándào usually end with the particle 吗 ma or other question-marking words.

For example:

b) “难道你就只觉得它是树？难道你就不想到它的朴质·严肃·坚强不屈，至少也象征了北方的农民？”

Nándào nǐ jiù zhǐ juéde tā shì shù? Nándào nǐ jiù bù xiǎngdào tā de púzhi, yánsù, jiānqiáng bùqū, zhìshǎo yě xiàngzhēng le běifāng de nóngmín?

— Could it be that you only think it is a tree? Could it be that you do not think about its simplicity, solemnity, resilience, and at least its symbolism of the northern farmer?

c) “你说我痴人说梦，一个人难道就不能有自己的梦想吗？”

Nǐ shuō wǒ chīrénshuōmèng, yīgè rén nándào jiù bùnéng yǒu zìjǐ de mèngxiǎng ma?

— You say I am talking nonsense—could it be that a person cannot have their own dreams?

d) “难道能否认培养接班人不是我们的责任吗？”

Nándào néng fǒurèn péiyǎng jiēbānrén bùshì wǒmen de zérèn ma?

— Could it be denied that training successors is not our responsibility?

e) “中国人难道就不能创出自己的名牌鞋，让国人和外国人都爱不释手吗？”

Zhōngguó rén nándào jiù bùnéng chuàng chū zìjǐ de míngpái xié, ràng guó rén hé wàiguó rén dōu ài bù shì shǒu ma?

— Could it be that Chinese people cannot create their own famous-brand shoes, ones that both locals and foreigners would cherish?

From the above examples, we can see that in Chinese rhetorical questions, the use or omission of 难道 nándào does not play a decisive role; it simply softens the rhetorical tone. It may be placed before the subject (emphasizing the subject) or before the predicate (emphasizing the predicate), without changing the fundamental meaning—though there is a subtle pragmatic shift.

On the Adverb 何 hé (“what? when? how?”)

This adverb does not appear in rhetorical sentences in isolation. All forms of 何 hé (“what? when? how?”)

occur in combinations such as:

- 何妨 héfáng — “what harm is there?” / “what’s the problem?”
- 何不 hébù — “why not...?”
- 何尝 hécháng — “when has it ever...?”
- 何必 hébì — “why (bother)...?”
- 何苦 hékǔ — “for what reason...?” / “why suffer...?”
- 何曾 hécéng — “at what time...?” / “when ever...?”

In almost all of our examined sentences, these forms carry rhetorical force:

a) “只要有利于心理健康，迷信一下又何妨？”

Zhǐyào yǒu lìyú xīnlǐ jiànkāng, míxìn yīxià yòu héfáng?

— As long as it benefits mental health, what harm is there in being a little superstitious?

b) “反正事情是吹了，院中又没有人，何不去拿几件东西呢？”

Fǎnzhèng shìqíng shì chuīle, yuàn zhōng yòu méiyǒu rén, hébù qù ná jǐ jiàn dōngxī ne?

— Since the matter has already failed and no one is in the courtyard, why not take a few things?

c) “你叫我忘了你，而你又何尝能忘得了我呢？”

Nǐ jiào wǒ wàngle nǐ, ér nǐ yòu hécháng néng wàng déliǎo wǒ ne?

— You told me to forget you, but when could you ever forget me?

d) “何必老是想不开：苦了自己？”

Hébì lǎo shì xiǎngbùkāi: kǔ le zìjǐ?

— Why always dwell on things and make yourself suffer?

e) “条条大路通罗马，您何苦单走这独木桥呢？”

Tiáo tiáo dàlù tōng luómǎ, nín hékǔ dān zǒu zhè dúmùqiáo ne?

— All roads lead to Rome—why insist on crossing this lone wooden bridge by yourself?

f) “这样好的差使，我何曾不想呢？”

Zhèyàng hǎo de chāishǐ, wǒ hécéng bùxiǎng ne?

— When have I ever not wanted such a good assignment?

Even though rhetorical sentences containing 何 hé are less frequent, whenever the adverb appears, it typically conveys a rhetorical tone.

Forms related to the adverb

何 hé (“what?”, “when?”, “how?”)

Meaning in Semantics

Meaning in Pragmatics

何妨 héfáng – “What harm would it do?”

Expresses necessity

Expresses emphasis

何不 hébù – “Why not...?”

Expresses obligation or possibility

Expresses persuasion, encouragement (to get someone to agree) or to expand one’s opportunities

何尝 hécháng – “When?”

Expresses affirmation or negation

Expresses self-defense, justification, or emphasis

何必 hébì – “Why?”

Expresses lack of necessity

Expresses necessity in a specific situation

何苦 hékǔ – “Why bother?”

Indicates that a person or event is not worth it

Expresses persuasion or encouragement

何曾 hécéng – “When ever?”

Indicates that the emphasized event has never happened

Expresses the state of coming to a conclusion

The components 何必 hébì “why?” and 何苦 hékǔ “for what reason?” both indicate the absence of necessity and suggest that a person or event is not worth the effort. Sometimes, they can be used interchangeably. The difference in usage is as follows:

1. The component 何苦 hékǔ “for what reason?” carries a slightly deeper tone in meaning compared to 何必 hébì “why?”. Therefore, in sentences with 何苦 hékǔ “for what reason?”, it is permissible to add the interrogative particle 呢 ne — “a modal particle conveying the speaker’s state” — at the end of the sentence. In contrast, after 何必 hébì “why?”, there is no need to add the interrogative particle 呢 ne.

On the adverb 岂 qǐ “how could it be / perhaps”

Forms of this type are not used in isolation; instead, they are typically combined with other adverbs. For example, with the adverb 不是 bùshì “no”, we get 岂不是 qǐ bùshì — “wouldn’t it be / isn’t it the case that there’s no need?”. Similarly, the form 岂 qǐ may combine with various verbs, producing expressions such as 岂不 qǐ bù “isn’t it...?”, 岂可 qǐkě “how could...?”, 岂止 qǐzhǐ “more than / not just...”, and 岂但 qǐdàn “not only / how could it be that only...”.

Examples:

a) 万一过几天“和平”解决了，岂不是多此一举？

Wàn yī guò jǐ tiān “héping” jiějué le, qǐ bùshì duō cǐ yī jǔ?

— If in a few days’ time “peace” is achieved, wouldn’t fighting have been unnecessary?

b) 磨砖既不成镜，坐禅岂能成佛？

Mó zhuān jì bù chéng jìng, zuòchán qǐ néng chéng fó?

— A brick cannot become a mirror by polishing; how could mere meditation make one a Buddha?

c) 写在纸上的话和事实岂不矛盾？

Xiě zài zhǐ shàng de huà hé shìshí qǐ bù máodùn?

— Aren’t the words written on paper contradictory to the facts?

d) 终身大事岂可马马虎虎？

Zhōngshēn dàshì qǐkě mǎmǎhǔhǔ?

— How could one be careless about matters of lifelong importance?

e) 巾帼不让须眉，妇女岂止能撑半边天？

Jīnguó bù ràng xūméi, fùnǚ qǐzhǐ néng chēng bàn biān tiān?

— Women are no less than men; aren’t they capable of holding up half the sky?

f) 岂但我一个人知道？

Qǐdàn wǒ yīgè rén zhīdào?

— Could it be that I am the only one who knows?

On the adverb 还 hái “still, yet, even”

Forms of this type are also not used alone; rather, they are combined with other adverbs. The adverb 还 hái “still, yet, even” may be omitted in rhetorical questions. However, when it is omitted, the tone of the sentence becomes weaker. This can be seen in the following comparisons:

1a) 她让孩子一个人玩水，自己睡觉或者看电视，孩子还能有个不感冒的？

— She lets the child play in the water alone while she

sleeps or watches TV; can the child still avoid catching a cold?

1b) 她让孩子一个人玩水，自己睡觉或者看电视，孩子能有个不感冒的？

— She lets the child play in the water alone while she sleeps or watches TV; can the child avoid catching a cold?

2a) 您为我们付出了这样高的代价，难道还不足以表达您对中国人民的友谊？

— You have paid such a high price for us; could it still be insufficient to express your friendship towards the Chinese people?

2b) 您为我们付出了这样高的代价，难道不足以表达您对中国人民的友谊？

— You have paid such a high price for us; could it be insufficient to express your friendship towards the Chinese people?

3a) 你还能不了解他的脾气秉性吗？

— Can you still not understand his temperament and character?

3b) 你能不了解他的脾气秉性吗？

— Can you not understand his temperament and character?

In all three sets, the rhetorical questions differ in that sentences with 还 hái have a stronger intonation, while those without it are softer in tone.

On the adverb 又 yòu “again”

The adverbs 又 yòu “again” and 还 hái “still, again” are used with similar frequency. Like 还 hái, the adverb 又 yòu can be omitted in rhetorical questions without significantly altering the meaning of the sentence. However, the omission slightly weakens the speaker’s tone and determination.

Examples:

1a) ...再说，香港又有什么了不起的？

— ...Besides, what is so special about Hong Kong, anyway?

1b) 再说，香港有什么了不起的？

— ...Besides, what is so special about Hong Kong?

2a) 一个人如果不是像一块海绵吸水似的，积蓄起大量的词汇，他的语言，又怎么能够生动和丰富起来呢？

— If a person does not absorb vocabulary like a sponge, how could his language possibly become vivid and rich?

2b) 一个人如果不足像一块海绵吸水似的，积蓄起大量的词汇，他的语言，怎么能够生动和丰富起来呢？

— If a person does not absorb vocabulary like a sponge, how could his language become vivid and rich?

3a) 她是朕的亲妈妈，又是太后，于忠于孝，朕又能怎样？

— She is my biological mother, and also the Empress Dowager, worthy of loyalty and filial piety; what more could I do?

3b) 她是朕的亲妈妈，又是太后，于忠于孝，朕能怎样？

— She is my biological mother, and also the Empress Dowager, worthy of loyalty and filial piety; what could I do?

CONCLUSION

The adverbs 还 hái “still, yet” and 又 yòu “again” do not differ in meaning from other adverbs in terms of the semantic content they express in rhetorical questions. Their use is not obligatory; they can be omitted without changing the rhetorical nature of the sentence. Their main function is to strengthen the tone of the utterance, serving as prosodic devices that reflect the speaker’s stance. In syntactic terms, they can be classified as marked adverbs.

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