SAYMEI · EVERYDAY CHINESE · CHEAT SHEET

How to Say Was in Chinese (Past Tense)

Chinese verbs don't change for tense, so was is the same word as is, with a time word to mark the past: 我以前是老师 (wǒ yǐqián shì lǎoshī), I was a teacher. Adjectives take no 是 (shì) at all. Here's how 了 (le), 过 (guo), 是…的 (shì…de) and 没 (méi) cover did, have done and didn't.



以前 **yǐqián** **Before, used to (was)**

Sounds like ee chyen. yǐ dips: 3rd tone, qián rises: 2nd tone. For didn't: 没 (méi), Didn't.

Which one fits?

Was a teacher, a student…	我以前是老师。 Wǒ yǐqián shì lǎoshī. I was a teacher.
Was cold, tired, happy…	昨天很冷。 Zuótiān hěn lěng. It was cold yesterday.
Was somewhere	我刚才在家。 Wǒ gāngcái zài jiā. I was at home just now.
Did something	我昨天买了一本书。 Wǒ zuótiān mǎi le yì běn shū. I bought a book yesterday.
Have done it before	我去过中国。 Wǒ qù guo Zhōngguó. I've been to China.
When or how it happened	我是坐飞机来的。 Wǒ shì zuò fēijī lái de. I came by plane.
Didn't	我昨天没去。 Wǒ zuótiān méi qù. I didn't go yesterday.

16 words and patterns for the past in Chinese

WAS: ADD A TIME WORD

以前 yǐqián Before, used to (was) EVERYDAY

昨天 zuótiān Yesterday EVERYDAY

那时候 nà shíhou Back then EVERYDAY

刚才 gāngcái Just now EVERYDAY

当时 dāngshí At the time EVERYDAY

DID, AND HAVE DONE

吃了 chī le Ate, have eaten EVERYDAY

去过 qù guo Have been (to) EVERYDAY

已经 yǐjīng Already EVERYDAY

DIDN'T AND WASN'T

没 méi Didn't EVERYDAY

还没 hái méi Not yet EVERYDAY

不是 bú shì Wasn't (with a noun) EVERYDAY

WAS WITH A NOUN, A PLACE OR AN ADJECTIVE

是 shì Was (with a noun) EVERYDAY

在 zài Was at, was in EVERYDAY

很 hěn Very; links an adjective EVERYDAY

WHEN, WHERE OR HOW IT HAPPENED

我是昨天来的 wǒ shì zuótiān lái de It was yesterday that I came EVERYDAY

你是怎么来的 nǐ shì zěnme lái de How did you get here? EVERYDAY

The past in short exchanges

CATCHING UP

A: 你以前是做什么的？ Nǐ yǐqián shì zuò shénme de? What did you used to do?

B: 我以前是护士。 Wǒ yǐqián shì hùshi. I was a nurse.

AFTER THE WEEKEND

A: 你周末去哪儿了？ Nǐ zhōumò qù nǎr le? Where did you go this weekend?

B: 我去爬山了，很累。 Wǒ qù páshān le, hěn lèi. I went hiking. It was tiring.

TRAVEL

A: 你去过上海吗？ Nǐ qù guo Shànghǎi ma? Have you ever been to Shanghai?

B: 去过，我是去年去的。 Qù guo, wǒ shì qùnián qù de. Yes, I went last year.

A GREETING

A: 你吃饭了吗？ Nǐ chīfàn le ma? Have you eaten?

B: 还没呢。 Hái méi ne. Not yet.

What to avoid, and why

× Don't put 是 (shì) before an adjective because English says was. Say 昨天很冷 (zuótiān hěn lěng), it was cold yesterday, never 昨天是冷 (zuótiān shì lěng).

× Don't keep 了 (le) after 没 (méi). Say 我没去 (wǒ méi qù), I didn't go, never 我没去了 (wǒ méi qù le). 过 (guo) does stay: 我没去过 (wǒ méi qù guo), I've never been.

× Don't add 了 (le) to every past sentence. Past habits and states take none: 我以前每天跑步 (wǒ yǐqián měitiān pǎobù), I used to run every day.

Hear every phrase and take the quiz: **saymei.app/tools/past-tense-in-chinese**

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