Notes on Chinese Learners of English

There are seven major dialect groups in Chinese, including nearly 300 dialects, but many dialects are mutually unintelligible, so some linguists argue that the dialects should be thought of as distinctive languages. Mandarin Chinese (the dialect of Beijing, the national capital since the 15th century) is a “young” dialect, i.e., formed well after most of the other dialects, so it is less “typical” in the sense that many features that exist in older dialects, like Cantonese, are lost in Mandarin. That said, all the different dialects share common features in terms of basic grammar.

Trouble-shooting for Chinese Learners of English:

Chinese does not use tense to distinguish past, present, and future.

Verbs are not conjugated. Nouns are not inflected.

Chinese also does not distinguish between singular and plural in the use of nouns (hence: one person, two person, etc.).

Chinese does not distinguish between the indefinite and the definite article (“a” and “the”) in the same way as in English. Hence, Chinese learners of English have enormous trouble deploying “a” and “the,” and will tend to either omit them or use them randomly.

Chinese does not distinguish gender in the third person (he, she, it are all “ta”); the third personal pronoun really means: “a person I am referring to who is other than myself.” Hence, Chinese learners of English will often sound confused. E.g., “I am very close to my mother. He was the person who taught me everything. I still call her up every week, and I get frustrated when they aren’t home to answer the phone.”
A Chinese narrative will state the subject only once and not state it again unless the subject changes. This is because sentences in Chinese are not composed as complete and independent grammatical units, as in English, and many Chinese learners of English will therefore tend to speak and write in what an English speaker would regard as “incomplete” sentences. To the Chinese ear, a series of complete grammatical units comes across as sonorous and pretentious, as if the speaker/writer is condescending to someone who is too slow-witted to follow a complex train of thought.

Chinese grammar prefers to use word order to express syntactical relationships. E.g., “If you go, I won’t go” = “You go, I don’t go”; “I won’t go unless you go” = “You go, I go” or “You don’t go, I don’t go.” Again, it is considered redundant and even pedantic to use subordinating conjunctions (if… then) if the relationship can be expressed using simple word order alone. This is why, paradoxically, Chinese learners of English sometimes speak in ways that remind you of small children.

The above is by no means an exhaustive list, but as you can see, the differences between Chinese and English are sometimes a matter of grammar but often also involve differences in social, cultural, and aesthetic values.