

Preface

“The writer was required at school to read his lessons aloud sixty times; that was for reading books in his own language.”

*Chao Yuen Ren, talking about himself, in Mandarin Primer,
Harvard University Press, 1961, fn. 1, p. 118.*

1. Getting started

This is the initial volume (of two) of a book designed to be an introduction to the Chinese language in both its spoken and written forms, as well as a primer on how to learn it. It assumes no prior knowledge of the language. More specifically, it is a course in Mandarin Chinese (or just ‘Mandarin’), a language that, though quite varied in its features, is conceived of as the standard for formal communication in most of the Chinese speaking world. It is called Mandarin rather than just Chinese to distinguish it from regional Chinese languages such as Cantonese or Hakka, as well as from earlier forms of Chinese such as Classical Chinese that served as the medium for formal written communication from early times to well into the 20th century.

Part I consists of this preface, an introductory chapter, a chapter on sounds and symbols, and then two sets of lessons, labeled 1 –7 and A – F. Parts I and II provide a foundation for pronunciation, an introduction to core grammatical issues and usage, and a primer for characters (both traditional and simplified). It is designed to instill a basic level of conversational and literary skills to students with absolutely no prior training in Chinese.

In Chinese, Mandarin is called ‘the ordinary language’ (Pǔtōnghuà) on the Mainland, ‘the national language’ (Guóyǔ) in Taiwan, and ‘the language of the Hua’ (Huáyǔ) in Singapore. Because Mandarin has developed its function as a national language in relatively recent times, its norms remain elusive. Whereas questions of English pronunciation or usage can often be resolved by reference to dictionaries, books of usage or other reference materials, for Mandarin, the range of acceptable usage is much broader and judgments about it, though often ardent, are less consistent. It should not be surprising, therefore, to find disagreement about material selected for a course like this. Agreement will be greatest in matters of pronunciation, where the urban educated speech, particularly that of the (Mainland) capital, Beijing, is regarded as the norm; it will be less so in matters of usage, where different words, expressions or even grammatical constructions may coexist or compete. Where differences are regional (or semi-national, as in the case of the Mainland versus Taiwan), they will be so labeled; otherwise, differences of time, or of formality will be noted in the text where relevant. Ultimately, though, learners will find that one of the most pervasive and productive topics of conversation for the learner is the language itself, and in part, material has been selected for this text to encourage students to use the language to explore the language, and decide for themselves on the many issues relevant to their ultimate success.

This book is intended for a diverse audience: specialists and non-specialists; college or high school students; people studying on their own or taking a course with a teacher; people seeking a review of basic Mandarin, or beginning their study of the language for the first time. Regardless of ultimate goals, all learners of Chinese need a systematic and detailed foundation, and this book is intended to provide one.

2. Writing

With a writing system whose symbols are numerous and non-phonetic, the presentation of language material to the beginning student is problematical. This book adopts the traditional approach of separating material that is primarily conversational from that which is primarily for reading. So there are two sets of lessons: one, numbered with Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3...), the other, with letters (A, B, C...). The first presents Chinese language material in the standard Chinese transcription system known as *pinyin*; the second, which is, to a degree, dependent on the explanations and examples found in the former, presents Chinese in characters (both the simplified forms, standard on the Mainland, and the traditional forms still in use in Taiwan and some other parts of the Chinese speaking world).

The two sets of lessons are relatable, but not identical, for they serve different purposes: the *pinyin* text serves the rapid accumulation of vocabulary and usage, primarily for conversation, but also for reading and composition; the character text serves to introduce the standard written language at a manageable rate and in appropriate contexts. The two sets of lessons can be interleaved from the beginning, with lesson 1 in pinyin followed by A in characters, lesson 2 by B, etc. Or the lag can be longer, with two or three lessons completed before beginning the character set.

Though some may argue that a transcription system is unnatural and can cause students not to take character writing seriously enough, an alphabetic transcription properly presented, offers the inestimable advantage of a clear guide to pronunciation and a practical means of notation. It allows the rapid introduction of vocabulary, and provides students with extensive practice in reading texts while the slower process of acquiring a critical mass of characters proceeds. (The *pinyin* system also serves native speakers of Chinese by providing a convenient and unambiguous way of notating pronunciation, of indexing, and of inputting characters in word processing.)

The pedagogical advantage of dealing with characters separately is that the student learning characters will find the graphs new and the syllable-at-a-time format of Chinese writing novel, but the words, grammar, and even the composition of the text will be familiar. After all, Chinese children have been speaking some form of Chinese for years before they go to school and start to learn to read (in characters); why require non-Chinese learners to master all skills simultaneously? The other advantage to treating characters separately is that students who wish to put off learning to read and write in characters, or who want to review just the spoken language or just the written language, can work through the appropriate set of lessons, and leave the other out.

3. Lesson content

The selection and ordering of topics is based on the author's own experience learning and teaching Chinese. It is guided in part by what the beginning student is likely to encounter in and out of the classroom setting, as well as in China itself, and in part by the need to provide a broad foundation of grammatical, lexical and cultural information for all future work in Chinese.

a) The pinyin lessons

The presentation of material within the *pinyin* lessons, though somewhat variable, is roughly as follows. Each lesson begins with a series of topics with explanation and examples. These topics are selected so students can build up a conversational repertoire that can be practiced and extended from lesson to lesson. Most lessons also culminate in a fairly lengthy dialogue, which serves to highlight certain language structures and functions. The dialogues are, to be sure, idealized; they are more explicit than 'real' conversations, which rely so heavily on visual cues and shared information, and they lack the false starts and shifting targets of actual conversation. But they do serve as a guide to usage, and internalized, they can provide a useful repertoire of reliable material that can be tapped for conversational needs.

Once a critical mass of vocabulary allows it (and particularly in part 2 of the book), lessons also contain a major narrative – a letter, a story or discussion. These contain extensive (*pinyin*) materials, written in colloquial style. They quickly become quite detailed, and not only allow for rapid vocabulary acquisition but also provide the basis for some discussion of Chinese geography, history, linguistics and culture.

The non-character lessons also contain commentary and exercises on the sounds of Chinese and the *pinyin* symbols that represent them; and each lesson closes with some rhymed material or light verse. At appropriate points throughout the exposition, there are short exercises or 'tests' that can be used to monitor progress. (Answers to these are not contained in the book but might well be provided by individual teachers.)

The lessons each contain a considerable amount of information. Some of it is background to the linguistic material (and therefore, in English), eg the sections on climate in lesson 7. Some of the Chinese language material is for reference rather than complete recall: there are, for example, lists of geographical names in lesson 3, and lists of food dishes, subjects of study, professions, sports, body parts, and illnesses elsewhere. These allow conversational options, and they are useful for reference. And though learners would be expected to retain only those items that applied to them or their classmates for active use, with some repetition and review, other listed items may be recalled and more easily retained when encountered in the future.

Some material is included because it suggests good conversational topics, because it provides an opportunity for visuals, or because it is simply judged to be interesting. Thus, the short conversation about Suzhou in lesson 6, which introduces some specialized words such as 'bridge' and 'canal' well before one might be expected to

sustain a conversation on the Chinese urban landscape, offers an opportunity to view pictures of Suzhou, and provides a nice reprieve from the more mundane biographic questions that limit one's conversation in early stages of study. But in general, it is hoped that students will be able to retain a good deal of the material in each lesson because it is serviceable in everyday conversation. So the lessons of part I focus on biographical information that can be practiced and extended daily to the point that much of it will become second nature. Even the more specialized topics, such as 'regional languages' ('dialects') or 'population' (in part II) can easily be incorporated in conversational scenarios that involve people's place of origin or places visited.

b) The character lessons

The character lessons, as noted earlier, lag behind the other lessons so that, for the most part, the language represented by the characters is already familiar. Characters are presented in two phases, the first dealing with their form, the second, with function. In the first phase, a set of roughly a dozen characters – both the traditional forms and the simplified – are introduced in an isolated list that is written in large format (for inspection and tracing), along with *pinyin* and English glosses. These are followed by notes on the form of the characters, the way they are written and the relationship between them, and hints for remembering them or distinguishing them from others of similar form.

With the list as reference, students then read. The characters are exemplified first in compounds and phrases, then in sentences and dialogues and ultimately in longer narratives or data sets that present information in tabular form. The intent is to provide enough context to make reading possible, to ease the process of familiarization, and to wean students away from isolated lists to texts and contexts. Writing exercises are interspersed throughout.

4. *flashCube*

Assistance in internalizing lesson material is provided by way of a computer program called flashCube, developed by Jordan Gilliland while a graduate student in Computer Science at MIT. As the name suggests, flashCube delivers through the medium of the computer what has traditionally been provided by the folk-method of the flashcard, the vocabulary and phrase notebook, and the tape recorder. FlashCube stores, in a compact and convenient format, much of the Chinese material presented in this book, and allows learners to test themselves into and out of spoken or written Chinese. At their own convenience learners can test themselves on words, phrases, or sentences, randomly or in sequence, until they are familiar with them. The classroom can then be reserved for more naturalistic practice, for fine tuning, and for dealing with special difficulties. FlashCube comes with a host of other useful functions that allows the creation of individualized data bases, or instant access to web-based encyclopedic information on the form and meaning of individual characters.