INTRODUCTION

The present textbook is conceived and written in conscious admiration of the principles of Y.R. Chao’s Mandarin Primer (Harvard University Press, 1948). The overwhelming virtue of Mandarin Primer was its emphasis on internalization of Chinese by the Western student. “Internalization” refers to the process by which students adopt a second language as a living language, and as their own, getting a “feel” for it in ways that approach, if never entirely equal, the native speaker’s. The key elements in bringing about internalization are: stress on oral-aural “foundation work”; uncompromising vigilance on the parts of both teacher and student to be sure that habits of correct tonal pronunciation are instilled before bad habits can take root; presentation of lively, natural Chinese; avoidance of overdependence on English; carefully planned sequential presentation of grammar points; audio-visual reinforcement (phonograph records in Mandarin Primer’s day, CDs and computer files today); and emphasis on the unity of all aspects of language learning. The four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are pursued in concert, and used to reinforce one another. In all cases the unity of usage and context is stressed.

Our stress on context derives from the Y.R. Chao teaching tradition. Rather than starting the learner with grammatical formulae and some vocabulary to “plug into” it, the Chao approach asks the student to “internalize” a piece of dialogue that contains a number of important grammatical points in natural context. Chao’s Mandarin Primer did not even include vocabulary lists, for fear that students would study Chinese and English words in pairs, and thus inevitably be led astray by false equivalences. We have included vocabulary lists in this textbook, but these should never be used in place of lesson texts. To stress the vocabulary lists, or use class time on them, is to go against the basic design of the textbook and cannot bring superior results.

To teachers who are considering use of this textbook for the first time, the length and richness of the dialogues may seem daunting. How can beginning students absorb so much? During the many years of using the first editions of this textbook, however, we have seen ample evidence that students can handle, and indeed appreciate, the richness. The key to success is in using the approach of the textbook correctly.

The Y.R. Chao approach has shown that Western students can “internalize” Chinese much more quickly than is allowed by the method that begins with vocabulary lists and only very simple grammar. This textbook introduces many of the basic grammatical patterns of Mandarin before the end of Unit II. These patterns are not, in fact, intellectually difficult, and learning them in the early stages allows students, very quickly, to speak relatively free and natural Chinese. The escape from the strait-jacket of only being able to say certain things has beneficial effects on student morale, which, in turn, greatly aids further learning.
Both teachers and students would be well-advised to read the rest of this introduction carefully in order to get the most out of this textbook. The front material in the accompanying Character Workbook is also absolutely crucial.

FOUNDATION WORK

“Foundation Work” is our term for the ear and tongue training that is necessary in order to perceive and to reproduce the sounds of Mandarin Chinese. It is hard to overstress the importance of Foundation Work. A good job on it will serve you well for a lifetime; a poor job can actually do more harm than good. If you form bad habits at the beginning stages of study, the habits can be hard to break. No matter how good you might get at reading or writing Chinese, with bad pronunciation you will always seem “alien” to a Chinese person.

Training in tones is especially important. Western languages do not use tones, and native speakers of Western languages need to consciously train themselves in correct tonal pronunciation.

In order to appreciate how disastrous the results of a bad foundation can be, try the following simple experiment: choose any fairly short English sentence, like, “The cat is on the mat.” Now pick any vowel at random: a, e, i, o, u, and choose its “long” or “short” version, such as “short o” or “long a,” or whatever you like. Now say your chosen short sentence using only that one vowel for every single syllable. How weird do you sound? Would English speakers understand you if you spoke that way? Yes, probably. But would they take you as a normal human being? Would they be likely to trust you? Tell you what they really think? Be your friend? No way. Not if you did the experiment correctly.

What this experiment displays might be called “vowel-free English.” If you do not master Chinese tones, you will end up speaking “tone-free Chinese,” and the effects will be just as bad. This is why we call the possible outcome “disastrous.”

It is crucial to stress that Foundation Work is not just a matter of the first few days of study. The challenge lasts much longer. A good course might spend two or three weeks concentrating on Foundation Work before turning to Unit I, Lesson 1, but both teacher and student must be vigilant for at least a year in order to instill good pronunciation habits. A policy of zero-tolerance toward tone error is best. Every time you want to say something in Chinese, don’t stop trying until you get the tones right.
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During your Foundation Work, do not be misled by the ease of imitating the tones the first time you try. Most people can learn to imitate the four basic tones of Mandarin in less than ten minutes. But there is a huge difference between that and internalization of correct habits. Do not assume, either, that you can “learn all the words and grammar now” and then “pick up the right accent later, when I go to China.” This does not work. Even some Chinese teachers, if they lack experience, might assure you that this is the way to go, but it is not. It is a great idea to go to China for advanced study, but if you go with bad tones you will only get fluent in bad tones. To Chinese people you will no longer seem a clumsy alien, but a very slick alien.

ROMANIZATION

This text uses the hànyǔ pīnyīn romanization system, which uses the marks `, ,ˌ, ˊ, and ` added above a vowel, to indicate tone. Every syllable includes a tone mark unless it is pronounced in the “neutral” tone (see p. 26). The tone-marking system is easy to master, but you need to work hard to be sure you fully adopt the tone and the tone mark psychologically whenever you speak, hear, read, write, or even think any word.

Western languages sometimes use similar marks, but the purpose is not at all similar. For example in the English word cliché, the accent mark reminds you not to let the “e” be silent (as you otherwise might if it were “é”) and to pronounce it to rhyme with “hay.” In hànyǔ pīnyīn, the same mark tells you to make your voice rise in pitch as you say a syllable like hé (see p. 3). In no Western language does any kind of a mark like that call upon you to do anything like what you need to do in Chinese.

Some students, whether consciously or not, tend to view the vowels and consonants in a spelling as the “real” words and tone-marks as some kind of “add-on.” Such an attitude invites disaster. The tone mark is just as real and important a part of any spelling as is everything else in the spelling. When you are writing hànyǔ pīnyīn, the ideal moment to write the tone mark is right before you write the vowel over which the tone mark appears. For example, in writing the phrase “hànyǔ pīnyīn,” write “h,” then “ˌ,” then “a,” then “n,” and then: y, ˌ, u, space. p, ˌ, i, n, y, ˌ, i, n. Say each syllable, either aloud or to yourself, using the correct tone, as you do the writing. This will help you to internalize good habits. On the other hand, the worst possible approach is to write a whole sentence or paragraph of hànyǔ pīnyīn and then go back and add the tone marks later. If you do that, you are showing that you fundamentally misconceive the nature of tones in the Chinese language. And the result could be to ruin your Chinese permanently.
CONSTRUCTION OF TEXTS

For the content of our texts, we have drawn upon the daily experiences of students: eating, drinking, classrooms, dorms, messy rooms, boyfriends, phone calls to worried parents, and so on. Our purpose in this is to allow students, as soon as possible, actually to use Chinese. We cannot at the same time focus on life in China, but this cost is far outweighed by the benefit of helping students to “internalize” Chinese as soon as possible. If you, the student, can adopt Chinese as your own living language at an early stage, your eventual absorption of Chinese culture will be much richer and more lifelike than if you regard Chinese as a foreign thing, something that needs to be translated in order to be understood.

From a practical point of view as well, there is a major advantage in giving students materials that they can immediately use outside of class. It is well recognized in modern language teaching that actual use in daily life is the best kind of learning reinforcement a student can get. Many good language programs encourage students to organize language tables in dining halls, language dormitories, drama clubs, film series, and anything else that brings students closer to the ideal of “total immersion” in the target language. The first step toward this goal, obviously, must be to learn the vocabulary of daily student life.

Nonetheless, every human language is part of a larger human culture in which it is embedded. Even when we present dialogues about student life on American campuses, the fact that we present them in Chinese raises interesting cultural questions. How do people address each other in Chinese? What are etiquettes of eating and drinking? And so on. To address some of these questions, we add a few paragraphs of “Culture Notes” to some of the lessons.

We have also tried to make our texts lively, and even playful, because our teaching experience shows that students invariably learn better from such materials. At the first-year level students are not, after all, linguistically prepared for advanced or austere topics, and the effort to be serious with such limited resources can easily result in boredom. Since rigorous and thorough work on basic grammar and pronunciation is just as possible with light-hearted examples as with serious ones, why not ease the student’s boredom with a little fun? Even if what the student finds funny is only the fact that we think we are being funny, that is better, in our opinion, than adding boredom to all the other difficulties of learning Chinese.
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Some teachers and textbook authors, from an understandable concern for student “situational competence,” like to organize grammar and vocabulary around the handling of tasks, for example visiting a post office, bank, hospital, bus station, etc. The intended advantage of this approach is to give students a unit of “experience” that can be transferred to in-country life. There is a danger, though, in trying to structure this kind of imagined situation without its seeming dry, mechanical, and in the end not flexible enough to help people gain genuine mastery. We feel that it is better to concentrate on internalizing the basics of pronunciation and grammar. If beginning students can master the basics, then adding this or that kind of specific vocabulary—“stamp,” “checkbook,” whatever—will always be a very small matter by comparison.

From time to time there are calls in Chinese language teaching circles for textbooks to include newly-emergent usages. We do not try to do this. The problem with new usages, whether they originate in Beijing, Shanghai, Taipei, or elsewhere, is that one can never know how long they will last or whether they will spread to all groups of native speakers. By contrast the basic skills of pronunciation and grammar are essentially the same everywhere, and have been so for a long time. We feel that concentration on these basics best serves a student’s long-term interests.

“NATURAL” CHINESE

We have striven to assure that the Chinese presented in the texts of our lessons is as natural and lively as possible. Our working definition of “natural” language is language that a native speaker might actually use in the situations we have invented. There are certain problems, though, in carrying out our natural-language ideal. The biggest is encountered in Lesson One. It is extremely difficult to construct a dialogue based on a tiny amount of grammar and vocabulary and still make it entirely natural-sounding. We do our best.

Another pressure away from complete naturalness is the understandable desire of many teachers for “pattern sentences” that can be used as models for classroom drill. We have included some sentences in the dialogues that can serve this purpose, but on the whole we have avoided the stringing together of model sentences, since this would be highly unnatural in Chinese, or in any language. The long-term best interests of students are, without question, best served by early and regular exposure to Chinese as it is actually used, rather than specially prepared “textbook Chinese.” (A side benefit of this policy is its good effects on the morale of teachers. In using some textbooks, native-speaking teachers are called upon to give their students examples that they find unnatural and even un-Chinese; yet they are obliged to go along because they must, after all, earn a living. It can be quite a painful experience.)
THE ROLE OF ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

When one stresses naturalness in Chinese, and then turns to provide a reasonably natural version in English, there is little chance that the vocabulary and grammar of the two versions will form a neat one-on-one correspondence. It is not our intention, in giving translations, to provide such correspondences. The student who looks for them will be wasting time, and maybe even hurting his or her Chinese. Our reason for including translations is to give the student quick and easy access to the basic content of the text. In studying individual Chinese sentences, the student can refer to the English as a reminder of the basic point of the sentence, or its larger context—but certainly not its structure. (Teachers who wish to assign memory work can ask their students to cover the Chinese side of their books and refer to the English for prompting in the basic content of the Chinese; but then the student must jettison the English structure and recite the Chinese on its own terms.) In order to remind students of the structural disassociation of the Chinese and English versions of the texts, we have deliberately been very free in our translations of the lesson titles.

PACING AND EXPLANATION OF GRAMMAR

In introducing and explaining grammar, we have attempted, first of all, to plan the text so that basic structures unfold in a logical, graduated sequence. For example, we proceed from resultative complements (Unit I, Lesson 5) to potential complements (Unit II, Lesson 1) to directional complements (Unit IV, Lesson 2), and later to split directional complements, potential split directional complements, etc. A good pedagogical grammar is importantly different from a theoretical grammar; in teaching, one must not give all the possibilities at once, but unfold the important ones in planned sequence. Certain special grammatical terms have to be introduced (“potential complement” and “split complement,” for example) simply because English grammar provides no parallels, and teacher and student must have a way of referring to the same thing. But in general, we try to keep the use of specialized terminology to a minimum, avoiding the jargon that might suit a professional linguist but only depress a beginning student. We feel that grammar notes are best when they are clear, to the point, and as simple as possible.

We try, as well, to structure the presentation of grammar so as to avoid some of the common mistakes of beginning students. For example, the two senses of the English word “if” indicating 1) a conditional (“If she comes I will see her”) and 2) “whether” (“I don’t know if she will come”) are expressed entirely differently in Chinese. This fact generates many mistakes in the speech of beginning students. In Unit II, Lesson 1 we introduce the Chinese ways of expressing the two “ifs”
INTRODUCTION

in successive lines, hoping thus to help teachers and students notice the difference and practice it, right from the outset.

It is for the convenience of the student that we put the vocabulary lists and grammar notes in a volume separate from the main texts. With the material in two volumes, both can be opened on a desk and referred to simultaneously. To put text, vocabulary lists, and grammar notes all in the same volume would oblige one to choose between fragmenting the text or asking the student constantly to flip back and forth.

For important grammar points, we intentionally repeat explanations or refer students to earlier notes. For points that especially tend to cause trouble for beginning Western students, we preface explanations with the word “WARNING”.

AUDIOVISUAL MATERIALS

The present text has both audio and video accompaniments, which are available in CDs and video files. The audio recordings, which begin with Foundation Work and extend through all the lesson texts, are most useful in mastering pronunciation and assimilation of the dialogues. The video recordings can be used to reinforce the impression of context for the dialogues, and are best used after students have acquired basic familiarity with the texts. The video recordings have also proven to be very useful when students review earlier lessons.

STUDY OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

Experience has shown that, in learning Chinese characters, first-year students do much better with many small doses than with a few large ones. It is much more effective to study for a short time once or twice a day than to study for a long time once or twice a week. Accordingly, we have prepared a character workbook that introduces five new characters each day—or, not counting weekends, twenty-five characters per week. The workbook includes the basic information about characters that a beginner will need: number and order of strokes, radical, pronunciation, and basic meaning. In addition it includes brief reading, transcription, and translation exercises that employ the day’s characters. The importance of these exercises is that they induce students to regard characters as integral parts of language as a whole, including pronunciation, grammar, sense, and context. Characters, like all other aspects of Chinese, are best “internalized” in this holistic way.
In using our text and Character Workbook simultaneously, the student will often encounter new vocabulary in the romanized text before encountering it in the Character Workbook. This is intentional, and part of the design of our textbooks. Most beginning students can learn to use words much faster than they can learn to write them in characters. Oral-aural learning should not be held back by insistence that students should immediately be able to write every word they can utter. There is nothing “un-Chinese” about allowing this temporary lag in character-learning; native speakers, after all, learn in the same order. And in any case, upon successfully reaching the end of the Character Workbook, the student’s character knowledge will have substantially caught up with his or her oral-aural knowledge. This occurs because much of the new vocabulary in later lessons consists of compounds that use characters the student has already learned.

TRADITIONAL AND SIMPLIFIED CHARACTERS

From ancient times Chinese characters have been closely bound up with concepts of Chinese culture and identity. It is not strange, then, that when the Communist government decided in the 1950’s to simplify Chinese characters, the two differing sets of characters—simplified and traditional—became symbolic of very different political allegiances. The controversy over which version of Chinese characters is “better” has lasted to the present day. It has spread to Chinese language teaching circles in the West, where many Chinese programs stress one or the other kind of characters, and some even go to the extreme of insisting on only one version. The problem is compounded because, among a younger generation of Chinese teachers from China, there are some who were educated entirely in simplified characters and do not want to teach traditional characters because they themselves would have to go out and learn them. Similarly there are teachers from Taiwan who either can’t or don’t want to teach simplified characters. Sometimes the parents of students have very strong opinions: “No child of mine will write simplified characters!,” “Traditional characters are ancient history—who needs them?” Etc.

All of this sound and fury does no good for serious students. The goal of a second-language learner of Chinese should be to enter the Chinese world in all its fullness. It is obviously in the best interests of students to learn to read both kinds of characters. If you can read only traditional characters, you will be able to read nothing published in China since the mid 1950’s. If you can read only simplified, then the ocean of one of the world’s richest heritages before the 1950’s is closed to you, as is most of the Chinese writing outside mainland China since the 1950’s.
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Another irony of the political controversy over simplified-versus-traditional characters is that it is not actually very hard to learn to read both. They are not all that different. A reasonable policy of many Chinese programs is to allow students to write whichever version they (or their parents, etc.) prefer. This allows them to express their political sentiments. But they must be able to read both kinds, so that they can engage the whole of the Chinese world.

The Character Workbook (yellow book) in this series is designed to introduce traditional and simplified characters simultaneously. Reading exercises are given in both traditional characters and simplified characters. In order to be sure that students do not rely too much on only one kind of characters, we do not give all readings in both versions but alternate traditional and simplified from one page to the next. This obliges the student to get equally familiar with both kinds of writing.

The Character Text (green book) includes all the lesson texts in both versions of characters. As another way of reinforcing the connection between the written and spoken language, we have, for the first three units, used slightly smaller print for characters that are pronounced in the neutral tone. The traditional-character texts begin from the right-hand side of the book (the “back” of the book in Western terms, but the front in traditional Chinese terms), where the characters are arranged in columns, top to bottom, in traditional format. The left-hand side of the book opens to the same texts written in simplified characters in rows that go left to right, as in Western books and as in simplified-character texts published in mainland China. The Character Text has proven very useful for two kinds of review: both of lesson content and of different versions of characters. Students who are adept at traditional characters and want to strengthen their reading of simplified characters (or the other way around) can use the Character Text. Precisely because students will already be very familiar with the content of what they are reading, they will find it convenient to concentrate on the version of characters they want to study.

PACING THE MATERIALS

Our textbook consists of Foundation Work plus eight units that comprise 32 lessons. These materials will, naturally, be covered at different rates in different Chinese programs.
In standard college programs, where most first-year Chinese courses meet five or six times a week for periods of 50 minutes each, a first-year course should be able to finish Unit VI, i.e., 26 lessons, in addition to the Foundation Work. Basic first-year grammar has been concentrated into these six units. Units VII and VIII, which introduce useful new vocabulary but are not rich in grammar, have been added for a variety of special purposes: some intensive college courses, which may meet as many as 10 hours per week, need more material for one year; some Chinese programs may wish to begin their second-year courses with Units VII and VIII, for the sake of continuity. And finally, because Units VII and VIII do not introduce much new grammar, they can be good self-study material for students who wish to continue on their own during summers.

In the Character Workbook, a normal first-year college course will likely reach to about p. 110. The pages following p. 110 accompany Units VII and VIII and include a list of difficult or relatively little-used characters.

Finally, we believe a first-year language text should have a clear format and ample exercises and these we have striven to provide. In our exercises, and our example sentences in the grammar notes we have tried to recycle vocabulary items from earlier lessons so that students will get built-in review of much of the vocabulary we introduce.

— The Authors