

Patterns and Policies: The Changing Demographics of Foreign Language Instruction

Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro
Editor

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Teaching Chinese to the Chinese: The Development of an Assessment and Instructional Model

Scott McGinnis

University of Maryland

In the 1990s, the purpose of Chinese language instruction at the university level is no longer restricted to training the next generation of Tang poetry experts and Qing historians. Instead, we increasingly find ourselves in the business of heritage language preservation and enhancement. It is ever more the case in collegiate Chinese language programs throughout the United States—and not just in major metropolitan areas or at large universities—that the predominant audience in Chinese language classrooms is not monolingual native speakers of English, but bilingual speakers of English and some form of Chinese, Mandarin, or otherwise. The result is that many of us find ourselves in the somewhat paradoxical and often even awkward position of teaching Chinese to the Chinese.

In the discussion presented here, a three-stage process is outlined as a means of best meeting the needs of a Chinese heritage speaker population: (1) initial adjustment of an existing curriculum through the use of test-derived skill levels for placement within each level of the curriculum; (2) establishment of new courses based on a needs analysis that responds to the unique strengths and weaknesses of heritage speakers; and (3) continuing enhancement of the program, integrating more globally oriented metrics on a continuing basis, with ultimate implications for long-term curriculum development.

The data presented here are drawn exclusively from the author's experience at his home institution, and are relatively modest in quantitative terms. However, the trends and tendencies represented herein are seen throughout the United States at this time, in particular at colleges and

universities in California and on the east coast. Thus while conceding that the audience's local conditions may vary, the global conditions are relevant to all, for both the Chinese specialist and those of other languages with their own particular heritage speaker challenges, such as Spanish (see Teschner 1990; Galindo 1992).

Assessment Instruments

Administration of a standardized examination to all students within an existing program is critical to developing an objective understanding of one's student population. There are a number of well-developed metrics available for assessment of receptive skills in Chinese, as outlined below. The structure of each of these tests is built around three broad areas: (1) listening comprehension; (2) grammatical knowledge; and (3) reading ability.

All three of the examinations in Table 1 were developed by professional testing experts. In addition, both the Chinese Proficiency Test (CPT) and Pre-CPT have been nationally normed within the United States. The principal drawback for all three is their relatively high price: no less than \$15 and as much as \$35 per examinee, depending on the total number of students at a test site. An additional difficulty with the Hanyu

Table 1.

Commercially Available Chinese Proficiency Tests

Test name	Publisher	Target levels
Chinese Proficiency Test (CPT)	Center for Applied Linguistics	All
Pre-Chinese Proficiency Test (Pre-CPT)	Center for Applied Linguistics	Elementary to intermediate
Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK)	Chinese State Education Commission and Beijing Foreign Languages Institute	Intermediate to advanced

Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) is that the administration schedule is very tightly controlled by the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China.

The alternative to nationally or internationally standardized tests is a locally created one, such as the Chinese Placement and Proficiency Test (CPPT) originally designed by the author for use at the University of Oregon and now being used at the University of Maryland. The CPPT is based largely on the models of the Pre-CPT/CPT and HSK, with test content drawn from both the *Practical Chinese Reader* textbook series and a variety of authentic materials.¹ The CPPT contains listening comprehension, grammatical structure, and reading comprehension sections in a multiple-choice format. It can be administered within a typical class period of 50 minutes; students with particularly high proficiency levels can complete the examination within a half hour.

All of the tests mentioned here focus on receptive skills only. However, if a particular institution has the resources, any test can be supplemented by an oral interview with predetermined format and/or writing tasks to provide a more comprehensive student assessment. The point is that some sort of consistent testing mechanism, appropriate for and administered to all students within a given program, is the initial step necessary for curricular assessment.

Stage 1: Initial Adjustment

When the CPPT was first administered at the University of Maryland at the beginning of the 1993–94 academic year, some very clear patterns regarding the proficiency levels of students in the Chinese language program became immediately apparent. Table 2 details a section of the results from that first test administration, specifically the mean scores and standard deviations for three categories of students: non-heritage second-year students; heritage second-year students; and non-heritage third- and fourth-year students. At this stage in the process, the term “heritage” was used to indicate a student with home background in any dialect of Chinese, be it Mandarin or non-Mandarin.²

The most noteworthy result of that first test administration was the confirmation of the lack of fit between the skill level of heritage speakers and their course placement. Heritage students in the second-year course demonstrated higher overall language competency in listening

Table 2.**CPPT Results by University of Maryland Students, 1993^a**

Student Category	Listening Mean/SD (T=22)	Grammar Mean/SD (T=15)	Reading Mean/SD (T=20)	Total (T=57)
First-Year Heritage (N=5)	18.8/1.6	14.8/0.5	17.2/2.6	50.8/3.9
Second-Year Non-Heritage (N=6)	13.3/2.1	5.8/3.1	10.0/1.8	29.2/3.2
Second-Year Heritage (N=6)	18.0/2.2	12.0/2.7	16.1/1.8	46.2/5.6
Third- and Fourth-Year Non-Heritage (N=8)	13.4/3.0	10.8/1.5	13.8/3.0	37.9/6.5

^a The first-year heritage students were tested in December 1993 after one semester of study. The other three groups were tested in September 1993 as they were starting the level of study indicated.

comprehension, grammatical knowledge, and reading skills than non-heritage students in the third- and fourth-year courses, thus giving rise to the question of whether the heritage speakers had been appropriately placed within the language curriculum.

Of even greater concern was that during the 1993–94 academic year, there were heritage students enrolled in the first-year language course whose Chinese language skills were superior to those of non-heritage speakers in the third- and fourth-year courses. It was unclear on what basis those heritage speakers had been allowed, or perhaps encouraged, to enroll in the beginning course. Given the very basic content of the first-year course, it is highly unlikely that the CPPT scores of the heritage students enrolled in the first-year course had been significantly affected by the

students' one semester of Chinese study at the University of Maryland before taking the test.

On the basis of this assessment of the existing Chinese language program, the most pressing need identified was a change in the placement process. We decided to use the CPPT as a placement test for all incoming students, regardless of where or how they had previously been exposed to the Chinese language. Using the scores compiled during the initial administration of the CPPT to all post-first-year students (September 1993) and to all first-year students (December 1993), with the addition of another set from an administration to all post-first-year students (December 1994), the program now has a complete set of means that can be used for placement purposes for incoming students.

Commencing in the spring of 1994, all students with previous Chinese language background, either through formal instruction or home language exposure, have been required to take the CPPT if they wish to take Chinese language classes at the University of Maryland. The percentage of heritage students placed in language courses via the CPPT has increased to a reasonably high level (at least 70 percent) since the beginning of the 1995–96 academic year. The curriculum has been expanded by the establishment of a new “accelerated track” course, which is discussed later. Any heritage speakers whose skill levels are judged to be too high to be accommodated within the existing language core curriculum are directed to upper-level courses in literary (classical) Chinese language, Chinese literature, and Chinese linguistics. Depending on the student population, these courses are frequently taught in Chinese, which gives students an opportunity to continue to use their Chinese language skills in a more content-based instructional setting. An added benefit has been to increase enrollment in these upper-level courses. It has also enabled us to create more homogeneous groups of learners throughout the modern Chinese language program, as well as to reserve seats in the beginning-level course for genuine novices.

Stage 2: Needs Analysis

To assess further the range of skill levels within the elementary Chinese student population, the CPPT was administered in December 1993 to all students who had just completed the first semester of the intensive first-year Chinese course. Table 3 details the results for the class as whole.

Table 3.**CPPT results by First-Year Students, December 1993**

Listening Mean/SD (T=22)	Grammar Mean/SD (T=15)	Reading Mean/SD (T=20)	Total (T=57)
12.6/5.8	6.8/4.9	8.6/5.6	28.0/14.4

Immediately apparent is the tremendous range of scores within a single class, as reflected by the high standard deviations. Clearly, whatever placement procedures had been in place prior to the beginning of the academic year were not sufficient to ensure a relatively homogeneous beginning-level class. Moreover, what had been equally apparent in teaching this group of students throughout the fall term was that one could not merely divide between “heritage” and “non-heritage” students. To begin with, there were at least a half-dozen ethnic Chinese students who entered the course as true beginners, lacking even the most rudimentary speaking and/or reading skills in Chinese. Second, there was a wide range of proficiency among the heritage speakers, reflected most acutely in the reading comprehension section of the CPPT. Two groups of heritage speakers were identified on the basis of their CPPT performance as well as the experience of having worked with the students throughout the semester. This necessitated distinguishing formally between what we now call the “semi-native” and “true native” students. The divergent skill levels of these two groups of heritage learners after one semester of study, as well as of those of the true beginners, are presented in Table 4.

The students in the first-year course whom we labeled “semi-native” have interesting linguistic profiles. A comparison of the skill levels between those students after one semester of intensive study (i.e., six contact hours per week) and non-heritage speakers at the start of the second year (i.e., after one year of intensive study at University of Maryland or the equivalent elsewhere) is depicted in Table 5.

After one semester of first-year study, while the semi-native students are very close in listening comprehension skill and grammatical knowledge to their non-heritage counterparts at the beginning of the second year, their reading skills are considerably weaker. This suggests that merely

Table 4.**CPPT Results of First-Year Students (by Category), December 1993**

Student Category	Listening Mean/SD (T=22)	Grammar Mean/SD (T=15)	Reading Mean/SD (T=20)	Total (T=57)
True Beginner (N=8)	8.0 (2.9)	3.8 (2.0)	4.0 (1.5)	15.8 (5.4)
Semi-Native (N=9)	13.2 (5.8)	5.1 (2.4)	8.0 (3.2)	26.2 (5.5)
True Native (N=5)	18.8 (1.6)	14.8 (0.5)	17.2 (2.6)	50.8 (3.9)

Table 5.**CPPT Results for Semi-Native First-Year Students and Non-Heritage Second-Year Students****

Student Category	Listening Mean/SD (T=22)	Grammar Mean/SD (T=15)	Reading Mean/SD (T=20)	Total (T=57)
First-Year Semi-Native (N=9)	13.2/5.8	5.1/2.4	8.0/3.2	26.2/5.5
Second-Year Non-Heritage (N=6)	13.3/2.1	5.8/3.1	10.0/1.8	29.2/3.2

** Data for the first-year students were collected in December 1993, after one semester of study. Data for the second-year students were collected in September 1994, at the beginning of the second year.

advancing the semi-native students more rapidly into the existing second-year course would not be advisable, especially given the highly divergent skill levels within that group (see Table 2). The CPPT results strongly

indicated to the University of Maryland faculty the need for a curricular structure specifically designed for the semi-native heritage speakers, who constituted almost 50 percent of the first-year testing population.

With financial support from the Center for Teaching Excellence and the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Studies, a new “accelerated track” course for semi-native speakers was established in the fall of 1995. The pre-existing first- and second-year curricular structure has been retained with a target audience of students with no previous background in Chinese—that is, a “novice track.”³ The new “accelerated track” course is built around a core population of heritage speakers of non-Mandarin dialects, specifically the sort of students categorized as being semi-native speakers—namely, those students with strong aural/oral skills but comparatively weak (generally almost non-existent) reading and writing skills. During the first year of implementation, the majority of the students in the accelerated track were native speakers of either Cantonese or Taiwanese (Southern Min) dialect.

The “accelerated track” course is characterized by the following features:

1. A thorough introduction to and grounding in modern standard Chinese (Mandarin) pronunciation and the PINYIN system of romanization. Because we recognize the inherent limitations on the development of fully standard Mandarin pronunciation for lifelong speakers of non-Mandarin (e.g., Cantonese, Southern Min) dialects, the students are assessed for their “ceiling” with respect to their ability to produce standard Mandarin. The rigorous introduction to PINYIN is intended to enable students to use the texts and materials effectively to acquire the most standard Mandarin pronunciation possible.
2. Instruction in the features of modern standard Chinese grammar, with particular attention paid to the differences between Mandarin and non-Mandarin syntax in areas such as word order and preposition usage.
3. Earlier and more rapid focus on literacy skill development, while still using spoken (Mandarin) Chinese as the principal medium for classroom instruction.

Stage 3: Continuing Enhancement

One clear indication of the success of the placement process is the decreasing standard deviations in the lower-level courses. Table 6 shows the

Table 6.**CPPT Results for First-Year Students**

Administration Date	Listening Mean/SD (T=22)	Grammar Mean/SD (T=15)	Reading Mean/SD (T=20)	Total (T=57)
December 1993 (N=22)	12.6/5.8	6.8/4.9	8.6/5.6	28.0/14.4
December 1994 (N=31)	11.7/5.6	5.8/4.8	6.1/4.3	23.7/12.8
May 1995 (N=30)	14.1/4.1	6.7/3.5	9.2/3.5	30.0/9.2

means and standard deviations for first-year students taking the CPPT during the first two years of its administration at the University of Maryland. While all of these are post-study administrations, it will be noted that the December administrations were after one semester of study, and the May administration after two semesters of study.

As these more linguistically cohesive student populations move into the upper levels of the curriculum, we will continue to monitor the placement process using, among other means, another administration of the CPPT during the 1997–98 academic year to confirm or revise the existing placement levels.

While the use of a purely local assessment metric meets the needs of a particular program, participation in nationally, or even internationally based projects enables a program to better understand its strengths and weaknesses within a more global context. Such an opportunity has been available to college-level Chinese language programs over the past several years in the development of the SAT II Chinese (with listening) test. The Educational Testing Service has made pretest versions of its SAT II Chinese test available at no cost to college-level programs to help in its test development efforts. The test is now administered on an annual basis throughout the United States. While the SAT II Chinese test does vary in specific question content from year to year, the consistency of item types and overall test content means that it can be used for continuous monitoring of curriculum development work at the University of Maryland

without resorting to overuse of the CPPT. In fact, the structure of the SAT II, composed of listening comprehension, grammatical structures, and reading comprehension sections, is identical to all of the existing receptive skills tests now available for Chinese, including the CPPT.

Since beginning administration of the SAT II pretest in the spring of 1994, we have been able to continue to monitor our program-internal course placement. Table 7 shows the results from administrations of the SAT II to first-year students between May 1994 and December 1995. As with Table 6, although all of these are post-study administrations, the May administrations were after two semesters of study, and the December administration after one semester of study.

The generally decreasing standard deviations demonstrate an increasing coherence of student language skill levels within the first-year course, made possible through both more appropriate placement of "true native" students in more advanced courses, a process that began in fall 1994, as well as the establishment of the accelerated-track course for "semi-native" students in the fall 1995 semester. It also provides confirmation of a similar pattern seen in the data shown in Table 6.

Additionally, at the end of the 1995 fall term, the SAT II was administered to students in the accelerated-track course, as well as to all first- and second-year students in the regular-track courses to monitor the effectiveness of placement procedures for all three lower-level courses. Table 8 provides the results for that test administration.

Table 7.
SAT II Results for First-Year Students

Administration Date	Listening Mean/SD (T=18)	Grammar Mean/SD (T=20)	Reading Mean/SD (T=17)	Total (T=55)
May 1994 (N=40)	14.0/3.3	12.3/5.8	11.1/4.0	37.4/11.8
May 1995 (N=30)	10.1/4.8	10.1/4.2	8.0/2.9	28.1/10.7
December 1995 (N=30)	9.7/4.1	7.9/3.6	9.1/2.7	26.8/7.7

Table 8.**SAT II Results for All Lower-Level Chinese Students, December 1995**

Course	Listening Mean/SD (T=18)	Grammar Mean/SD (T=20)	Reading Mean/SD (T=17)	Total (T=55)
First-Year (Novice Track) (N=26)	9.7/4.1	7.9/3.6	9.1/2.7	26.8/7.7
Accelerated Track (N=19)	15.1/3.1	12.8/4.2	12.4/3.1	40.4/8.2
Second-Year (N=20)	12.0/4.1	11.6/4.8	13.0/3.5	36.6/10.7

The relatively high standard deviations of the mean scores of the second-year students reflects the program's far less systematic placement procedures in the pre-CPPT era. The data also show the clearly stronger listening skills of the semi-native speakers who make up the enrollment for the accelerated course, providing continuing justification for this curricular innovation.

Another advantage of utilizing the SAT II pretest is that it allows the program to continue to monitor changes in the demographics of the student population. At least three types of students have increased in number within the University of Maryland Chinese language program during recent years: students with one to three years of high school Chinese language instruction; native speakers of Vietnamese who frequently also have some background in a southern Chinese non-Mandarin dialect, most often Cantonese; and native speakers of Korean with various degrees of proficiency in Chinese character orthography. Table 9 details the SAT II performance of these various student groups in the fall 1995 first-year Chinese course.

One will note that the final row of data (for the "true native" category) reflected student performance far above that of all other students in the class. The three students in that category had not been required to take the CPPT due to a bureaucratic mix-up; as a result, they were inappropriately placed in the regular first-year class. Additionally, some of those in

Table 9.
SAT II Scores of First-Year Students by Background, December 1993

Background	Listening Mean/SD (T=18)	Grammar Mean/SD (T=20)	Reading Mean/SD (T=17)	Total (T=55)
True Novice (N=2)	4.5/0.7	4.5/0.7	7.0/1.4	16.0/1.4
High School Background (N=3)	7.0/3.5	6.0/1.7	9.7/1.5	22.7/5.9
Korean (N=4)	6.0/1.8	5.3/2.6	9.8/4.3	21.0/7.1
Vietnamese (N=8)	10.0/3.3	8.1/2.3	8.6/2.7	26.8/2.8
Semi-Native (N=6)	11.7/2.3	8.0/1.8	9.0/2.5	28.7/3.1
True Native (N=3)	16.3/1.2	15.1/4.4	10.7/3.1	42.0/2.7

the semi-native and Vietnamese categories, who had not reported themselves to be speakers of a Chinese dialect, would also have been better placed in the accelerated-track class or in a higher-level course in the Chinese curriculum. As a result of this assessment, steps have been taken to ensure that the CPPT is given to every incoming student with Chinese language background before final placement in a course is approved, including administration of the CPPT on the first day of class if necessary. At the same time, the mean scores for students with high school Chinese background and Korean native speakers indicate that their placement in the regular first-year course is the most appropriate option.

As for the new accelerated track, while current resources allow us to offer only one year's worth of curriculum, equal to approximately the same number of characters as those covered in regular first- and second-year courses, the eventual establishment of a graduate degree program within the next several years will enable us to expand our teaching staff with graduate assistants, and thus increase the course offerings within the accelerated track.

The current accelerated track, largely serving students who have home background in a non-Mandarin dialect, is not the only sector within the Chinese language curriculum meriting development. At least two other heritage student groups have been identified that would provide sufficient enrollments to justify establishing the following courses: (1) an advanced-level writing course for those native speakers with genuine native-level proficiency in the oral and literacy skills, but who wish to develop their writing skills for either more creative or vocationally oriented purposes; (2) an intermediate-level speaking course for native speakers of a non-Mandarin dialect who wish to focus exclusively on developing their pronunciation mastery and fluency in using Mandarin for communicative purposes.

These and other possibilities for curricular development await the hoped-for increase in resources available to the department in the years ahead.

Conclusion

Teaching Chinese to the Chinese requires a systematic assessment of both student population and institutional resources to best meet the needs of the former without exhausting the latter. The revision in progress of the curriculum discussed here is but one scenario that was appropriate for the particular local conditions at the University of Maryland. Other situations may well require more creative approaches. For example, where the heritage speaker population outstrips resources at an institution, joint ventures among a number of institutions, possibly even at both the secondary and tertiary level, may be an attractive alternative, particularly in a large metropolitan area with a comparatively large number of potential participating institutions.

Simultaneous with the challenge of heritage learners is the challenge of articulation. For those involved in Chinese language instruction at the college level, it will increasingly be the case that students with greater and more diverse types of preparation will appear in our classes—heritage and non-heritage speakers with considerable previous background in Chinese from formal and informal instructional settings, including public and private elementary and secondary schools, overseas study programs, and Chinese community or weekend schools. For comparison purposes, consider that according to data compiled by the Chinese Language

Association of Secondary-Elementary Schools (CLASS) in the fall of 1995, just under 6,000 students were enrolled in K–12 Chinese language programs in the United States, including exploratory programs (Lee, personal communication, November 1995). But in statistics compiled by the National Council of Associations of Chinese Language Schools (NCA-CLS) for the same period, there were reported to be approximately 82,000 students enrolled in community/weekend schools—over ten times as many potential students for programs at the university level (Chao, personal communication, November 1995). Of course not all of these students from either community or compulsory schools will enroll in university-level Chinese language programs. But those who do bring linguistic, communicative, and cultural skills that are not yet easily accommodated in existing college curricula. If only in quantitative terms, it is clear that it is the community schools, which are composed almost exclusively of heritage learners, that present to us the greatest challenge.

As a result, we in the field of Chinese language education have the opportunity—and indeed, are compelled by circumstances—to take a leadership role in developing models for articulation. Articulating with the cultural and linguistic demands of teaching Chinese to the Chinese will be critical to our success.

Notes

1. *Practical Chinese Reader* (hereafter *PCR*) was originally chosen as the base text because of its widespread use throughout the United States. In a survey conducted by the Chinese Language Teachers Association in 1995, approximately one-fourth of 382 responding instructors reported using *PCR* as the text for both the first year (28.6 percent) and second year (25.4 percent) courses; the next most commonly used textbook at the first-year level was used by only 12.7 percent of the respondents.
2. The so-called Chinese “dialects” are for all practical purposes mutually unintelligible languages. A person who can speak only Mandarin and a person who can speak only one of the non-Mandarin dialects (e.g., Cantonese) would be unable to communicate orally, primarily due to the high degree of phonological difference between the two. However, all of the dialects are historically related and share many common syntactic and lexical features as well as a common written

orthography. Thus, it is much easier for a speaker of Cantonese or another dialect to learn Mandarin than it would be to learn any non-Chinese language.

3. In addition to true beginners, the “novice track” also includes students with some high school preparation, although not sufficient to be placed in the second-year course, and speakers of Vietnamese and Korean.

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