REVIEW OF BEGINNER'S CHINESE and INTERMEDIATE CHINESE

Beginner's Chinese with Two Audio CDs

Yong Ho

1997

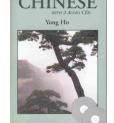
ISBN 0-7818-1095-7

US \$25

188 pp.

Hippocrene Books, Inc.

New York, USA



BEGINNER'S

Intermediate Chinese with Two Audio CDs

Yong Ho

2004

ISBN 0-7818-1096-5

US \$21.95

309 pp.

Hippocrene Books, Inc.

New York, USA



Review by Tiffany Shao, American University

As China emerges as a global economic and political power, interest in learning Chinese and learning about Chinese culture also increases. Some learn Chinese to be able to live and work in China; others learn Chinese just to be able to get around while traveling through the vast country. Just as in the learning of any language, textbooks are useful to learners when they meet learners' needs and goals for communicating in the target language. The books reviewed here, Ho's *Beginner's Chinese* and *Intermediate Chinese*, may best serve those learners whose needs and goals are to travel in China rather than those who want to live and work professionally there.

Both *Beginner's* and *Intermediate Chinese* books are "based on the premise that less is more" and are "communication-oriented" (*Intermediate*, p. iii). Each book covers ten lessons organized by functional topics such as "Greetings" and "Money and Shopping" (*Beginner's*) and "Holidays and Festivals" and "Health and Fitness" (*Intermediate*). Both books teach vocabulary, grammar, and the written characters of Chinese by presenting three to four dialogs in each lesson. The dialogs can be heard on an accompanying audio CD, although *Beginner's Chinese* has an additional CD for pinyin and tones (pronunciation) practice. In addition, both books include answer keys to each lesson's exercises and appendices on further resources, both print and online, for self-study of Chinese.

Beginner's Chinese is "designed for those with little or no prior experience in the language" (back cover), and this is achieved by the author's excellent introductory explanations of Chinese in the chapters Chinese Language: Its Prominent Features, Chinese Phonetics, and Written Chinese¹. Each lesson in the book starts with Sentence Patterns, scripts of the Conversations, Words and Expressions, Supplementary Words and Expressions, Language Points, and Exercises, and ends with Cultural Insights relevant to the topic of the lesson. However, the CD for each lesson starts with Words and Expressions, continues with Supplementary Words and Expressions, then Sentence Patterns, and finishes with Conversations. If the author's intention was to introduce new vocabulary and expressions first, then it is puzzling why the

organization of the book and the audio CD are not in sync. The amount of vocabulary and number of expressions taught in each lesson increases by lesson so that upon finishing the book, "the student will have learned 90 basic sentence patterns, 300 written characters, and numerous communicative skills" (back cover). The author's use of "Sentence Patterns" encompasses both grammar structures, such as the modals *yao* 'to be going to, want', *neng* 'can, may', and *keyi* 'can, may' (p. 78-79), and useful terms and chunks, such as *yixiar*, used with verbs to mean a brief action, and *tingshuo*, meaning 'I heard' or 'they say' (p. 81). These 90 basic sentence patterns are recycled throughout the lessons, but since they are all new to learners, 90 patterns can be quite overwhelming for a beginner.

The same can be said for teaching 300 written characters in a beginner's book, especially since the author advises in the introduction on written Chinese that "the emphasis of this or any other beginning course for adult learners is on speaking or communicating, character learning and writing are not given priority" (p. xii). Learners can certainly learn to speak or communicate in Chinese with this book because new words and expressions, while presented in Chinese characters, are also romanized in pinyin and translated into English. In fact, there are textbooks such as *Chinese for Dummies* (Abraham, 2005) and *Chinese in Plain English* (De Mente, 1995), which teach Chinese with pinyin alone without Chinese characters at all. Pinyin is used in China to teach pronunciation of Mandarin; however, learning Chinese as a foreign language by pinyin may allow learners to "read" and "speak" Chinese, but not necessary "understand" Chinese. Just as in learning any language, even one whose orthography is similar to English, being able to speak or pronounce words and phrases does not mean communicative competency. Perhaps the author acknowledges and compensates for this problem by directing those beginner learners who cannot "resist learning some characters" to separate software programs, online tutorial sites, and "an exercise book with grid pages" to practice writing characters (pp. xii – xiii).

For learners who just want to be able to speak and understand tourism Chinese, the presentation in each lesson of paring pinyin with English translations is functional. Together with the audio CD, learners can pick up chunks of useful phrases for greetings, asking for directions, time expressions, and ordering in a restaurant. The recording of the audio is clear, and the rate of speech is slow enough for a beginner to follow. However, when rate of speech is slowed down, some conversations sound robotic and emotionless. As mentioned before, the *Beginner's* book includes a bonus CD on pinyin practice. Although the author does not specifically suggest it, learners may best be served by starting their learning of Chinese by mastering pinyin first. This is especially important since the representation of Chinese sounds using the Roman alphabet can result in odd combinations of consonants and vowels, together with diacritic marks to indicate the four tones: a learner may very well be wondering "did the CD just say what sounded like 'chu' for qu?" The speaker on the pinyin practice CD is exceptionally clear in her articulation of all possible Chinese sound combinations in four tones; however, she does not leave time after each set of combinations for learners to repeat and practice, which would be useful. While the author provides a list of these possible sound combinations for the 21 consonants in the appendix to use with the CD, the CD starts off with vowel practice. Unfortunately, there is no itemized visual/textual representation of vowels and vowel combinations, except for a chart in the beginning of the book and in the introduction on Chinese Phonetics (p. vii). Furthermore, the order of the vowel sounds in the vowel chart and in the introduction does not match the order as recorded on the CD.

By learning chunks of key words and phrases, learners who want to be able to speak and understand tourism Chinese can achieve this goal relatively quickly. The author presents these chunks as Sentence Patterns which are further explained as grammatical structures and communicative usages in Language Points. This method of teaching grammar structures and language functions works for language learners who are used to memorization. However, memorized grammar structures and chunks of words and phrases do not necessarily enable learners to communicate when they are engaged in real-life interactions. By presenting chunks of key words and phrases to learners, the author does not allow learners to discover for themselves grammatical structures and the communicative functions in which they are appropriately

used (cf. Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). In other words, learners do not have to take responsibility for self-learning since the answers and explanations are provided by the textbook/teacher. Once again, the author seems to compensate for this weakness by stating in the introduction that "Chinese grammar is very simple," and indirectly quoting the renowned linguist Yuen Ren Chao that "all Chinese grammar is syntax, all Chinese syntax is word order, and therefore all Chinese grammar is word order" (pp. iv and v).

In *Intermediate Chinese*, instead of Sentence Patterns, dialogs and new vocabulary are used to "illustrate common grammatical patterns" (back cover). Unlike *Beginner's Chinese*, this follow-up book focuses on reading and writing of Chinese by presenting a short reading passage, in Chinese characters and pinyin, in each lesson (the corresponding English translation is provided at the end of each lesson). This sudden focus on reading and writing of Chinese characters may be a hurdle for learners who learned from *Beginner's Chinese*, which focused more on speaking and communicating. The topics covered in *Intermediate Chinese* are also less tourism Chinese and more "Chinese for living and working in China." These include Calling and Answering, School and School Life, and Job Hunting and Interviewing. In other words, this volume is suitable for more academic Chinese taught in classrooms.

Presentation and organization of each lesson in *Intermediate Chinese* are different from *Beginner's Chinese*. Each lesson starts with Conversations, a short Reading Passage, New Words and Expressions, Supplementary Words and Expressions, Language Points, Exercises, and English translations of the scripts of the conversations and reading passage. The accompanying audio CD follows the order of presentation in the textbook, but it does not include Supplementary Words and Expressions. Although, just as in *Beginner's Chinese*, *Intermediate Chinese* is text-heavy, it does include a few simple black-and-white drawings of people, activities, and objects, such as those that accompany the progressive aspect (pp. 43-44), prepositions and directions (pp. 73-76, 86, 88-89), body parts (See Figure 1, p. 125), and Chinese zodiac signs (p. 155).

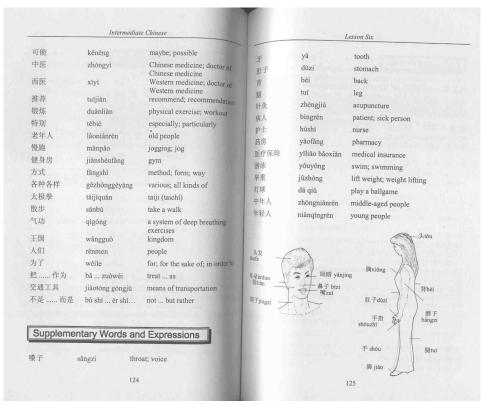


Figure 1. Sample black and white drawing in *Internediate Chinese*.

It is possible that a learner is new to *Intermediate Chinese* who has previous knowledge of Mandarin Chinese learned from other texts (back cover). If a learner is continuing his or her study from *Beginner's Chinese*, then the materials presented in *Intermediate Chinese* should include materials recycled from the previous volume in addition to new materials. In as early as Lesson 2, the author assumes the learner has previous knowledge of "making/talking on the telephone" to be able to complete the exercise on "describing what people are doing in the following pictures" (p. 43), but the term "*da dianhua*" (making/talking on the telephone) is first introduced in the following lesson (pp. 51 and 54). In general, a cursory glance of *Intermediate Chinese* gives the impression that a learner should have a solid academically-learned foundation in Chinese, especially in literacy of Chinese characters, to be able to understand and learn successfully from this book. While a glossary of vocabulary covered in *Beginner's Chinese* is included in this follow-up book "to assist learners with making a smooth transition" (p. iv), the amount of Chinese characters might initially be overwhelming.

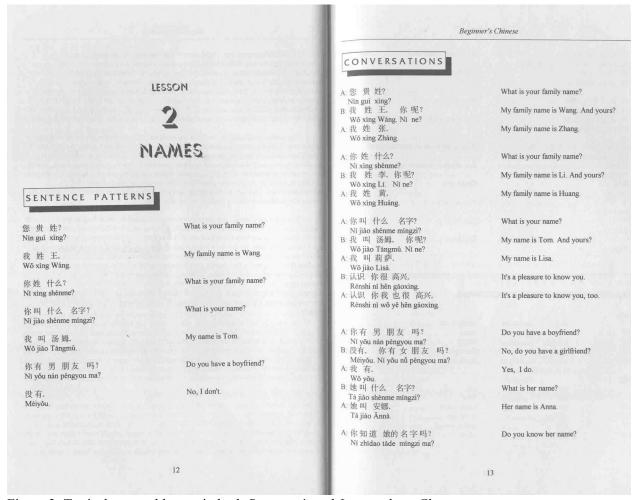


Figure 2. Typical text and layout in both Beginner's and Intermediate Chinese

Both *Beginner's Chinese* and *Intermediate Chinese* are similar in presentation so that a "smooth transition" is nonetheless possible. In fact, the "look" of the texts is the same: sentences in Chinese characters appear first horizontally from left to right, then the same sentences in pinyin using the Roman alphabet is repeated immediately beneath the characters. The Chinese characters are known as "square characters", and "[i]rrespective of the complexity of strokes and structures, each character occupies the same amount of space as the next one" on the page (p. xiii, *Beginner's*). Obviously, using the Latin alphabet to spell out sounds of Chinese characters, however, takes up a variable amount of space to

represent the sounds. For example, the term *Zhongwen*, 'Chinese language', is composed of *two* square Chinese characters, but *eight* Roman letters (the textbook capitalizes the "z" following the English writing convention of capitalizing the first letter of proper nouns). In the scripts of the dialogs, language points, and exercises, the author spaces out the Chinese characters and words to line up with the space required to spell out the words in pinyin, as well as to separate out grammatical parts of speech in Chinese. The result is inconsistent spacing between Chinese characters and words while the pinyin is spaced evenly. (See Figure 2.) It is perhaps a matter of learner preference to visually match up Chinese characters and words with corresponding pinyin. The teaching of literacy of Chinese should expose the learners to authentic writing of Chinese: both the characters and how they are spaced in relation to punctuation marks. By the time learners reach the intermediate level, it might be damaging to develop a reliance on inauthentic spacing to distinguish parts of speech and collocations for meaning.

Intermediate Chinese also carries over familiar exercises from Beginner's Chinese. Routines are useful in language learning. From Beginner's Chinese, learners by now are accustomed to the format of certain exercises and can focus on completing the exercise instead of understanding directions. Typical exercises in both volumes are "answer the following questions," "fill in the blank," "translate the following into Chinese," the correcting of mistakes, and conversion of sentences. In Intermediate Chinese, to focus on reading and writing, there are also writing exercises, such as "describe your home or apartment" in the lesson on locations and directions (p. 92). If a learner is using this book for self-study, such exercises should certainly strengthen the ability to manipulate grammar (or more precisely, word order) and develop literacy in characters. However, the exercises are mostly "controlled" in that "there is only one correct answer," and, while they are good practices to reinforce the memorization of chunks, grammar structures, and character stroke orders, such exercises do not easily allow learners to "apply the same structure to real communicative contexts outside the classroom" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005, p. 3).

Chinese is drastically different from English in sounds, grammar, and orthography. Due to such differences, it is perhaps more productive that both teachers and learners first determine the learner's needs and goals for learning Chinese. If one wants to pick up enough Chinese in a few months through self-study to be able to travel in China, then *Beginner's Chinese* may serve as an ideal textbook. If one wants to expand or supplement his or her Chinese previously learned in an academic setting, then *Intermediate Chinese* is an excellent addition. Teachers may also find both volumes to be good supplements to their assigned texts. In learning Chinese as a foreign language in the U.S., where authentic audio materials can be hard to obtain (sometimes it may also be difficult to find native Chinese speakers to record teacher-created dialogs), the dialogs on the audio CDs can provide students with additional opportunities to hear different voices of spoken Chinese as well as supplementary dialogs in various life functions. Best of all, both volumes are modestly priced for a solid foundation in Chinese for both students and teachers.

NOTES

1. Capital letters are used to indicate the author's lesson sub-sections.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Tiffany Shao is a lecturer of Intermediate Chinese at American University. She is interested in applying the principles and techniques of communicative language teaching to the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language in the U.S.

E-mail: ts8103a@american.edu

REFERENCES

Abraham, W. (2005). Chinese for dummies. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (Ed.). (2005). Innovative and communicative materials for teaching grammar [Special Issue]. *AU TESOL Working Papers*, 3. Washington, DC: TESOL Program, American University.

De Mente, B. L. (1995). Chinese in plain English. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

Ho, Yong. (1997). Beginner's Chinese with two audio CDs. New York: Hippocrene Books.

Ho, Yong. (2004). Intermediate Chinese with two audio CDs. New York: Hippocrene Books.