

REVIEW OF *ENCOUNTERS: CHINESE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE*

Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture (Student Book 1)

Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture (Character Writing Workbook 1)

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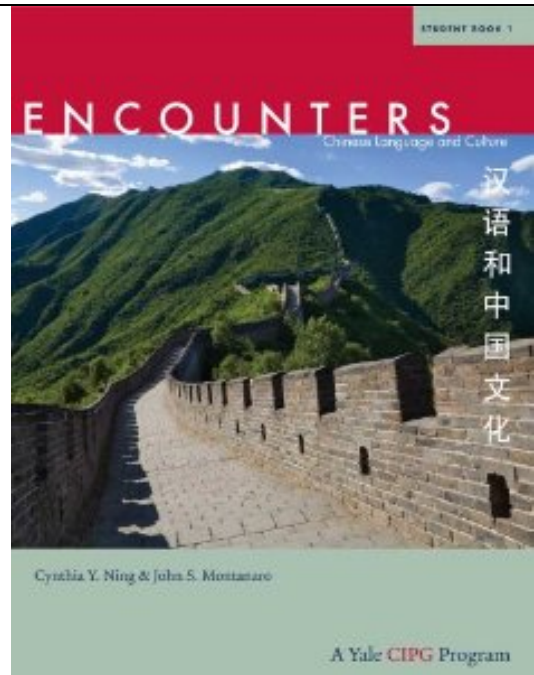
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In the past two decades, great value has been placed on communicative and cultural competency in language classrooms. This has led to a burgeoning of textbooks focusing on learners' communicative skills and their ability to use the language in the target culture. However, Chinese textbooks often lack key communicative criteria and often do not require learners to be able to use Chinese in authentic, real-life settings. Some Chinese textbooks on the market, such as *Chinese Link* (Wu, Yu & Zhang, 2007) and *Integrated Chinese* (Liu, 2008), seem to place great emphasis on learners' reading and writing skills and introduce a large amount of vocabulary and grammar rules in each chapter. Few activities are devoted to learners' communicative skills, and instructions are sometimes unclear, which require teachers to invest much time preparing for class. Culture might only be presented as facts within limited space at the end of each chapter. Thus, teachers of Chinese might be intrigued by *Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture*, because it is promoted as a truly communicative and task-based textbook. I am glad to report that it is highly communicative, has authentic materials, and most importantly, is, as it is promoted, "culturally rich and delightfully engaging" (p. xvii). However, teachers who use it will still need to supplement parts of the book to enhance its potential to promote task-based learning.

Integrated, Authentic, Practical, and Engaging

The *Encounters* program provides an integrated series of learning materials: student books, character writing workbooks, companion website, CD-ROMs (dramatic video episodes, instructional videos on Chinese culture, information about class testing and sample exams, etc.), and annotated instructor editions. One of the most distinctive features of the *Encounters* program is that it includes a dramatic storyline that was filmed in six different locations across China with a cast of nine characters from different areas and with different cultural and social backgrounds. These characters discover themselves and others as they explore the language and culture of China. This is very similar to *Sol Viente* (VanPatten, Lesser & Keating, 2011), a Spanish textbook, in that it also provides a video series particularly made for the textbook. This genre of textbook has been gaining popularity in language education in the United States.

An additional bonus is a series of video culture notes. For example, people on the street talk about their views on topics such as different forms of greetings in Chinese and different methods of bargaining in street markets. For the culture notes, the videographers recorded a mix of non-actors (passers-by), actors tasked with certain communicative speech acts (these appear to be mainly unscripted), and teachers, who comment on the speech acts and explain them through a Chinese cultural lens. Learners thereby become engaged in both urban and rural settings in China. Also importantly, through watching these videos, learners get a chance to hear a range of native speakers' accents.

The title of each unit is written in English, Pinyin, and Chinese characters. Interestingly, unlike the other textbooks in which the titles are simply "Lesson X", specific expressions that are related to the topics in the unit are presented as the titles. These are often four-character Chinese idioms or widely used proverbs. For example, Unit Five concerns family and friends, with title "亲朋好友" (*qīnpénghǎoyǒu*, "family and friends"); Unit Nine deals with shopping and bargaining; the title is, then, "一分价钱一分货" (*yì fēn jiàqián yì fēn huò*, "you get what you pay for"). In addition, on each unit's introductory page, students can garner a clear idea of what they will learn in the unit from a list of skills and topics that will be covered in each lesson. Introducing a unit in this way is not only appealing to learners but also culturally rich and authentic. It corresponds with the authors' idea that students should be immersed in the target language and culture immediately, from the start of Chinese learning. When overviewing the complete table of contents, I sensed that this textbook might be task-based, in that the chapter topics are based on what students will need to know to communicate in Chinese.

The units in the textbook contain supplementary or additional information through three types of colored "boxes": "Grammar Bits" (blue), "FYI" (green), and "Cultural Bits" (red). Vocabulary, grammar, culture, and other information are, in this way, not presented as isolated sections as seen in many other textbooks. Rather, they are interspersed throughout the units, interwoven with the storyline, and embedded in the audio and video materials. "Grammar Bits" boxes explicitly instruct the grammar needed to convey meaning related to the unit topics and activities. The authors created these grammar lessons as "incidental"; however, one might contextualize them better as reflecting a planned focus on form, as the grammar forms highlighted anticipate the language needed to complete the communicative tasks at the heart of the lessons. The grammar explanations in these boxes are presented in English, which might negate the need for teachers to focus precious in-class time explaining sometimes complicated grammar points, which further allows teachers to only talk in Chinese during class. "FYI" boxes provide factual information (for example, that China has only one time zone) and study tips. The "Cultural Bits" boxes often have questions for discussion related to the cultural aspects of the video and only provide, as the authors note, a "jumping-off point" (p. xxvii) for investigations into Chinese society and culture. In other words, teachers have plenty of room to supplement the instruction with their own culturally-focused tasks here. But the authors should be commended for not leaving culture to the very end of each unit and for not simply listing cultural facts. With this textbook the Chinese teaching field is closer to the notion that culture is inseparable from language. It helps students explore how Chinese culture is different from or similar to their own by providing thought-provoking questions.

With a great emphasis on practicality, lessons in *Encounters* deal with up-to-date topics. For instance, when studying Unit Six, in which professions and careers are discussed, students learn about the changes taking place in workplaces in modern China, which leads to a further discussion of the relationship between education and careers in contemporary Chinese society. Another example is Unit Nine, which deals with shopping and bargaining. Different from other textbooks in which students only learn about some expressions used when shopping, this unit embeds language learning within the art of bargaining and offers useful tips for bargaining in China. Another enjoyable aspect about *Encounters* is that numerous authentic texts are presented throughout. By incorporating authentic materials—business cards, advertisements, newspapers, signs, and hand-written notes—the lessons provide practical information that enables students to better understand Chinese culture.

Unlike some other Chinese textbooks, which can be monotonous in design, *Encounters* features a colorful layout. It has authentic photographs, attractive illustrations, and organizing icons. These bells and whistles likely keep learners motivated because they are visually pleasing. To encourage students to learn Chinese, entertaining rap songs are presented to review the core vocabulary and expressions in each unit. A “Recap” (wrap-up) section appears at the end of each unit. Each of these sections includes a summary of grammar points, a list of vocabulary, and a checklist of “can-do” skills that students should have mastered after learning the unit. Those skills span listening, speaking, reading, writing, and particularly, understanding culture. The “Recap,” which corresponds to the preview section on the introductory page of that unit, also helps students monitor their progress, identify gaps in their learning, and appreciate their accomplishments. All of these features may help deepen learners’ understanding of the language, the culture, and the people of China, and also make the learning process more organized and enjoyable. This is particularly important to help build self-regulating and autonomous learners, ones who will be more likely to continue to learn Chinese to the advanced level.

A Variety of Activities

Another characteristic of *Encounters* is the provision of a wide range of activities. Each unit is comprised of several “Encounters” in which real-life topics are presented, and activities are designed in such a way that students start from more form-focused practices and then progress to more meaning-based communicative exercises. For example, in Unit Four in which nationalities are discussed, the first *encounter* is “expressing nationality.” To begin, students are introduced to vocabulary concerning nationalities through various form-focused exercises. Once they become familiar with the expressions, they start doing communicative activities. For example, students are asked to take notes on short conversations with classmates about their home cultures. The next *encounter* focuses on talking about places students have lived, in which students, again, learn vocabulary and expressions through exercises, and then move to a “mingling” communicative activity, in which they are instructed to ask several classmates where they were born, where they grew up and where they live now. The following *encounters* follow a similar pattern. The last *encounter* of each unit is always Reading and Writing, in which the focus shifts to reading and writing skills so that students can develop a range of communication abilities.

However, within this variety, I found the various activities to be somewhat unrelated at times. For example, in Unit Four, students first read various window signs from China and a postcard from Taiwan, all of which they then translate into English, and then they are instructed to write an introductory note to a new friend, explaining a bit about oneself. It is perhaps a shame that the various activities are not integrated more, with, for example, the post-card writing example being extended into a postcard writing task. The content of the postcards could have also been related to the text presented in the window signs. These missed opportunities are unfortunate and would be worth revisiting in a subsequent edition. While the speaking and writing activities often provide a nice shell for the communicative activities, teachers will need to thoughtfully consider how to make the activities more meaningful and more developed into complex *tasks* with outcomes that can be assessed. The annotated instructor’s edition provides useful tips and suggestions on how to use the materials. Teachers may want to take those tips a step further and create links between the activities in order to design more robust and meaningful speaking and writing task.

Use of Multimedia and Technology

An outstanding feature of *Encounters* is that the program has a companion website which offers an array of materials and activities, including interactive exercises, streaming video and audio content, and other resources for practicing speaking, listening, reading, and writing in Chinese. Online media enhances learning and teaching by providing a powerful yet intuitive tool to engage language learners and instructors (Cairncross & Mannion, 2001; Evans & Gibbons, 2007). The use of music also provides

students a lighthearted and friendly environment to engage in Chinese learning.

Other Notes

What I also like about the *Encounters* program is that the character writing workbook presents the stroke order of each character and contextualizes each character to help learners' understanding. Strategies for remembering the characters are also suggested. In addition, the workbook shows the evolution of characters from ancient to modern Chinese in both traditional and simplified forms. Indeed, the inclusion of both traditional and simplified characters may help learners who have different learning purposes; however, for beginning learners with no previous experience with the Chinese writing system, it might be confusing. Also, unlike many other textbooks in which the exercises are written solely in characters, *Encounters* provides both Pinyin and character forms, with instructions in English. This may help beginning learners better recognize Chinese characters; however, it also involves the potential problem that learners may overly rely on Pinyin as they go through the units.

Despite those minor flaws, *Encounters* provides learners with meaningful, authentic, and engaging contexts. More importantly, the use of multimedia and technology helps learners explore China and Chinese culture. As the authors claim, *Encounters* “masterfully guides learners along a well-prepared path toward intercultural communication and understanding, a path that also leads to fuller participation in the modern global community” (p. xvii). There is no doubt that this textbook can bring significant contributions to the field of Chinese language teaching and inspire new innovations in the development of Chinese teaching materials.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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