

LEARNING CHINESE

A FOUNDATION COURSE IN MANDARIN

in three parts

I: Units 1-4

II: Units 5-7

III: Units 8-12

Julian K. Wheatley
MIT

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Yǒngwǎng zhíqián ('bravely go forwards')
'Onwards and upwards!'

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Preface

The essential features of *Learning Chinese: A Foundation Course in Mandarin.*

Versions of *Learning Chinese: A Foundation Course in Mandarin* have, over the last few years, been introduced by increments into the first three terms of the regular Chinese language program at MIT. The book has been reworked and revised several times in the process. In its final form, it has 3 parts, each with 4 units, for a total of 12. The first 8 of these units include a substantial character component. By Unit 9, however, students can read sufficiently well to make use of graded readers of the sort already available, and so Part 3, made up of Units 9-12, does not include character lessons.

Listed below are 10 essential features of *Learning Chinese*:

1. It is for a diverse audience.

The book is intended for a diverse audience, specialist and non-specialist alike. But it is particularly conceived for the latter group, for whom language courses are the major source of knowledge of China as well as Chinese. Such students need a course that not only guides them towards basic conversational and literary skills, but also stimulates their curiosity about the linguistic setting of the language and the geography, history and culture of the lands where it is spoken. On completing *Learning Chinese*, students will have a solid foundation for further study of the language, whether in a specialized program of Chinese studies, or in conjunction with work or further study in a Chinese speaking country.

2. It has a discursive style, with content woven into units.

The textbook proceeds discursively, with content organized in units that are made up of a dozen or more topics. A unit (including the character portion) may take a month or longer to complete. This approach makes it possible to introduce a wealth of interconnected material that can form the basis of engaging conversations and interesting narratives. So, for example, the final unit of Part 1 introduces (among other things) time phrases, names and titles, introductions and subjects of study. These are practiced piecemeal in the early classes; but later, they are woven together along the lines of the culminating dialogue of that unit (in which a Chinese businessman strikes up a conversation with an overseas student on a bus in Sichuan). Within each lesson, topics are selected so students can build up a conversational repertoire that can be practiced, personalized, and extended from lesson to lesson.

3. It is intellectually stimulating.

The textbook is exuberant rather than restrained. Its Chinese content is current and lively, with subjects that range from ordering food to bargaining, from visiting temples to discussing conditions in Tibet. It is also larded with quotations, rhymes, popular culture, linguistic information, and historical and geographical notes. It is intended to be an intellectually stimulating resource for both students and teachers alike.

4. Its content is easily transformed into classroom activities.

The selection and ordering of topics is based on the author's experience learning and teaching Chinese over several decades. It is guided by what the beginning student is likely to encounter in and out of the classroom setting, as well as by the need to provide a broad foundation of grammatical, lexical and cultural information for future work in Chinese. It mixes practical topics, such as providing biographical information, buying train tickets, or giving toasts, with topics of general interest, such as geography, regional languages and brand names. Such topics are easily enriched with online materials (such as satellite maps, photographs, video clips and advertisements); they are also easy to transform into effective classroom activities.

5. It can be used for self-instruction.

With occasional help from a Chinese speaker, *Learning Chinese* can serve as a manual for self-instruction. It introduces the language systematically; it has extensive explanations about grammar and usage, as well as suggestions about how to learn the material; it provides a pathway for the inductive learning of characters; it comes with the *flashCube* learning and testing program (see #10); and it can be accessed electronically, with a selection of audio files and other materials from MIT's OpenCourseware.

6. Its character lessons can be omitted or used independently.

Chinese is learned more effectively when the enormous task of learning to read in characters is separated from the task of learning the sounds, lexicon, grammar and usage of the language. Because *Learning Chinese* separates character reading from other aspects of learning the language, students who wish to study or review the colloquial language without reference to characters can ignore the character components; while those with sufficient grammatical knowledge can study the character material alone.

7. It emphasizes reading skills over writing; it teaches simplified and traditional characters simultaneously.

The character lessons focus on learning to read in characters. Writing is encouraged for its aesthetic qualities, and as a way to draw attention to the distinguishing features of characters; so is word processing, which makes use of character recognition skills. But the emphasis is on reading. Rather than selecting one character set as primary (or offering separate versions of character material), both the traditional and the simplified are introduced simultaneously. Given the fact that the majority of characters have either only one form or very similar forms, learning to read both is quite feasible. For writing purposes, however, students can choose one or the other as their primary medium.

8. It uses an inductive approach to promote character reading.

The character lessons are placed at the end of each unit so that, for the most part, the language represented by the characters is already familiar. Within the lessons, characters are exemplified first in compounds and phrases, then in sentences, dialogues, and narratives, as well as in data sets that present information in tabular form. The approach is inductive. It attempts to provide enough context at each step to make reading possible, and to thereby ease the process of familiarization and discourage studying from isolated lists.

9. It accommodates supplementary material.

Learning Chinese is envisioned as the foundation text for a sequence of Chinese language courses, but although it is comprehensive in its coverage, it can easily accommodate traditional or online supplements of the kind that teachers, in time-honored fashion, use to enrich a course and make it their own. Nowadays, such materials range from podcasts for listening and blogs for reading to voice-over-IP telephony for actual conversation. These tools can enrich the learning environment but their effectiveness still depends on a strong foundation of linguistic and cultural knowledge.

10. It is accompanied by a learning/testing program called 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 tools such as flashcards, vocabulary and phrase notebooks, and tape recorders. *flashCube* stores, in a compact and convenient format, much of the Chinese material presented in the 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 allow the creation of individualized data bases, or instant access to web-based encyclopedic information.