

Introduction

*He who does not understand words is incapable
of understanding men*

e Analects of Confucius, 20.3 (Leys trans.)

The idea for this book stemmed from my experience teaching Chinese to very busy people. My students have included corporate CEOs and a cabinet minister and I quickly became aware of the need to tailor language material to meet practical needs within limited timeframes created by professional commitments. These people did not expect to become fluent in conversation but wanted to acquire enough usable language that reflected their interest and which could help establish some ready rapport with their counterparts in China. Such beginners with a firm view on practical needs often comment ‘I just want to be able to say...’. My own experience of learning and using Chinese over many years taught me that a number of highly useful expressions can be easily learned and are adaptable to a variety of social situations. Most importantly

they establish a connection with native speakers and through them an appreciation of the cultural context of the Chinese language.

This introduction to spoken Mandarin Chinese for the adult learner uses practical methods to deal with the mismatch between ability and needs. The selection of words and phrases is based on their usefulness in more sophisticated social situations while recognizing the need for ease of learning and pronunciation. The introduction to the usages of different words and phrases have been carefully selected to avoid overly complex grammar while still being able to be used as stand alone comments in appropriate situations.

It is possible to learn sufficient and useful Chinese with a minimum but sustained effort without learning the Chinese script. The approach of this book makes great use of the limited sound structure and economy of expression that characterise the Chinese language. The use of the pinyin spelling system, the official romanisation system in China, can be quickly mastered as a tool for progressing learning. With the veil of the Chinese characters removed the elegant simplicity of both Chinese grammar as well as the sound system is revealed. Like many things Chinese, there is a premium on the use of flexibility and adaptability which in terms of language means that a little can go a long way—great news for users of this book!

The simplicity and economy of the Mandarin sound system mean that the basics of pronunciation can be quickly learned. A detailed pronunciation guide, with a

note on tones, features at the start of this book. It is recommended that you review this before delving into the chapters. To assist familiarization with the spelling system, within the chapters pronunciation is provided in square brackets to aid memory.

While tones are important it is not necessary to get the tone right first time—most Chinese speakers bring their regional accents to Mandarin which even in the case of northern speakers can mean some heavy accents. Tones and pronunciation will improve with familiarity and use.

The inclusion of proverbial sayings in this book acknowledges their important place in ordinary speech as well as the extent to which such proverbs reflect much of the charm and spirit of the language. It has been observed that ‘the Chinese perhaps more than any other people are world-renowned for their proverbs, and proverbs have long played and continue to play an important role in both their oral and written traditions up to the present day’ (Rohsenow, *ABC Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs*, xvii). Short proverbial sayings are structured for oral memorization and can be used for maximum effect as stand alone expressions without the need for more complex linguistic support. Very common sayings have been selected for their relative ease of pronunciation. They can be used effectively from the earliest engagement with the language to the delighted surprise of listeners. The continued use of proverbial language in Chinese reflects an educational tradition that has always placed a premium on oral repetition and rote memorization. More importantly, proverbs

express traditional knowledge and values that still resonate with speakers today.

How this book works

This practical introduction to spoken Mandarin Chinese is structured around a number of sentences and expressions that can be immediately used. The vocabulary and grammar of each key expression is explained together with further examples of related usages. Where appropriate, linguistic and cultural notes are provided for additional background. The order of the key expressions has been arranged according to likely social situations that will confront the adult visitor to China whether on an official visit or for pleasure. The basic language patterns and grammatical structures introduced provide a useful foundation for further, more formal, study. The selection covers a large proportion of Chinese grammatical structures and patterns.

This guide can also be productively used by a native-speaker tutor. While the content is designed to be suitable for self-study, access to an experienced (native or foreign) speaker to correct pronunciation and intonation is recommended. Few native speakers of any language are equipped to teach their own language, though appropriate teaching material can make the most productive use of both the student and teacher's time. Most native speakers are unaware of the language needs of the adult foreign learner as well as the shortcuts in their language that have been (arduously) acquired by fluent foreign speakers.

The accompanying MP3 pronunciation guide contains the main sentence patterns as well as vocabulary provided in the text. It is recommended that you listen to each lesson a couple of times to become familiar with the sound patterns. Pronounce each sound as naturally as you can without straining for perfect accuracy. The examples are very basic vocabulary that is easily understood. Remember that context is all and for native Chinese speakers also it is most often the sounds around each word that communicate meaning rather than individual sounds. Familiarity will come with practice.

It hardly needs saying that communication is about much more than language, even so there remains few more convenient bridges into another culture than the spoken word. Confucius himself appreciated this point when he said: 'He who does not understand words is incapable of understanding men.' In its practical guidance to matters of social intercourse this principle underpins much of the content that provides some background to the cultural milieu of the people that use the language.

A modest aim of this work is that it will stimulate further interest in both the language and culture of China. An indication of interest usually meets with appreciation and respect for foreigners who have gone to the trouble to acquaint themselves, no matter how rudimentarily, with the Chinese language. If this occurs even occasionally the purpose of this guide can be considered to have been realized. Enjoy!

Note on sounds in Chinese

Chinese words are usually created by two Chinese characters and it is useful to remember that each individual Chinese word sound is composed of two syllables—an initial and a final sound syllable. *Together* they produce a *single* sound. Chinese is characterized by an extremely limited number of basic sounds. The finite number of sound units are increased by the use of tones. (For more detail on pronunciation and tones see the next section). It is important to pronounce the sound syllables as a single unit, not as separate sounds. For example, n+ee = ni, N+an = nan; Ni+an = nian [pronounced 'nyan']. Please note that in this book pronunciation is provided in brackets as a guide and aide memoire only and is not exact.