

Cambridge Chinese for Beginners: Textbook 2, by Marcus Reoch and William Minter, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 144 pp., £16.00, (paperback), ISBN 978-0-9560-5265-0

As the global reach of China expands, so too has the demand for access to Mandarin Chinese, which has assumed an importance in countries beyond China's borders that was unimaginable just two decades ago. Following this development, a thriving market has developed for teaching texts at all grades to act as aids for learning standard Mandarin. *Cambridge Chinese for Beginners: Textbook 2* is an example of this. It is a text that follows on from the first volume and which is designed to establish a rudimentary base from which beginners can move forward. The target purchasers will be the growing number of teachers of Mandarin across the British school system, their students, and of course the parents. A secondary target group is the growing number of children of English-speaking expatriates living and working in China who attend classes in order to acquire some basic Mandarin.

This book contains seven units, each of which focuses on a topic such as 'Meeting people', 'Going out', 'School', 'My week', 'Eating out' and 'Holiday'. One advantage of such a scheme is its predictability, allowing the teacher to insert additional lesson materials drawn from the families of the learners or from their own past lesson materials. The difficulty levels do not increase as students move through topics but remain fairly even throughout the book. Unit 7, 'Meeting people', alerts the reader that it will cover ground already covered in *Textbook 1*, and also introduces learners to important new things about the topic. This unit begins with 'Introductions in Chinese', opening with a listening activity to provide opportunities for students to review what they have already learnt about names and ages in *Textbook 1*. Following this is a writing activity which focuses on basic sentences relating to introducing oneself. In this session, although the activity title is written in English, the basic sentences are all written in Chinese with pinyin underneath the new words to help students to read and remember them. Consequently this text could also become part of the stock for teachers of Mandarin in the growing number of Chinese community schools springing up around the country where an ever-increasing proportion of the students need to begin from scratch. There is a paired activity followed by a writing activity. Such group work is designed to help students to practise what they have learnt in their previous session. There are more writing and reading activities in the latter part of the unit. In the reading contents there are also pinyin equivalents underneath some of the less familiar words. Throughout the whole unit, the words and sentences chosen are very practical and easy to learn and thus are suitable for newcomers trying to learn the language. This suggests careful preparation and testing of the contents with teachers in real classroom situations before going to press.

The section called 'Amazing characters' in Unit 7 introduces a character '男' meaning 'men' in English.

As Chinese characters are hieroglyphic, the authors explain this simple character '男' by breaking the grapheme into its constituent elements. Below this is an etymological account of the evolution of the word in Chinese. Therefore such material can lead to broader class or group discussion about the evolution of language, possibly reaching out into English-language examples.

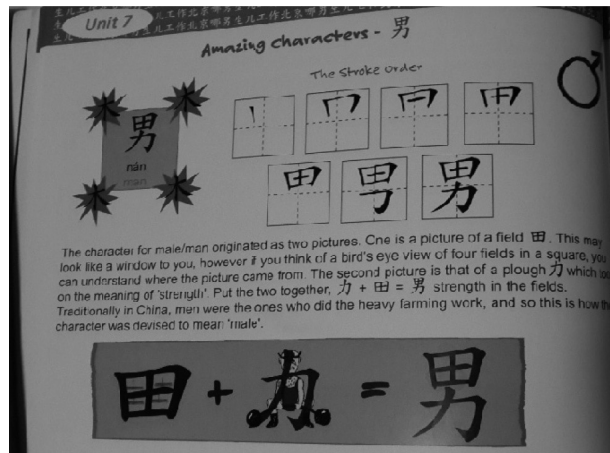


Figure 1: Amazing characters – 男 (15)

The approach adopted by the authors reflects a growing consensus that a major aim behind teaching any language is for the learner to come to an understanding of the culture that gave birth to and sustains the language. In Figure 2 there is an example taken from Unit 7 which introduces ‘Family life in China’. Because the target users of this book are mainly those students whose first language is not Chinese, the authors use English rather than Chinese with accompanying photographs that appear to be authentic family snapshots.

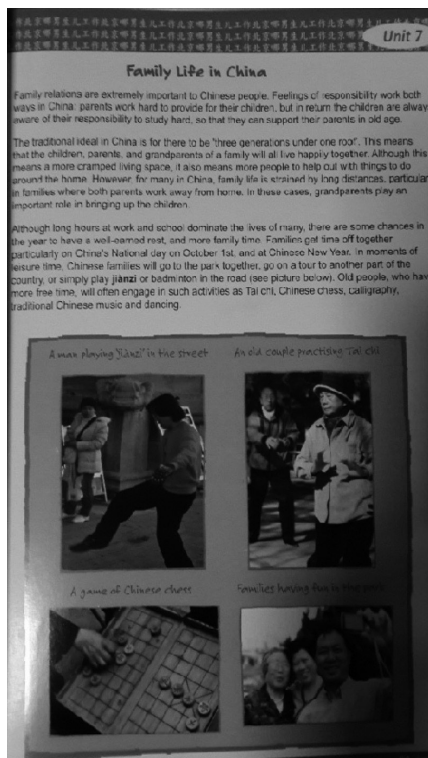


Figure 2: A section which introduces family life in China (20)

The great Tang period poet Bai Li is featured (Figure 3), thus alerting beginners to the notion of a Chinese literary heritage. The two-page spread is distinctive for its use of Chinese characters, pinyin, and English translations alongside each other. Such a section gives students the opportunity to experience the implicit beauty of the ancient Chinese language or at least for a teacher to try to introduce aesthetic notions to the students. As presented, the English translations really will help students to understand the meanings of the words and sentences, as well as the poem as a whole.

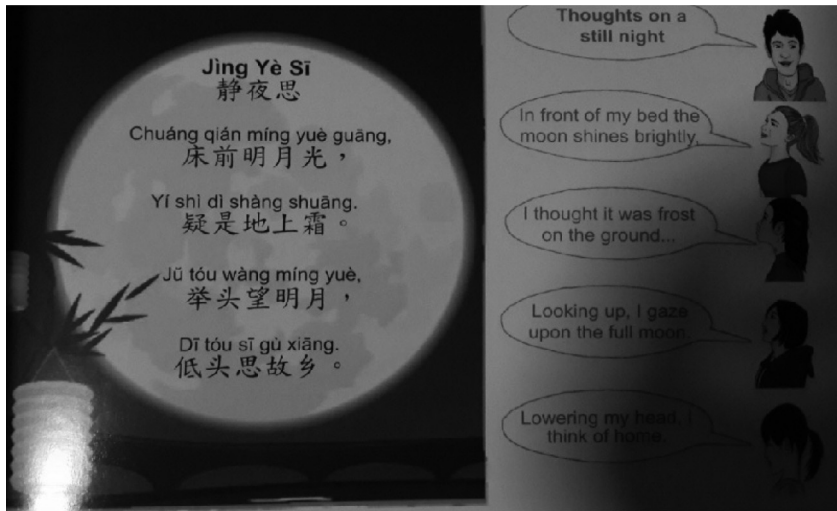


Figure 3: Tang poetry (56)

One characteristic of many books of this sort is their tendency towards monotone or, at best, uncreative and dull layout designs. Cambridge University Press has avoided this trap and has used well-thought-through page designs to hold the attention of learners. Of note also is the careful balance between listening, reading, writing, and speaking activities (often using group work), something that will assist users of this text with their learning.

We now accept that learning a language should not be limited to the acquisition of knowledge of structure and form but should also be a process of exploring cultural diversity. *Cambridge Chinese for Beginners: Textbook 2* embodies such an aim for learning a language. The set of activities and the layout, as well as the contents, are well considered and therefore provide students with a lively and also practical way of learning the Chinese language.

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