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**Book Review**

Lee, C., Liang, H. H., Jiao, L., & Wheatley, J. (2014). *The Routledge advanced Chinese multimedia course: Crossing cultural boundaries*. Routledge.

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This Chinese reader is an advanced level Chinese textbook, targeting Chinese learners with approximately advanced mid to advanced high OPI proficiency. Unlike most of the advanced level Chinese textbooks, the highlighted features of this book are multimedia and culture themes. In order to strengthen learners' cultural literacy, the authors compile a comprehensive repertoire of articles related to both modern and historical issues using written Chinese. All the articles are authentic materials that were directly extracted from newspapers, journals, and fictions.

This book is a thematically organized and multimedia-oriented with 12 chapters categorized four broad units: popular culture, social change, cultural traditions, and history and politics, with three lessons in each unit. Each lesson starts with *learning objectives* and *warm-up questions*, followed by a brief but informative *introductory reading*, usually a short article (about 300 characters) related to the theme. The introductory article serves the purpose of delineating the cultural and historical background of the main text. After the introductory section, the *main reading* is introduced, supplemented by *fixed expressions*, *word discrimination*, *sentence patterns*, and *exercises*. The last section includes *review exercise*, *cultural notes* and *supplementary reading*, which oftentimes provide different perspectives and further explanation of the theme.

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There are several advantages in this textbook compared to other “traditional” advanced level Chinese textbooks. I will describe four major strengths with regard to its content, format, and functionality.

### **Topic**

Most of the topics are heatedly discussed social issues in China, and some of them are relevant to contemporary Chinese culture, such as lesson 3, *TV Drama*, and lesson 1, *Online Dating*. The up-to-date content easily arouses the attention of college-age Chinese learners who usually have an intense curiosity about contemporary youth culture. The “conventional” topics in most of the advanced level textbooks are usually about Sino-US relations, housing prices, greying society, etc. A broad spectrum of topics could potentially help students to develop not only language proficiency but also cultural literacy. A good example is lesson 3, which takes a deep insight into Chinese pop culture through current TV drama. Activities consist of having learners watch TV dramas, make comparisons between Chinese and U.S. TV dramas, and summarize themes. The culture aspect introduced in the book is a gateway for learners to discuss, research and compare.

### **Multimedia**

One of the most appealing features is the incorporation of multimedia. The website *Chinese Society in the New Millennium* (Please see <https://web.duke.edu/chinesesoc/>) is open to the public as the online companion to the textbook. The twelve lessons perfectly correspond to the textbook topics. Clicking on lesson 7, *Chinese Cuisine*, for example, learners will see interview footage in China encompassing a variety of issues like birthday food, recipe names, Shanghai cuisine, nutrition, etc. To ensure the authenticity of the videos as well as familiarize learners with language under different contexts, videos are labeled with “normal,” “subtle” and “mixed” accent. In some of the videos, there are no clear utterances but just scene shootings, such as the *Morning Market*

*Argument* video in lesson 5 *Floating Population*. Through watching the footage, learners go beyond the topic by accessing authentic and real-time situations. Both verbal and nonverbal details, including gestures, environment, clothing, expressions, and speech are visually presented to the learners. In terms of pedagogical application, learners could be assigned to watch closely and describe the details of what happens in the video. A “dubbing” type of assignment is ideal for training students’ ability to narrate and describe a series of events in the past time frame, which is a key requirement for reaching OPI advanced level (“ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines,” 2012). In addition, the real happenings enable learners to situate the main text within a broader authentic context. The website videos also have companion exercises, an ideal supplemental resource for instructors to enrich students’ learning experience via diversified learning materials.

Besides the companion website, various online tools are also incorporated into learning activities. In lesson six, *Changing Views of Marriage*, two of the warm-up exercises are: 1) Do a keyword search for “Chinese wedding” on YouTube and view at least two videos. 2) Visit the website Chinese Historical and Cultural Project at <http://chcp.org/> (p. 125). Through watching authentic weddings on YouTube and searching for artifact nuances on the suggested website, learners go beyond the written texts and learn about the topic in a visual way. Thus, multimedia incorporation allows learners to take a deeper insight into Chinese marriage from different sources and modes.

### **Integration of Four Skills**

The four skills- speaking, listening, reading and writing- are facilitated throughout the volume. Speaking is treated with primary importance, as it is with most of the language programs. The four skills are equally emphasized for the most part, although there seems a lack of formal writing training. The practical language task design is a convincing showcase of the integration of

different skills. For instance, in lesson 5 *Floating Population*, the task asks learners to complete a sequence of activities. Firstly, the textbook suggests that the class be grouped into three teams and watch three different videos on migrant workers. Then learners need to write up their understanding of the video on a class social media website, either on Blackboard or an online discussion forum, and they will read and reply to each other's posts. In class, learners then are instructed to retell and present the synopsis in the video and exchange the information with other groups. The three-step, task-based project is an epitome of integrating different skills. By watching videos, learners practice listening skills. The writing-up and reading others' posts on the Internet are effective ways to hone both writing and reading skills while exchanging ideas in class is intended to train learners' speaking and presentation skills. Upon completing a series of tasks, learners familiarize themselves with the topic, and they produce meaningful language through output. Exercises with an integration of different skills are ubiquitous in the textbook.

### **Teacher – Friendliness**

The textbook not only provides rich content to learners, but also serves as a user-friendly teaching resource for instructors. One great feature is its free Instructor's Resource Manual, which includes answer keys to the textbook exercises, additional language tasks, in-class activities, and instructional suggestions. Instructional suggestions, above all, is significant assistance, especially for new instructors, to plan a multi-media advanced Chinese curriculum. The four authors of the book are all well-versed Chinese instructors who years' teaching experience, so the supplementary activities they propose are based on immense classroom practicum. In the instructional suggestions in lesson 6, *Marriage Customs*, for example, learners are asked to watch two short video clips. The first video is an authentic interview with a wedding dress manager, followed by the second video, which is a conversation between a female college student and two social workers. The activity is

designed to introduce students to views on marriage from different perspectives, which is effectively complementary to the relatively one-sided view in the text.

Another aspect of the book's teacher-friendliness is indicated in the word recycling. Many language teachers find it hard to have a systematic review of earlier materials due to time constraints. Particularly, for advanced Chinese courses, recycling of old vocabulary from earlier chapters is hard to carry out because each lesson has over 150 vocabulary words. However, this textbook is excellent for reviewing earlier words. For instance, the main text in lesson 3 includes over ten vocabulary words and sentence patterns from lesson one and lesson two. In this way, students are able to go over the materials that are situated in new contexts and review earlier materials on a natural learning curve. The systematic reviewing saves valuable time for teachers on figuring out how to recycle materials from the previous lessons.

Despite all the strengths, some weaknesses need to be addressed.

### **Inadequacy of Writing Training**

For advanced Chinese learners, composition is an essential skill to be trained. Although it is the authors' earnest endeavor to include writing guidance, there is still insufficient training in writing skills. A composition section is included in the exercise section with instruction on what should be covered, suggested vocabulary and basic requirements. Students' main issues at the 300-400 level in terms of writing, however, are usually not what to write, but how to write for a specific purpose. The textbook provides little guidance on skills for writing within a context, and some essay assignments do not fulfill the functional goal. Heneda (2007) stated that in the surge of foreign language curriculum reform, writing needs to be conducted in a specific social context beyond the classroom. For example, the essay topic for lesson 7 is *My Favorite Dish*. The requirements for the composition include the description of the origin, flavor, recipe, etc. The

problem for this essay project is the lack of functionality. Questions arise such as what function it serves, what social aspect the task includes, and how to write to serve the purpose. Style, genre, diction, and structure of essays are dependent on the purpose and context of writing. Therefore, the composition task is insufficient for cultivating learners' genre and functional writing awareness. The essay assignments should be situated in a social context, and serve a specific audience and purpose.

### **Translation**

Although the book aims to cultivate learners' proficiency via online-intensive communicative approach, in the grammar section, there are occasions where grammar translation is encouraged. Multiple questions ask learners to directly translate from English to Chinese as an supplementary exercise of new grammar. Direct translation, however, is not an ideal method for approaching meaningful and context-based communication. Without context and communicative elements, learners automatically remain on the sentence level, translating word for word, rather than think in Chinese by using newly-learned grammar in a socially appropriate manner, which is the ultimate goal for language acquisition.

In addition, the English translation of some vocabulary can appear perplexing for native English speakers. Users reported they were confused over some English used in the vocabulary list. For example, the English counterpart for vocabulary number 17 *guan chang* in lesson 3 *TV Drama* is translated as *officialdom*. Learners reported that they were not sure of the meaning of the word. What this word actually means is "the circle of government officials." There are many words in the Chinese language that cannot be simply substituted with a single English counterpart. In situations like this, example sentences and more detailed explanations could be included for better comprehension.

In conclusion, *The Routledge* is an accessible and comprehensive textbook for advanced level Chinese learners to promote communicative skills and cultural literacy. The organic combination of cultural literacy development and multimedia resources is the highlight of this book. The diversity of topics cultivates learner's cultural sensitivity and serves as a resourceful reading material for advanced Chinese learners. Although several shortcomings might need to go through closer scrutiny and modification, such as the writing training and grammar translation, this book is an excellent choice for Chinese teachers who look for an up-to-date textbook written by well-versed language educators.

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