

Chinese Breeze Graded Reader Series, Level 1: 300 Word Level.

Edited by Yuehua Liu, Chengzhi Chu. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007-2008. 6 volumes. \$5.00 each.

Those of us who have been teaching beginning and low-intermediate level Chinese language courses are all too familiar with Fred Fang-yu Wang's ingeniously crafted *The Lady in the Painting* (Yale University Press, 1969). Within the limits of a vocabulary written with merely 300 characters, Wang manages to retell a well-known Chinese folktale in a vivid manner that is accessible to students who have studied Chinese for only a few months. Many beginning learners have experienced excitement, encouragement, and newly-found confidence when they hold their "first real book" in Chinese and read the engaging story with ease and enjoyment. They do not have to constantly go back and forth between the text and a glossary, thanks to the frequent recurrence of familiar characters in the text. The fact that this little book has remained in print for so many years and has recently been published in an expanded version accompanied by a multimedia courseware package speaks to its irresistible appeal to both Chinese language teachers and students.

On the other hand, however, the "classic" status Wang's little book has enjoyed for the past four decades reveals a dire situation in the Chinese learning community: There have been too few full-length stories written in Chinese for learners of Chinese as a foreign language! Therefore, there is a pressing need in our field for authentic extensive reading materials written with a controlled vocabulary that can propel beginning learners to read for fun, read for pleasure, and thus motivate them to read for more on their own. *Chinese Breeze Graded Reader Series* is an exciting new set of readers that not only meets this urgent need, but also sets a new standard for future extensive reading publications in our field.

Although similar to *The Lady* in terms of its intention to facilitate learners to move beyond the stage of "learning to read" toward "reading to learn," *Chinese Breeze* exceeds its predecessor in many aspects. There are several reasons why.

First, while *The Lady* focuses on *character* and *character recognition* as the basic building blocks to improve learners' reading skills, *Chinese Breeze* emphasizes *word* and *pleasure reading* as the stepping stones to develop learners' reading fluency.

Second, while the 300 characters in *The Lady* are chosen based on a textbook titled *Read Chinese I* compiled by the same author (Wang), the 300 words in *Chinese Breeze* are selected based on sophisticated computational analyses of very large written and spoken Chinese corpora as well as a databank of more than

forty leading Chinese language textbooks used in various countries. This scientific selection of base vocabulary not only guarantees the words chosen to be those most commonly used in daily spoken and written discourses by native Chinese, but also ensures that this series of readers (used as supplementary material) will be much easier to “plug” into any language program.

Third, while *The Lady* showcases but one traditional Chinese folktale, *Chinese Breeze* includes stories with a wide spectrum of themes ranging from detective stories to romance, all using contemporary China as the backdrop. Therefore, students will not only learn about Chinese cultural traditions, but also get exposed to contemporary social issues such as poverty and the plight of public education.

Fourth, given the fact that *The Lady* is penned by a veteran language teacher (and a very talented one for that matter), the discourse of the narrative nevertheless suffers from the inevitable problem of “teacher talk.” *Chinese Breeze* avoids this potential shortcoming by inviting professional writers who usually write for a native audience to create the original stories. Their imagination of plots and unique depiction of characters adds charm and depth to these stories that one can hardly find in books published for learners of Chinese as a foreign language. These stories are then polished by the two editors who are veteran researchers and teachers of Chinese as a foreign language to ensure their readability for learners at this level.

Chinese Breeze is scheduled to include altogether over sixty volumes covering eight grades ranging from a 300 word level vocabulary all the way to a 4,500 word level vocabulary. As of now, only the six volumes of the 300 word level have been published. Therefore, this review will only focus on these six volumes.

The six titles are *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong* 错, 错, 错!; *Can I Dance with You?* 我可以请你跳舞吗?; *Two Children Seeking the Joy Bridge* 两个想上天的孩子; *I Really Want to Find Her* 我一定要找到她; *Left and Right: the Conjoined Brothers* 向左向右; and *Whom Do You Like More* 你最喜欢谁? The first two titles are suspenseful detective stories involving two cases. In the first case, the police have to figure out which one of the beautiful identical twins has been murdered and who has committed the vicious crime. In the second case, a skilled computer analyst becomes a fugitive on the run in search of the bad guys who have framed him in a high-tech bank robbery. *Two Children* narrates a heart-warming story of two elementary students’ persistent search for the heavenly bridge that enables the annual reunion of the legendary Cowherd and his wife the Weaving Maid. *I Really Want to Find Her* relates a story of three American college students’ journey to China, trying to find and help a girl in a photo left behind by their late professor. The girl turns out to be a big-city college graduate

who forfeits the opportunity to go abroad and chooses to teach in a mountain school in a remote village. *Left and Right* is the rarely-told story of two conjoined brothers, highlighting their happiness and their hassles from childhood to adulthood. *Whom Do You Like More*, using the 1980's and a once well-known social phenomenon called "left-behind spouses" as the backdrop, tells the story of a young man who has to make a difficult choice between going to America to join his wife and staying behind to develop his own software.

As a native speaker, I have found all six stories to be enjoyable to read. The surprises and excitement that these twisted plot lines bring about are not at all hindered by the constraint of the limited vocabulary with which the original writers and editors have to work.

For language learners, all six books will prove to be pleasurable and accessible reading materials. I can imagine students in my intermediate Chinese courses picking up any volume at this level and starting to read without too much difficulty. The base vocabulary items reappear in various contexts on different pages, a research-informed feature that ensures better mastery of newly acquired words. Although each story has to introduce additional new words (ranging from 50 to 81) to facilitate storytelling, all the new words are glossed with pinyin and English translations in footnotes and indexed throughout the text as well as in a "Vocabulary Index" at the end of each book. The English translations of these new words are concise and accurate. Like the base vocabulary, all the new words recur multiple times throughout the book to build readers' familiarity with them. Each page usually does not have more than five new words, a density that can be easily handled by students at this level.

All of the six stories are divided into short chapters. After each chapter, there are exercises to help readers check their reading comprehension. There are various types of exercises including multiple choice, true-false, arranging sequence of events, and "Global Understanding" where the reader is supposed to discover and correct the mistakes in a retelling of the story.

"Global Understanding" proves to be the most demanding activity because the reader has to remember the whole story and every little detail of it. Some of the "Global Understanding" questions are contextualized as real-life tasks that make them more meaningful and realistic. For example, in *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong*, the reader is asked to correct the mistakes in the notes taken by a detective when he investigates the crime. All the exercises come with keys at the end of the book, which is a nice feature that will help students to interact with the texts more effectively on their own.

The physical layout of the six volumes is appealing and user-friendly. The "Table of Contents" is followed by a list of "Main Characters and Main Place"

which prepares the reader for the story. Each page has between ten and twenty lines, clearly marked so that learners can trace and time their reading. New words are superscripted with an index number and their pinyin and English translations are provided in the footnote section. The main texts are interspersed with excellent illustrations, which add flavor and contextualize the story to facilitate comprehension. The main texts are then followed by a “Vocabulary Index” which includes all the new words introduced in the story, “Exercises,” and keys to all the exercise questions.

Being the first set of publications in this series, *Chinese Breeze: 300 Word Level* nevertheless suffers from a few minor drawbacks, which hopefully can be addressed in the upcoming issues of the series. For example, although both the editors and the original writers have apparently striven to make the discourse in these stories sound as natural and smooth as possible, I still find a few instances where the language is either unnatural or awkward-sounding. In the story *Can I Dance with You*, the opening sentences on the first page read: “这是 2007 年 4 月 30 号的晚上, 一个很好的晚上。北京的这个晚上, 不冷, 也不热。” The phrase “一个很好的晚上” sounds very similar to the English phrase “a very nice evening,” which is seldom used by native Chinese. In this context, this phrase can probably be deleted without damaging the flow of the discourse. On page 5 of the same book, one sentence reads “这时候, 房子里开始响起很好的音乐, ...” Here, it might be more natural to use “很好听的” to replace “很好的”. I have also noticed the limited use of measure words in three of the volumes (*Can I Dance with You*, *Two Children Seeking the Joy Bridge*, and *Whom Do You Like More*). Instead of introducing different measure words for different objects that appear in the stories, the editors apply the more commonly used “个”. Thus, we see phrases such as “一个电脑” and “一个桥,” where “一台电脑” and “一座桥” may sound more natural in those contexts. It is understandable that the editors have to make the difficult choice of what new words should be introduced in the readings and what should be left out. The decision to leave out certain key measure words, however, might potentially undermine the consistent efforts by many language teachers who repeatedly admonish their students to use the correct measure words in Chinese from the very beginning.

I have to point out that these few examples of awkward language use are exceptions rather than the norm in these volumes. I have not found the same problem with the other three volumes at this level. Actually, the flow of language in some volumes sounds extremely natural and smooth (e.g. *Left and Right: the Conjoined Brothers*” and *I Really Want to Find Her*.)

All six volumes in the series come with mini audio CDs that contain the

oral renditions of the stories read by two professionals (both male and female) at two modes of speed: slow and regular. The audio files are in MP3 format, which can be easily downloaded onto a learner's personal iPod. While excited to see these nice features that will facilitate self-learning, my initial enthusiasm was dampened when I made the discovery that a) the 8-centimeter mini CDs can only be played on a PC but not inserted into a Mac. This is due to the fact that a Mac usually comes with a slot-loading CD/DVD drive that "sucks" a standard-sized CD into it, while PCs are usually equipped with a non-slot-loading CD/DVD drive that slides out a tray to receive the CD); b) the claimed "regular" speed of the recordings for four of the six stories (*Can I Dance with You*, *Two Children Seeking the Joy Bridge*, *Left and Right: the Conjoined Brothers*, and *Whom Do You Like More?*) is notably slow in my opinion. It is not the natural regular reading speed one would expect to find in, for instance, recordings made by native Chinese for native listeners.

Would it be possible that these professionally-trained announcers have unconsciously slowed down their speed when they were told these recordings were made for foreigners? Or were they specifically instructed to do so by the publishers? Either way, I hope to hear true *regular* speed recordings in the upcoming CDs that come with the series. To make the audios more accessible for Mac users, the publisher might want to consider the option of making these audio files available on the *Chinese Breeze* website for easy download by customers who have purchased the books.

Additionally, while the "Global Understanding" activity mentioned above is a good check on learners' overall comprehension of the materials after they have read the whole story, some of the questions are designed as "memory tests" rather than "reading comprehension tests." In other words, this activity should aim for "global" and "general" comprehension about the story line, rather than a "local" memory contest that checks readers' ability to remember the smallest detail that is irrelevant to the general plot line. For example, in *Two Children*, the reader has to remember whether it is Mingming's mother or both of his parents who had received the call from the "kidnappers." In *Can I Dance With You*, the reader has to remember whether it is in front of a park or a library that the female protagonist finally meets her boyfriend. Even as a native speaker, I found that I failed to identify some of the mistakes. There are two reasons for this: First, when one reads fast, these little details tend to go unnoticed. Second, cognitively speaking, when one finishes reading a story, usually it is the major plot line and the critical details, not those that are irrelevant, that stand out in one's memory. The purpose of these readers is "extensive reading," not "intensive reading." The design of the "Global Understanding" in some volumes betrays this purpose and might unnec-

essarily frustrate those learners who read for meaning rather than for little details.

Despite the aforementioned minor and easily correctible shortcomings, I highly recommend this series of readers for all Chinese language learners who have completed the low-intermediate level of coursework. All six volumes in this level can be used either as self-learning materials by students, or as supplementary readings by instructors in beginning and intermediate language courses. With their intriguing story lines and well-controlled selection, sequencing, and recurrence of vocabulary, these six little volumes will succeed in helping both heritage speakers and “true” beginners to improve their reading skills in Chinese. Given the high quality of the first batch of books in this series, I look forward to seeing more volumes from this series at higher levels for more advanced learners of Chinese. Since the six volumes I have reviewed are printed in simplified characters, I also look forward to seeing a traditional character version to meet the needs of all types of learners and language programs. Learners of the Chinese language will have many more “real books” to enjoy than merely *The Lady in the Painting* when they embark on their journey to explore the reading world of Chinese.

Reference

Wang, Fred Fang-yu. *The Lady in the Painting*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969.

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