

Hong Li, Jing Z. Paul & Eric Reinders. (2015) *Fun With Chinese Grammar: 35 Humorous Dialogues and Comics* [趣味汉语语法：35 课幽默对话与漫画]. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press. ISBN 978-7-305-14357-1, 272 pp. (paper)

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The book's foreword was written by the authors in Chinese, and is divided into the following four sections.

Section 1 provides an overview of the book – there are 35 units, each made up of: (1) a humorous dialogue targeting one grammatical structure; (2) a vocabulary list for the dialogue, providing simplified characters, pinyin romanization, parts of speech, and English equivalents; (3) a list of sentences in the dialogue that exemplify the grammatical structure under consideration, with pinyin romanization and English translation; (4) cartoons illustrating the dialogue, with instructions for the students first to role play the conversation, next insert speech bubbles with text focusing on the grammar point, and finally write a narrative based on the dialogue, again using the grammatical structure as much as possible; (5) exercises linking grammar and meaning; and (6) communicative exercises in the form of paired or small-group activities, in which students utilize the grammatical form under consideration for more extended interaction.

Section 2 touches on the goal of the book as well as its special characteristics. The primary goal of *Fun with Chinese Grammar* is to provide support to learners of first or second year (college) Chinese – of novice or intermediate level proficiency. The characteristics of the book are that the contents are interesting, supportive of performance, communication, and interaction, and richly imbued with cultural and real-life material.

Section 3 discusses target learners and how to use the book. Again, this text would be instructional to students in first- or second-year Chinese at the college level (or up to year six at the intermediate or high-school level), and useful for review for college students in third- or fourth-year Chinese. The authors make the following suggestions to classroom teachers making use of this book.

- a. If resources permit, offer a course focusing on “Interesting Approaches to Chinese Grammar,” and use this book as the primary text.
- b. The 35 units of the book are interconnected, and yet independent – they roughly go from the most elementary to the most challenging structures, but

any unit can also be utilized without reference to any other. Teachers of language skills classes can use units from the book as supplementary material, to boost learners' grammatical competence.

- c. Cartoons in the book can also support speaking or writing practice.

Section 4 acknowledges and thanks others who have contributed to the book: Eric Reinders provided over 100 humorous cartoon illustrations; professors Cheng Aimin of Nanjing University and Tao-chung Yao and Cynthia Ning of the University of Hawai'i provided advice and support, and Eric Reinders and Abigail Holst edited the English language content of the chapters.

Following the foreword is a listing of abbreviations of the parts of speech used in the book, and an introduction to the five main characters, all college students, featured in the dialogues: three male (a Chinese American, an American, and a Chinese) and two female (a Chinese American and an American).

Next, the table of contents indicates which 35 grammatical patterns are featured in the book. These include beginning patterns such as *yǒu/méiyǒu* 有/没有 and *ma* 吗 question forms, the use of auxiliary verbs such as *huì* 会 and *néng* 能 as well as tricky adverbs such as *jiù* 就 and *cái* 才, the troublesome Verb + *de* 得 + descriptive complement and the Verb + directional complement patterns, the ubiquitous topic-comment format, and, of course, ever-challenging constructions including sentence-final *le* 了, *bǎ* 把, and *bèi* 被.

Overall, *Fun with Chinese Grammar* is a lively, useful text, which makes the following contributions to the field.

1. The 35 grammatical patterns on offer include patterns that teachers likely agree are sticky wickets in language instruction. This exploration of how to work on them with students is a useful new collection of resources.
2. The short dialogues which begin each lesson are contextualized, humorous, and roughly follow a storyline. They are set on a U.S. college campus, and the five characters featured – two Chinese-Americans, two Caucasian Americans, and a Chinese exchange student – have appealing personalities, with which numbers of students are likely to identify. For example: Unit 2, which introduces the question word 吗 and the A-not-A question format, features an interaction between the Caucasian-American Heidi and the Chinese-American Xiaolan, roommates, in their dorm room. Heidi has watched an amusing on-line video about Chinese students with funny English names, and offers to pick an English name for Xiaolan, who is busy getting dressed up for a dinner-movie date. The different outfits Xiaolan tries on prompt Heidi first to suggest Angelina (after Angelina Jolie), and then Ellen (after Ellen DeGeneres), but Xiaolan is not enthusiastic. The episode closes without a conclusion, and the issue of English names does not come up again. Since there is no English

translation provided for the dialogues, they are followed by a glossary of key vocabulary, to assist with student comprehension.

In many cases, the dialogues are laced with cultural content – Unit 2 noting that Chinese learners of English will pick striking names for themselves, after American personalities, for example. The non-fiction novel *River Town* by Peter (2001), describing English learners in Fuling, Sichuan, notes the cases of a William Jefferson Foster who named himself after president William Jefferson Clinton, and a Nancy, who named herself after Nancy Drew. Unit 3 notes that asking about age and salary is acceptable in a Chinese context but not in American society; Unit 4 highlights Chinese practices in celebrating the lunar New Year: making and enjoying 饺子 (dumplings), and then watching the 联欢晚会 (New Year's Eve extravaganza) on CCTV; and Unit 5 relates efforts to provide relief to regions devastated by earthquakes, as Sichuan was in 2008 and again in 2013. Donations for earthquake relief in Unit 5 is a very clever setting for a discussion of measure words – 两件衬衫、三条裙子、一百块钱、一张飞机票、一个人, etc.

Perhaps most importantly, the dialogues are interesting, and hold the learner's attention. The Unit 6 dialogue offers narrative tension, for example, concerning the romantic difficulties that the character Liu Xing (the exchange student from China) is suffering. His well-intentioned but awkward behavior is likely to invite commentary from students using *Fun with Chinese Grammar*.

3. Each dialogue offers multiple examples of the pattern in question, all within the same context. In the Unit 3 dialogue described above, for example, the following sentences are highlighted, as indicated in a list (with translations) provided after the dialogue:

Heidi: 你有英文名字吗?  
 Heidi: 你有没有英文名字?  
 Xiaolan: 你喜欢这条裙子吗?  
 Heidi: 你喜欢不喜欢 Angelina Jolie?  
 Xiaolan: 我像 Angelina 吗?  
 Xiaolan: 这件 (夹克) 好看不好看?  
 Heidi: 你不喜欢那条裙子吗?

Since students need multiple contacts with language input to move to intake, this dialogue format is very useful.

4. The subsequent suggestions, that students *first* role-play the dialogue with a partner, following the cartoons provided; *then* write speech bubbles for the cartoons, using the grammar pattern featured; and *finally* narrate what happened in this episode, all provide valuable opportunities for the students to

work with this grammar format, and encourage them to gain more familiarity with and control of the pattern.

5. Next come a set of more mechanical exercises focusing on the pattern, to build “muscle memory,” so to speak, in using it. Still, as much as possible, the book encourages students to transition to expressing their own information. For example, in the Unit 2 example already described, students work in pairs to ask *first* if the other enjoys reading, watching TV, eating Chinese food, or eating American food, *then* if the pictured computer, skirt, book or pen belongs to them, and *finally* if the other has an older brother, older sister, younger brother, or younger sister, all using the question word 吗 and the A-not-A question format. The hand-written list of items for students to use to practice measure words in Unit 5 is particularly apt: the list is reading realia, and to interpret it students have to link the items with the measure words, which is a realistic task.
6. Finally a set of communicative exercises are suggested. These are more open-ended tasks focusing on specific grammar patterns that challenge student expressiveness, resourcefulness, and creativity, and are some of the best offerings of the book. They include descriptions based on pictures that the teacher provides or the students create, comparing available jobs, make-shift job interviews, surveys and interviews of classmates, memory challenges, developing lists of rules, developing and assigning tasks in preparation for an event, brainstorming celebrities to invite to a party, giving each other advice on how to solve specific problems or respond to complaints, practicing giving compliments, describing childhood memories, describing interesting objects, planning and describing excursions, practicing conversations with “strangers on a train,” switching plans due to an unanticipated weather event, gossiping about celebrities, describing individuals and choosing several as friends, narrating stories, narrating events, describing overprotective parents, describing how individuals and communities have changed, practicing encouraging nervous friends, and playing charades and guessing-games based on drawings.

Of course, any new offering to the field will face challenges as well. *Fun with Chinese Grammar* raises a number of questions, and might be improved through some tweaks. These include the following:

1. How were the 35 grammatical foci selected? 把 and 被 and comparative sentences are of course generally included in any treatment of Chinese grammar, but what about such common and here overlooked subjects as the position of time and place in a sentence; differentiating among 的, 得, and 地; and the challenges of noun modification in Chinese? Some discussion of why particular grammatical issues were included and others not would have been helpful.

2. The book does a very good job of supporting inductive understanding of Chinese grammar. However, the decision not to include any explicit discussion of grammatical form at all may be considered questionable.
3. The decision to set the dialogues on a U.S. college campus is refreshing, since many instructional materials set the content in the target (foreign) and therefore alien culture. A setting in the home culture is comforting, and encourages students to identify with their role models. But how did two Caucasian Americans, two Chinese-Americans, and one Chinese exchange student come to be interacting exclusively in grammatically perfect Chinese? It can be argued that authors have creative license, and readers (users) are used to suspending disbelief. Here, readers have the added challenge of having to “get on the same page,” when they find that the same grammatical pattern is used over and over again in one conversation. Some contexts make this sort of repetition rather natural – the one focusing on disaster relief, in which various items to be donated are mentioned, works well. But other grammatical formats are less commonly used, and multiple repetitions within one conversation are more obviously didactic and forced. Five repetitions of 只有 X 才 Y in one short conversation begin to grate! Perhaps we need some open discussion of these issues to “warm up” the users of the book, to gain their sympathy and incline them towards a suspension of disbelief.
4. There is an issue of distributing cognitive load between grammar and vocabulary. Unit 1, which focuses on the very elementary form 有没有, requires a grasp of more challenging vocabulary such as 房间, 床, 书桌, 椅子, 电话, 电视, and 冰箱. Is the grammar not too easy, and the vocabulary not too hard? This issue is attenuated in the later lessons, as the grammar foci become challenging enough to match the vocabulary.
5. The communicative exercises at the end of every unit have much to offer; it would have been wonderful if they could have been expanded upon. Some need further scaffolding – intermediary steps that would make the activity that much richer for the students. For the first exercise on p. 187, for example, the students might begin by brainstorming a list of 20 or more activities and results on the board, before each picks out three to describe to their classmates. Other activities would benefit from handouts for classroom use; on page 44, for example, there is an activity focusing on historic dates (in a unit which has students practicing dates) – a full page of, say, 10 historic dates, which could have been photocopied and cut apart by the teacher, would have been very useful. Similarly, on page 58, the “Problem Cards” could have been expanded into a full page copyable handout. A great deal of tweaking among these excellent exercises would result in a collection of very useful classroom activities indeed.

6. Finally, some minor corrections in the pinyin romanization and the English used in the book would be helpful.

Overall, the book is useful and inspirational, and is worth using for beginning and intermediate language classes, as the authors intended. All textbooks deal with making questions with 吗, or using the A-non-A pattern, for example; if the teacher feels that student control of these patterns is still a little shaky, she can refer to Unit 2 of *Fun with Chinese Grammar*. Or, for example, if the class as a whole feels insecure about directional complements after completing Lesson 16 of *Integrated Chinese* (Liu & Yao, 2008), Lesson 20 of *Chinese Link* (Wu & Yu, 2010), or Unit 13 of *Encounters* (Ning & Montanaro, 2012), they can turn to Unit 25 of *Fun with Chinese Grammar*, and will likely feel more confident after completing all of its exercises.

In addition, when author Jing Z. Paul was a PhD student at the University of Hawai'i, she worked with Hawai'i's Confucius Institute to film four segments from a draft of the book. These segments were uploaded to the web, and are now freely available at the following addresses.

The 比 construction – <https://youtu.be/0sam4O0uV18>

比 activities – <https://youtu.be/0fpfl2u9Bes>

The 把 construction – <https://youtu.be/V-j5Ft4-K7c>

把 activities – <https://youtu.be/4kLa2qQ3HQw>

Viewing these segments brings the authors' intentions to life, and provides some depth to this very lively book.

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