

Review of *Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture* (《Encounters: 汉语和中国文化》述评)

沈婷

(Shen, Ting)

蒙特优宁大学

(University of Mount Union)

shenti@mountunion.edu

Cynthia, N., & Montanaro, J. S. (2011). *Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture Book 1*. CT: Yale University Press. ISBN: 978-0300161625
Cynthia, N., & Montanaro, J. S. (2012). *Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture Book 2*. CT: Yale University Press. ISBN: 978-0300161632

I began teaching Chinese in American high schools and universities in 2007, and have always found the textbook to be a crucial component in foreign language instruction. I have used a wide range of textbooks, including *Happy Chinese*, *Chinese Link*, *Integrated Chinese*, and *Ni Hao*, but was never completely satisfied with any of them. To provide world language instruction guided by the Standards for Foreign Language Learning—Communication, Culture, Connection, Comparison, and Community (the Five Cs)—Chinese instructors need a Chinese textbook that meets the following criteria: It must focus on communication and stress the use of language in authentic and meaningful real-life contexts; content knowledge learning must be integrated with language and culture; and most importantly, the textbook must make good use of technology to provide not just instructional materials but also abundant and engaging resources for both instructors and students. This textbook must reflect accurately the communities around us in America so that various connections between Chinese language and culture and the students' daily lives can be made by both instructors and students.

However, previously I had found no textbook that met these criteria to my satisfaction. While *Ni Hao* does introduce language skills that students can use in their daily lives, focusing primarily on self and family, for high schools and college students, this book is too easy and does not give students enough satisfaction. *Chinese Link* is also commonly used in American classrooms. Both these textbooks focus a great deal on reading and writing and introduce a vast number of vocabulary and grammar patterns. Many pages are devoted to exercises focusing on individual vocabulary, phrases, and grammar. There is cultural information but these are limited to end-of-chapter cultural notes that provide basic introduction and a presentation of facts. One problem we had with *Chinese Link* was that the increase in difficulty between the first and second volumes was too significant for them to be taught consecutively.

Happy Chinese and most other textbooks by Chinese publishers all have the same problem: they are not designed specifically for American students. If learners do not see themselves, their lives, and their communities reflected in the textbook, they find it difficult to become really engaged in Chinese learning. Besides, one common problem for all these textbooks is that they focus too much on print and audio media. Today, interactive visual technology is everywhere and has become a staple in almost every student's life. Any textbook that is not designed carefully to utilize the rich resources offered by technology loses precious opportunities to provide students the most effective and engaging Chinese learning experiences.

In 2011, I became an assistant professor of Chinese, assigned to build a strong Chinese program from zero in a relatively small mid-western university. The first decision I had to make was to select a series of high-quality textbooks to attract students into Chinese program and effectively assist them to grow rapidly in their Chinese learning. Fortunately, I found *Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture (Encounters)* and decided to order the series for my students. It was a risky move, because when I placed the order for the books I had not yet seen the full set. Now when I think back it was definitely one of the best decisions I have ever made. As the preface says, *Encounters* is practical, communicative, culturally rich, and delightfully engaging. In two years, the enrollment in our Chinese program has increased from 6 to almost 50. Credit must be shared with the *Encounters* textbooks and authors Dr. Cynthia Ning and Dr. John Montanaro.

Encounters is not just a series of textbooks. Instead it is a new generation of fully integrated language programs that is informed by the latest language learning research. The *Encounters* program has several important components: student books, character writing workbooks, a website, screenplays, and annotated instructor editions of the textbooks. The set provides a fully integrated array of learning materials focusing on communication and authentic language use in real-life context. Each episode that presents part of the story in this textbook leads you to the corresponding chapter and activities in the textbook, to audio activities, and to practice exercises and related cultural information.

The use of technology is both the theme and the highlight of the comprehensive *Encounters* program. Nowadays most Chinese textbooks include the use of technology. Mostly there is a CD that provides an audio program and presents the pronunciation of the printed content of each chapter. The editors of *Encounters* include both language and media experts. The series provides enriched resources and demonstrates a well-designed use of technology, including 22 episodes of a dramatic story, a series of cultural mini-documentaries, an audio program that assists students with listening comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, and model conversation, and a website that distributes all the video and audio materials.

Central among all the learning resources provided is a dramatic video series, filmed entirely on location throughout China in settings such as Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an, Guilin and Qinghai. A variety of learning activities and exercises were designed to link to the video episodes and other media. In these videos, you will watch the dramatic story

line developed around several characters of different professions, nationalities, backgrounds, life patterns, and personalities. These characters' stories were developed meticulously and creatively in different settings such as university dorms, business conference rooms, elementary school classrooms, restaurants, and rural homes. The videos offer beautiful music, a lighthearted attitude, and humorous vignettes. In a relaxing, meaningful, and authentic context, students can be exposed to language skills used in real-life settings. For example, Unit 8 teaches about daily activities. The episode of Unit 8 depicts how one character (the Chinese young woman) looks for a job and has her job interview in Beijing, while another character (the American young woman who is an English teacher in Guilin) asks for help and tries to schedule some activities with her landlord's son. If the students watch the episode without the available subtitles, they won't understand most of the story the first time around. However, there are many cues, such as the music, visuals, some familiar language and some conversation in English, and characters' actions and facial expressions, that can help students make sense of the story that is being told in the new language. Following this introduction, different video segments focus on specific phrases and sentences that students can use to ask questions and describe their own daily routines. In the exercises that follow, students immediately are offered opportunities to practice their new language skills and connect them to their own daily activities in their own culture. This process of learning is certainly integrated and comprehensive because students get to listen to, speak, read, and write in Chinese in very authentic real-life cultural contexts.

The editors of *Encounters* designed a carefully structured and cumulative approach to link among episodes, language learning including vocabulary, phrases, and grammar, and related cultural information. All the cultural videos link to language functions. Different learning opportunities and activities available in each chapter are marked with colorful icons. Other than a long video, *Encounters* also presents numerous short video segments in which students can focus on some language patterns and obtain repeated exposure to them. For example, one video segment of Unit 8 emphasizes sentence patterns such as 我每天晚上回家以后吃晚饭 and 她每天早上去跑步. The context of discussing daily routines in real life provides authentic opportunities for students to practice the vocabulary for different activities, as well as grammar patterns using time expressions. Students must know these language functions to complete the tasks in this unit. Learning them also raises students' interest in the cultural importance of daily activities. When students watch the cultural discussion, they are also exposed to the language functions repeatedly. This approach is really well designed and gives students maximum opportunities to enjoy the language in its cultural context.

In viewing the episodes, students hear authentic Chinese speech. In real life communication, students will not have many opportunities to listen to the type of model Putonghua heard in most textbook audio programs. *Encounters* works hard to prepare Chinese learners to communicate in the real world. As in real life, they hear native Chinese speakers' normal speech, some of which is accented to varying extents. Since the characters are from different areas of China such as Guilin, Shanghai, Qinghai, and Beijing, the accents students hear are diverse. Characters in the episodes also speak at different speeds and pitches based on mood and emotion, as people do in real life. In addition, students hear foreigners speaking Chinese. Some are very proficient and others

apparently have just started learning Chinese. Seeing foreigners, who serve as role models, can be very motivating for beginning learners.

Encounters also has its own website, that offers a variety of supplementary materials for both instructors and students, in addition to the audio program that most other textbooks have as well. Other than streaming video and audio content, there are other resources for speaking, reading, and writing Chinese. For example, the cultural segments illuminate aspects of life in China and enable students to explore beyond the confines of each unit. Students are exposed to meaningful discussions of different topics in Chinese culture. Real people from various walks of life speak on their perspectives on cultural topics such as meeting friends, bargaining in street markets, and Chinese festivals. Chinese people's lives are presented in a fuller scope and with nuance, through technology. *Encounters* certainly reinforces the notion that language is inseparable from culture. Rather than having end-of-chapter cultural notes, cultural information is woven into the episodes and the texts, and "pop-up" discussions of culture are everywhere. One thing that I like particularly about *Encounters* is that it presents and discusses cultural information critically. No single person tries to pose their view of culture as fact. Neither is any cultural element singled out to represent all of Chinese culture—necessarily an enormous and complex construct. China is as large as and more populous than the United States. Many cultural practices are specific only to limited areas of China. By video-interviewing many different people, including both Western and Chinese, about their understandings of Chinese culture, and by contrasting and comparing Chinese and American cultural concepts, the *Encounters* program opens students' eyes to diversity and multiculturalism. This is one of the most powerful functions of technology in foreign language teaching.

There are some other interesting applications of technology on the website of the *Encounters* program. For instance, to provide students a model of accurate language use, there are also animations that are specifically made to teach important words, phrases, and sentences. Unlike many other textbooks that use audio and vocabulary cards to reinforce these language structures, the use of Chinese animation makes language input that much more engaging, interesting, and, strangely enough, even authentic (since the animation is reminiscent of what one might see on Chinese television). Rap songs are another example. At the end of each unit, there is a rap song written specifically to review the key expressions and vocabulary of the unit. Students can sing along and get more precious opportunities to practice Chinese phrases and sentences, using a format that they like. They can also download the raps using iTunes, to listen to at leisure.

Another thing I like about the *Encounters* program is that clear and detailed analyses of grammar patterns are presented in the textbook, but are never the only focus of each unit. Rather, when grammar issues arise, they are introduced as Grammar Bits, which serve as important and useful tools to support the communication that students are practicing. The amount of grammatical information presented is certainly manageable; none of my students felt it was overwhelming. At the end of each unit, the grammar content of the unit is reviewed systematically. Certainly the attention to grammar can be a very supportive resource for students; more than that, the succinct and precise explanations of complex grammar patterns is a practical assistance to teachers as well,

especially those who don't feel comfortable using English to discuss Chinese grammar and linguistic structures.

The comprehensive *Encounters* program adheres to ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and also reflects a communicative approach to world language pedagogy. In the beginning of each unit is a list of Can-Do statements that presents the intended learning outcomes of each unit. In these Can-Do statements, different modes of communication and various language abilities are taken into consideration. A complete Recap section appears at the conclusion of each unit and corresponds to these Can-Do statements. The Recap section includes a summary of grammar topics, a vocabulary list, and a checklist of assessment tasks that students are expected to have mastered in this unit. Authentic materials such as a Chinese restaurant menu, business cards, and newspaper excerpts are included, and can be used as assessment activities if the teacher wishes. For example, rather than asking students to read the characters 印度 (India), one assessment task for Unit 4 can be to look at a photo of the marquee of an Indian restaurant in Beijing, and circle the characters for "India". Using the *Encounters* program can certainly help Chinese instructors to provide standard-based instruction in their Chinese classrooms.

Ironically, one complaint about the *Encounters* program is perhaps that it presents so much information, that teachers and students feel they can't finish everything in of the amount of time available. In my first semester of using *Encounters*, my students and I were concerned about this issue. However, I quickly realized that what matters is not whether or not I have taught everything, but what students have learned and are able to use functionally on given topics in real-life settings. I revised my instruction accordingly. Instead of teaching to the textbook, I created PowerPoint presentations that capture the most important language and cultural information based on the Can-Do statements of each unit and the Five Cs national foreign language standards. I encourage my students to explore the textbook, especially the parts that I don't focus on in classroom instruction. This not only reinforces students' classroom learning but also promotes their self-learning ability and their long-term study of Chinese. I believe that each Chinese instructor can come up with his or her own way of utilizing *Encounters* and the vast amount of language and cultural information presented. To make the best use of the *Encounters* program, I encourage my students to continue studying Chinese even after they have completed their language requirements through CHN 101 and 102. In CHN 201 and 202, I use the scripts of the episodes of each unit and involve my students in more advanced learning of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in Chinese. I understand that the currently available Yale textbook *Exploring in Chinese* by Cynthia Ning is another viable second level follow-up to *Encounters*, and that an actual second level of *Encounters* is in the planning stage.

As a foreign language instructor and researcher, I am very meticulous and demanding regarding the selection and utilization of instructional materials. In the last ten years, we have seen a significant increase of interest in Chinese language and culture in K-16 settings. As is true for many foreign language programs, not all Chinese programs provide the same quality of education. Authentic and meaningful learning materials, especially textbooks, are the foundation of any high-quality foreign language

instructional program. I strongly recommend the *Encounters* materials, a remarkable series of textbooks, to all Chinese instructors, especially those teaching at the high school and college levels. I believe both teachers and students will very much enjoy this exemplar of a new generation of language programming.