STRATEGY AND TACTICS FOR READING CHINESE PROSE

This book was compiled with the goal of helping you learn how to read modern Chinese prose with the greatest possible efficiency and understanding. Texts, structural explanations, vocabulary glosses, and sight reading passages were all selected to help you learn how to skim and scan Chinese texts for basic content as well as how to read intensively for complete comprehension. You are urged to read this lesson carefully as it first discusses the theory of reading that stimulated compilation of the book and then suggests various tactics which are helpful in developing the ability to read Chinese efficiently and effectively.

Reading Strategy

Research indicates that people generally take the strategies and tactics they use to read in their native language to their reading of foreign language materials. Thus, it is useful for you to be aware of how English speakers go about reading in their own language when you are working with Chinese texts. English readers first identify grammatical markers and vocabulary, then break texts into segments based on length, grammatical structures, and I suspect, punctuation markers. Units are generally sentence length, though complex sentences may be broken into several units for processing. After segments are understood by matching grammatical structures and vocabulary against language information kept in the brain, they are stored in short term memory. Segments are processed one after the other until the whole text has been read. When short term memory is filled, the contents are sent on to long term memory for retention.

Using this theoretical model as a pedagogical guide, this text focuses on presenting a reading strategy and supporting tactics which Chinese language students at the "beginning of the reading strategy instruction phase" (1) can use to read original Chinese materials most effectively. Initially, your control of these
processes will be slow and laborious, but as you practice, utilize the various techniques described below and gain experience and confidence, your Chinese reading skills will become stronger, faster, and ultimately, second nature. At that point, you will be able to cease being concerned with the language of the materials and concentrate on the contents. In other words, you will be able to read Chinese for what it says, not how it says it.

There are many tactical skills to be developed in order to reach the level wherein you can read Chinese solely for content. Understanding how to read quickly and effectively by recognizing the grammatical markers that flag grammatical structures is the first and most important skill, but other skills must also be developed. You need to know how to recognize vocabulary by using word group affiliations and by analyzing the constituent elements in individual characters, how to use a dictionary efficiently, and how to employ prediction techniques (i.e., educated guessing) when reading. Understanding Chinese punctuation practices is another tactical skill constantly useful in making segmenting and grammatical decisions. Control of all these skills is necessary whether you are simply skimming a text or are reading it for complete comprehension.

Speaking on the function of journalistic writing as a model for modern expository prose, the important literary figure and influential educator Zhu Ziqing (朱自清) said in the 1940’s, "Middle school students should take the style of writing in newspapers and magazines as their main inspiration while practising writing." (2) Newspapers continue to be written in the style of expository writing you will most commonly encounter in your everyday work with the Chinese language and culture, so their contents are a good medium for practicing reading skills. The articles in this book were selected from newspapers such as 人民日报, 法制日报, 经济日报, 光明日报, 文汇报, 中央日报, 成都晚报 and 北京晚报 first and foremost for the language learning opportunities they present, but they were also chosen for thematic content that will be of lasting value in helping
you understand contemporary Chinese culture. The texts range from straight news articles, to interviews, to letters to the editors, to advertisements. They are written in a variety of styles ranging from the colloquial to some clearly influenced by Neo-classical prose. Some of them are written with more skill and clarity than others. Most are in simplified characters, but several are in full form characters. The many different topics and sources result in a variety of vocabulary which will prove useful to your future work with Chinese texts.

Tactical Reading Skills: Text Organization

Chinese newspaper articles are generally organized around presenting one main event or theme and its supporting information. The main idea is first presented as the major headline and then expanded upon in the first paragraphs. Secondary but related information is frequently announced in the form of physically smaller headlines. These themes are usually addressed in the article after the main topic has been treated. There are of course numerous possible permutations on this structure, especially when the article does not deal with "hard news," but journalistic articles generally follow this layout.

These organizational principles mean that grammatical structures and vocabulary items tend to be repeated in articles. This not only makes the task of identifying the structures and learning the vocabulary easier, it also enhances your chances for successfully using contextually based prediction techniques as you skim, scan and read articles intensively. Keep this basic organizational structure in mind as you practice.

Tactical Reading Skills: Recognizing Grammatical Markers

English speakers apparently rely heavily on grammatical markers in the reading process. Markers such as [of], [and], [-ed], [-er], [-ing], etc. are identified,
understood and then combined with vocabulary to enable the reader to understand the meaning of a text. Years of language experience and reading practice allow you to recognize and process English grammatical structures very quickly, usually without conscious effort. But as a student at the middle stage of Chinese language study, you probably do not have automatic control of most Chinese grammatical structures and must work hard to identify and process them. Grammatical markers such as [的], [地], [了], [还是], [才], etc. are especially important in the reading process since many Chinese words can have multiple grammatical functions differentiated only by markers such as these. Recognising these markers and understanding the structures they represent governs the speed and level of comprehension of your reading in Chinese.

A main feature of this book is its presentation of reading methods which you can use over and over to recognize and process Chinese sentence structures with ever increasing speed and certainty. Each lesson focuses on specific grammatical structures which you must firmly control in order to read Chinese efficiently. Attention is drawn to these structures by the structure notes placed next to the original texts. That is done to help you get in the habit of automatically looking for, recognizing and processing grammatical structures before you begin to work with the vocabulary. You should emphasize recognizing the markers and understanding the structures as you prepare the lessons for classroom work. Careful attention to the example sentences which accompany the structure notes plus work with the grammar exercises which follow each main text will help you strengthen your control of the grammatical patterns to the point that you will come to recognize and use them automatically.

Tactical Reading Skills: Steps for Approaching a Text

The first step in approaching a newspaper text is to look at the headlines (see the comments in the second lesson on how to read headlines), after which
you should skim through the entire article. You will almost certainly feel very nervous about going past characters or compounds you don’t immediately understand, but you will find skimming a text really is a valuable reading tactic which will save you a lot of time and energy in the end. Skimming allows you to begin to see the grammatical markers in relation to the rest of the sentence and the overall text in which they occur, it allows you to see which vocabulary is used repeatedly, and it helps you to get a feel for the basic ideas and layout of the piece.

After skimming the entire piece, or if it is very long, at least skimming the first several paragraphs, you should then go back to the beginning and skim it a second time. This time you should concentrate on analyzing it into meaningful grammatical units. These segments will sometimes be of sentence length, but since Chinese seem to like to write very long sentences, the initial grammatical units you will work with will very frequently be of sub-sentence length. Punctuation markers, especially commas, can be important guides to breaking sentences into processable units, so you are urged to pay particular attention to punctuation usages as they are described in the next section and in the structure notes in the lessons.

The third step involves scanning the text for specific bits of information. Scanning is similar to skimming in that you go quickly over the text, but while scanning you should concentrate on recognising key words or phrases and gain an overall idea of the basic informational content of the piece. The questions given at the end of each sight reading passage are designed to help you develop skill at looking through a text and locating specific information.

Finally, if you are working towards having a complete understanding of a text, re-read each line making sure you thoroughly understand each structure, each vocabulary item, and the flow of information within the article. Students tend to start with the vocabulary and often quickly bog down in a maze of
unrecognized grammar and vocabulary. Hours are spent inefficiently and results are disappointing. Following the sequence of steps described here will train you to read Chinese efficiently and with greater understanding.

The sight reading texts which accompany each lesson were chosen to strengthen your skill at skimming and scanning Chinese prose. You will get the most out of these texts if you concentrate on using the skimming and scanning techniques discussed above and do not worry about the vocabulary. The questions asked at the end of each sight reading are designed to help you focus on these skills. Since most of the structures and vocabulary will already be familiar to you from your work with the main texts, you will find the sight readings helpful in practicing these extensive reading techniques. You should use the sight reading passages to build confidence at reading for speed and content, and to this end it is most profitable for class coverage to concentrate on reading and discussing the contents of the sight readings, preferrably in Chinese, rather than focusing on either structural or lexical items per se. The selections of headlines given with each lesson will also be helpful in developing your ability to skim and scan a newspaper page.

After you are confident that you understand the grammar, recognize the vocabulary and know what information is being presented in a text, put it aside for an hour, or a day, and then come back and re-read the whole thing. This time approach the text as something to be read simply for information and enjoyment. Approach it with the attitude that the text is no longer a language learning tool, but rather as something you want to read for its contents. As you progress through the book, go back and re-read the texts from previous lessons with the same intent of gaining information and pleasure from them.
Tactical Reading Skills: Punctuation Usages

China's contemporary punctuation system has markers which are unique to Chinese (of which #6, 7 & 8 below are only rarely used in newspaper texts), markers which are similar in written shape and function to English punctuation markers, and five punctuation markers which are written identically in English and Chinese texts, but which have both similar and dissimilar functions in the two languages. Knowledge of the values of all three types of markers will be very helpful in strengthening your reading ability. For example, focusing on [\. ] is extremely helpful because [\. ] is used to mark lists of things, see 2:5. You can rely on familiar markers such as [?] and [!] to function in the same manner as they do in English. But understanding the usages of those markers which look the same but are used differently, especially the very frequently used comma [,] is particularly important for an accurate and efficient understanding of Chinese texts.

UNIQUELY CHINESE PUNCTUATION MARKERS

1. [。 ] Sentence Period Marks the end of sentences.
   这是中国队第六次登上亚洲冠军宝座。2:32

2. [、 ] Listing Comma Marks items in lists.
   我认为，应采取“早、少、小”的三字措施来控制吸烟。11:28

3. [《》],[〈〉],[「」] and [～] in traditional texts Title Markers Mark literary titles.
   ……发出了《关于围绕“世界无烟日”积极开展劝阻吸烟活动的通知》……11:14
4. [「」],[『』] Quotation Markers  Mark quotes and use of materials with special meanings; comparable with the Western style ['“”'].

......他告诉「西藏自治区主席」多吉才让说: 「如果......」 12.3:10

5. [⋯⋯⋯] Ellipsis Marker  Marks the omission of text.

这中新型器件寿命长、重量轻⋯⋯⋯ 5:23

6. [（）],[【】],[〖〗] Parentheses Markers  Mark parenthetical material

7. [．] , [＿＿] Emphasis Markers (N.B. [＿＿] marks literary titles in traditional texts)  Placed under or besides characters to mark emphasis.

8. [□] Lost Character Marker  Marks characters lost in transmission

GRAPHEMICALLY IDENTICAL, FUNCTIONALLY DIFFERENT MARKERS

1. [＿＿] Proper Name Marker  Placed under or beside characters in traditional texts to mark the names of individuals.

2. [X],[O] Taboo Markers  Used in to mark deleted taboo words.

3. [・] Sub-division Marker  Placed mid level in the line to mark sub-sections of foreign names, literary titles, dates, and addresses.

4. [，] Comma  Used in Chinese sentences to separate and thus emphasize materials. You must avoid automatically transferring your understanding of how commas are used in English to your reading of Chinese. It is crucial to be aware that Chinese commas can separate grammatical structures which English commas do not. For example Chinese commas routinely separate subjects from verbs, e.g.
Northern urban city Shenyang, recently采取 effective measures ······ 4:5; verbs from objects, e.g. 航天工业部副部长、著名宇航专家孙家栋认为; this satellite's launch success ······ 5:4; and place from subject and verb as in 在今天的射击比赛中，广东刘海英、解放军苏冰、湖南张秋萍四次超过两项亚洲记录。2:8 To assume Chinese commas are always the same as English commas and dismiss these usages as mistakes is to be unclear about what is going on in the Chinese. If you understand how commas function in Chinese texts, you will be able to make those all important segmenting decisions more accurately, and you will be more aware of the extra-textual, connotative content of the materials. See 2:8, 4:10, 4:42, 5:8, 7:9, and 12.1:5 for further discussion of Chinese comma usages.

Markers which are graphemically and functionally similar are: [?] Question Mark; [!] Exclamation Mark; [“”] and [‘’] Quote, Title and Special Usage Markers; [:] Colon; [;] Semi-colon; [-] Dash; [-] Hyphen; [[ ]] and [()] Parentheses; and infrequently used miscellaneous markers such as [||], [～], [/], [“”], etc. (See Stan Mickel, “Modern Chinese Punctuation and CSL Reading Pedagogy” JCLTA, Vol XXIII: No. 1, Feb 1988, pp. 21-39 for further discussion of the punctuation system.)

Whether written with a shape familiar to you or with a form you have not seen before, skillful use of punctuation markers can be as helpful to your development of reading skills as the other tactical skills discussed in this book. Be careful and attentive to these ‘traffic signs’ when working with Chinese texts.

Tactical Reading Skills: Working with Vocabulary

Working with Chinese vocabulary is complicated by the fact that words can be used for several different grammatical functions without change in pronunciation or written form. This leads to a need for flexibility when thinking
of the English equivalents for Chinese words, or otherwise you will have unnecessary difficulties when working with them. For example, if you find 革命 translated as ‘revolution’ in a dictionary and then only think of it as a noun, you may have trouble understanding a sentence in which 革命 is used as the verb ‘revolt’, or the adjective ‘revolutionary’, or as the adverb 革命地, which does not have a direct English equivalent. If you accept that a Chinese word appearing in a particular grammatical position must be translated with an English equivalent reflecting that specific grammatical function, you will not be confused when something you saw as a noun in the dictionary is used as a verb, adjective, adverb, or vice versa. You should learn words for core meanings, almost without concern for the grammatical form of their English equivalent, and then understand and interpret them in terms of the grammatical slots in which they appear.

In addition to understanding the role of grammatical function in working with vocabulary, there are other techniques which will increase your efficiency with vocabulary, and ultimately with reading in general. Vocabulary should never be learned in a vacuum, every vocabulary item should be learned as part of a matrix of meanings, graphic shapes and phonetic values. For example, be alert to the existence of radicals and phonetics as clues to meaning and pronunciation. Radicals are helpful because they generally indicate the basic meaning associated with a character; e.g., the ‘metal’ radical in 铜、银、铂, etc. suggests they all have a meaning having to do with ‘metal’. Phonetics also can be used to predict pronunciation and sometimes meanings; e.g., the phonetic 原 [yuán] ‘original’ gives a clue to the pronunciation and meaning of 源 [yuán] ‘source, fountainhead’.

Use the idea of "Word Groups" as a way to fix vocabulary items in a matrix of conceptual relationships which will allow you to work with the vocabulary more efficiently. For example, if you are alert to the core meaning of 赛 [sài] ‘compete’ in the second lesson and combine that with your understanding of the meaning of the other part of the compounds in which 赛 is used, you will
have a basic idea of the meaning of the words 比 赛 ‘compare + compete’ > ‘competition’, 赛 事 ‘compete + affair’ > ‘competition’ and 决 赛 ‘decide + compete’ > ‘finals in a competition’ without needing to look them up. Even if you do not recognize the other part of the compound, you can use your knowledge of radicals, phonetics and word group affiliations to predict the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary; e.g., use 赛 and the ‘boat’ radical in 艇 to predict that the word 赛 艇 has to do with ‘sailing competition’. This tactic of contextualized guessing can sometimes result in hilarious misunderstandings, but the pleasure that you will experience when you find your guesses confirmed is very rewarding. You can also get many illuminating insights into how the Chinese understand the world around them from the elements used to construct words. Watch for this.

As you get better at implementing these techniques for working with vocabulary, not only will you be able to learn vocabulary more easily, you will improve your reading speed and comprehension.

Tactical Reading Skills: Dictionary Usage

Using a dictionary is unavoidable when reading in a foreign language, but you should take great care not to become chained to it. If you start out trying to read a Chinese text by looking up its vocabulary before you understand its grammatical structure, you will wind up spending hours decoding a puzzle instead of reading, and you will frequently still be unsure about just what the text means even though you may have spent lots of time hitting the dictionary. But there will inevitably be many times when you have to use a dictionary. So that you can more quickly move towards the central point of reading--working with and understanding the contents of texts--you should learn how to use dictionaries most efficiently and not spend undue time and energy finding words in them.
It is hard to learn how to use a dictionary expeditiously from written instructions, but knowing some basic principles is a good way to start. There are two ways to find vocabulary in most Chinese dictionaries: alphabetically and by graphemic analysis of the characters. If you know how to pronounce a Chinese word but are unsure of its meaning, the quickest and easiest thing to do is to look it up by its romanized spelling. A compound word is usually listed under its first character, so you can look it up by alphabetically locating the first character in the dictionary and then scanning the compounds listed under that character. In many dictionaries the compounds are also listed alphabetically. If you do not know the pronunciation of the rest of the compound, you can look at the listed compounds one by one until you find the word. Keeping the radical and/or phonetic of the unknown character in mind improves the speed with which the compound can be located.

When you do not know the pronunciation of the first character of a word, it is necessary to find it through graphic analysis of the character. The most common graphic organization of characters in dictionaries, indexes, phone books, etc., is by their radicals, though there is also the less commonly used four corner method. Radicals are listed in dictionaries (or in radical indexes) in order of ascending number of strokes. The first step is to identify the radical under which the character seems likely to be listed. Individual characters under each radical are also listed in order of ascending number of strokes, not including those of the radical. Having counted the number of strokes, you should then go to the subdividison of the radical having that number of strokes and search out the character. (A good habit to cultivate when you are unable to find a character under the anticipated number of strokes is to look also under the next higher and then the next lower number of strokes.) In some dictionaries each individual character has its own assigned number, but usually just the page number where the character appears is given. Once you locate the first character of the compound in the dictionary, the search tactics discussed above for finding the
compound should then be used.

As a general principle, it is worthwhile to poke around in the back and front parts of dictionaries. In addition to prefaces and radical indexes, lexicographers seem to delight in adding information such as lists of the names, regions, capitals, and currencies of countries; lists of governmental agencies; lists of measure words; and lists of common Chinese surnames, among other things, all of which can be interesting and unexpectedly useful.

Tactical Reading Skills: Cultural Knowledge

The Chinese write about the world around them, of course. Therefore, the more you know about their culture and how they view the world, the more likely you are to get the exhilarating "aha experience" of recognizing in Chinese texts things you already know, and the easier it will be for you to read what they write. For example, knowledge of Chinese social structure will give a clarifying background to the comments on the position of women in Chinese society given in Lesson Three. Knowing about the results of the 1945-49 Chinese civil war will give you a context for understanding the article on Taiwan in Lesson Eight more rapidly, as well as a context for understanding why comments are phrased as they are in the articles in newspapers from Taiwan in Lesson Twelve. Similarly, knowledge of Chinese foreign relations, especially those of the last 150 years, will make the Chinese foreign minister’s comments in Lesson Seven clearer and help you see the covert as well as the overt messages being conveyed. What you learn about China in courses on Chinese history, religion, anthropology, literature and other disciplines, and from your own readings and experiences, will inevitably come in handy as you read.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Outline the specific steps to be taken when preparing a Chinese text for class.
2. How does an active knowledge of grammatical markers help you read Chinese materials?
3. Why are grammatical markers discussed after the main text in each lesson?
4. What steps should you take to learn the vocabulary most efficiently?
5. What is the function of the sight reading texts?
6. How is a dictionary to be used when you are reading Chinese? Why do many people rely too much on dictionaries when reading in a foreign language?
7. What are the three groups of Chinese punctuation markers?
8. In what specific way does knowledge of the values of punctuation markers increase your ability to read Chinese?
9. What are some of the similarities and differences between Chinese and English comma usages?
10. How can classes taken in English be useful when reading Chinese language materials? What classes in traditional and modern Chinese culture have you taken?
11. What is your goal in learning to read Chinese? What level of proficiency do you wish to reach? Which of the strategies and tactics discussed in this book will be useful to you in reaching your goal?

FOOTNOTES