A New Practical Primer of Literary Chinese
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Introduction

Though most students who have picked up this reader already know why they are doing so—they have specific goals in mind and know what sort of texts they will be reading—it may be appropriate here to say a few things about the nature of literary Chinese and how that nature affects the presentation of the rules in the textbook and the philosophy that went into composing it. Whereas this textbook in many ways shares the assumptions and methods of previous ones, there are a few issues that I have thought particularly important in my own teaching methods and so I will mention them here also.

The Nature of Literary Chinese

Literary Chinese was the principal language of written communication in East Asia from ancient times until the early twentieth century. It grew first out of the earliest examples of written language in China—the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang 周 dynasty and the bronze inscriptions of the Shang and early Zhou 周 dynasties—and can be read in archaic form in the earliest strata of the “Confucian” classics. By the fifth century B.C.E. the language had begun to stabilize and to develop standardized syntactic and grammatical rules. Over the next two centuries the first great flowering of Chinese writing occurred, exemplified in the compendia of the great philosophers (e.g., Mencius 孟子, Xunzi 荀子, Zhuangzi 莊子, and Han Fei zi 韓非子) and the early historical narratives (e.g., Zuo zhuan 左傳, Guoyu 國語, and Zhanguo ce 戰國策).

Because of the complexity of the character-writing system, literary Chinese evolved a flexible and open-ended grammar with few rules and essentially no inflections. Understanding a passage depends not on the previous mastery of a grammatical system but on the ability to intuit the thrust of an argument or a narrative as well as the knowledge of the past usage of particular characters. Consequently, in premodern times, learning literary Chinese
never involved learning a grammatical “system” (as learning Latin or Sanskrit did, for example); rather, it involved memorizing “classic” texts and absorbing their rhythms. These ancient texts formed templates for later composition.

One can say, then, that reading literary Chinese is largely a matter of semantic mastery (i.e., a knowledge of character meanings and which meanings occur in which situations). It only takes a few weeks to learn the basic rules of literary grammar, but it takes many years of work to become comfortable with how characters are used. This is one of the reasons why using dictionaries when reading literary Chinese is both necessary and frustrating: You will need to know a wide range of meanings for each character, but in many cases you will have no idea which possible meaning is applicable to the sentence you are reading. The larger and more sophisticated the dictionary you use, the more likely it is that you will find the meaning you need—but also the more likely it is that the number of meanings you can choose from will multiply. In many cases, you will discover that reading literary Chinese involves guesswork—if you can guess what the sentence is most likely going to say, you can then check to see whether any meanings for the character in question make sense in that context.

There are some further consequences that arise from these characteristics:

First, grammatical rules tend not to be treated as rules—that is, there is no sense that certain grammatical rules must be obeyed for a sentence to be correct. Quite a few modern scholars have observed that grammatical rules were customarily followed during the so-called classical period of literary composition, from the fifth to the second centuries B.C.E. After that, it seems that writers were often unconscious of grammatical rules and wrote “ungrammatically” if the rhythm of the language demanded it; in fact, in many cases writers ceased to understand how certain classical particles and language structures worked. This means that you must keep the rules in mind but also retain a healthy degree of skepticism—not every sentence is going to be analyzable in a “classic” way.

Second, the various meanings of a character tend to congregate around certain kinds of writing; the same character may appear in a legal document, a poem, a philosophical essay, a Buddhist sutra, and a medical treatise, but it will have a different meaning in each of those texts. One might say, as a result, that there is not one coherent language—literary Chinese—but rather a proliferation of dialects distinguished by type and style. You may very well find when you confront a new type of text that it suddenly becomes opaque—you can more or less figure out how the rhythms and syntactical structures of the text work, but you have no idea what it means. As you confront each new type of writing, some patience is required while you master the new semantic range for the type of writing you are reading.

The question then remains: How does one begin the study of such an open language? Wouldn’t it make more sense to have as many introductory textbooks as there are varie
ties of the language? To some extent, it would (beyond the impracticality). For example, medical language and Buddhist theological argumentation are so far beyond other forms of literary Chinese as to make them good examples of self-contained "dialects," and they would perhaps be best learned on their own (as they are often taught in advanced university seminars today). However, teachers generally agree that it is useful for all students of the different literary "dialects" to begin from one common ground: classical prose of the "classical" and early imperial (second century B.C.E. to second century C.E.) periods. There are two good reasons for beginning here. First, classical-prose texts of that era do provide a good grounding in the handful of grammatical rules that tend to be followed, to a greater or lesser extent, in later texts. Second, they introduce the reader to the style of prose most typical in what has been identified (justifiably or not) as the "mainstream" of premodern Chinese literature: the essay, the historical/fictional narrative, and the philosophical treatise (poetry could be included here as well, with some reservations). It can be assumed that any writer in these genres from the second century C.E. on will have read and absorbed the works of the early period to some extent and will be either consciously imitating them or subconsciously repeating their rhythms and manner of expression.

This textbook thus follows the consensus in stressing early texts. First, a series of excerpts from a first-century-B.C.E. anthology (the Garden of Stories 說苑) provides lessons in the basic grammar rules. After that, it introduces the historical text (Shiji 史記 in Unit 2) and the two philosophical texts (Mencius 孟子 in Unit 4 and Zhuangzi 莊子 in Unit 6) thought to be most influential on later literary style. In addition, I have included two biographies from the Biographies of Noted Women 烈女傳 (Unit 3), both for their cultural and stylistic importance and for the insights they give on the lives of women (who are largely absent from the other texts). Finally, for variety's sake, I include two narratives—one prose, one poetic—from later centuries (Unit 5) to give readers an introductory view of how the language began to change.

**LITERARY CHINESE AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE**

There is one important assumption underlying this textbook: Even though literary Chinese is best begun through a study of classical texts from China, the language itself is an international written language of East Asia and consequently must not be taught as or considered to be merely an "earlier stage" of Mandarin or of the other modern Chinese dialects.

Literary Chinese had one major advantage as a written form of communication outside China: because it was not a phonetically based language and provided a rich vocabulary for representing complex ideas, it could be adopted by different emerging cultures as a system of signification that defined cultural literacy and even made intercultural communication possible (in this sense, it played to a much greater extent the same role Latin did in the medieval and Renaissance West). Ultimately, most educated men and women in Korea, Japan,
the Ryukyu Islands, and Vietnam before the twentieth century could read (and often write) literary Chinese to some extent. In addition, and what is perhaps more significant, literary Chinese came to influence the vocabulary and style of the vernacular languages as well, in spite of its alien syntax.

Unfortunately, the developments in East Asian education during the “modernization” period from the end of the nineteenth century have inclined toward limiting literary Chinese: Chinese intellectuals have tended to claim it as China’s own, distinctive, premodern form of self-expression (often dismissing its composition outside of China as pale imitation), while the other countries have often excluded native writings in literary Chinese from their canons, seeing them as alien and artificial, the symbol of their countries’ servitude to a foreign tradition. Recently, however, an increased sensitivity to the links that bring the societies of East Asia together into a shared cultural space has suggested that the study of literary Chinese independent of the study of the modern Chinese language may be of great advantage for the next generations of scholars and students.

This philosophy is reflected in two ways in the present text. First, I have refrained in most cases from explaining literary structures and meanings in terms of their Mandarin equivalents—except in certain cases where it is likely that the Mandarin student will confuse a Mandarin meaning with a literary meaning (a typical example: 走 = literary “to run,” Mandarin “to walk”). Though the habit of translation back and forth between Mandarin and literary Chinese may prove a useful exercise for some (particularly those who are learning literary in order to master written Mandarin style), it can prove misleading for students who are using the language as an independent form of communication. This text assumes that students will be working back and forth between literary Chinese and English—not because English has any inherent superiority, but because it simply is the only common ground for every student in the English-speaking academy.

Second, I have provided multiple pronunciations for the vocabulary: Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean. Pronunciation is a complicated issue with literary Chinese, and some further explanations may be needed here:

1. Literary Chinese was pronounced in whatever language or dialect the speaker spoke—in other words, there is no “authentic” way of pronouncing literary Chinese. However, it is usually easier for students to learn a character when they have a sound they can associate with it. So, it is strongly recommended that you learn the character in the language/dialect with which you yourself are most familiar.

2. Of course, literary Chinese as originally read in the early dynasties would have sounded quite different than it does when read in Mandarin (in fact, modern Fujianese and Cantonese speakers—often assert that earlier literary pronunciation is closer to their own dialects). There is no particular reason for assum-
ing that Mandarin is the best language to use when reading literary Chinese, except as a matter of convenience. However, all students (including those who know Japanese or Korean) should take the time to learn the spelling of proper names in their Mandarin romanization—for no other reason than that Western language scholarship tends to use the Mandarin version.

3. At the end of the textbook I have provided complete character indexes for both Mandarin and Korean.

4. Japanese pronunciation is a difficult matter. Because Japanese readers only read literary Chinese through a series of syntactic rearrangements known as kanbun, one cannot determine how a Chinese character will be read until the kanbun rearrangement has been made. I have provided some of the most common readings for each character, or at least have given how the character is read in one possible kanbun arrangement (with kun readings italicized). Considering the complexity of the issue, however, I have found it impracticable to provide a pronunciation index in Japanese. Instead, I have given romanized kanbun readings of all of the texts (except those in Unit 5), based on good twentieth-century Japanese editions. For Korean pronunciation I follow the Revised Romanization of Korean (National Academy of the Korean Language: 2000).

5. I apologize for not providing Vietnamese pronunciations—my work has been based on the needs of my own students over the past decade or so, and the number of students of Vietnamese culture with an interest in the literary Chinese heritage I have encountered has been relatively low thus far. Perhaps I can rectify the lack of a Vietnamese index in a future edition.

Sino-Vietnamese-English dictionary @ here (Select Hán-Nôm and input Chinese character)

SOME FURTHER COMMENTS ON PEDAGOGY

This textbook is “practical” because it attempts to avoid some of the more complicated issues surrounding literary Chinese interpretation for the sake of introducing students to the basics of the language. As I have said above, unlike highly inflected Indo-European classical languages (Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit), literary Chinese did not require first learning complicated grammatical rules to make it comprehensible. Until the twentieth century, students used memorized texts as guides for composition. This means that the very rules that govern literary Chinese—whether they have been followed or not—were not clearly articulated by early writers and are still open to debate among modern scholars, who often disagree quite sharply over how certain particles or sentence structures should be interpreted. In addition, we must face the problem of the “historicity” of interpretation. Careful historical linguistic analysis, using modern scientific methods, may allow us to figure out what Zhuangzi originally meant (or at least to get closer to it), but this is only partially
useful, because such an interpretation may differ significantly from how most East Asian
readers have read him for the past two thousand years. This does not mean that we should
champion one reading over another; it simply means that we have to be aware that ba-
sic matters of “understanding” may imperceptibly shade into more complex problems of
“philosophical interpretation.”

All of these complexities may produce a problem for you—especially if you are a
student mostly of a modern spoken language, and you have received very little training in
grammatical and syntactic analysis from the beginning. Except for some of the most basic
terms (noun, verb, adverb, etc.) you may have little sense of how a sentence may be parsed,
or what differences may be implied by syntactic transformations. To subject you to the full
brunt of scholarly debate on how literary Chinese should be analyzed and interpreted may
merely confuse you unnecessarily. However, you may find that you do need guidelines for
reading, and you will need a sense of basic grammar. Although my “practical” solution
here may be unscientific in that it is not rigorous from a linguist’s point of view, I hope it
succeeds in walking a middle path. As you become more comfortable with the material and
the ways of structuring thought, you can deal with more complicated issues and come to
understand how sophisticated grammatical and syntactic debates might deepen and com-
plicate our reading. Regardless, I hope that all students will soon make an effort to consult
Edwin Pulleyblank’s *An Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar*, which is the most lucid
description of pre-imperial literary language in English currently available.
How to Use This Textbook

This textbook is divided into six units:

Unit 1 (Lessons 1–10): a series of brief anecdotes introduces the grammar of the language, and exercises help you to internalize standard linguistic patterns.

Unit 2 (Lessons 11–18) and Unit 3 (Lessons 19–21): a substantial selection from chapter 86 of Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 Shi ji 史記 (also called Records of the Historian) and two biographies from Liu Xiang’s 劉向 Biographies of Noted Women 烈女傳 will further accustomed you to standard prose style.

Unit 4 (Lessons 22–30) introduces philosophical language through selections from the Mencius 孟子.

Unit 5 (Lessons 31–32) gives two accounts of “warrior women” and introduces you to later, more “fictional” (and poetic) narrative.

Unit 6 (Lessons 33–40) presents a complete chapter from the Zhuangzi 莊子, “Autumn Waters” 秋水.

The textbook is designed to take a full academic year to complete. The most challenging element for you will probably be the mastery of characters. Altogether, 1,374 characters are introduced in the course of the reading.

STRUCTURE OF THE LESSONS

Each lesson is composed of the following:

1. The original Chinese text.
2. New vocabulary items for that text:
   a. Every new character is assigned a consecutive number. Multicharacter items are assigned a number based on the first character of the compound, with letter designations in order of appearance, for example, 三 (260; first appears in Lesson 8); 三王 (260a, first appears in Lesson 33); and 三代 (260b, first appears in Lesson 35).
How to Use This Textbook

b. Each entry is followed by pronunciations in Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, and Cantonese. (Yale romanization)

c. Under the pronunciations, definitions are listed. All definitions for the character in all of its appearances in the textbook are given, and sometimes significant definitions that do not occur in the lesson texts. If the definitions are drastically different from one another, or if they are pronounced differently according to the rules of modern Mandarin (see 2.7 below), they are listed under separate numbers. In that case, an asterisk (*) is placed next to the definition applicable to that particular lesson.

d. Additional information concerning the character or compound may then be given.

e. The character’s radical under the classic dictionary system is provided.

3. A detailed commentary follows the vocabulary list. In the earlier lessons, this includes notes on basic grammar and syntax, and it may also include exercises. In later lessons, the commentary explains confusing or dubious passages of the text.

4. After Lesson 6, “vocabulary hints” sections give you the identification number for old characters that occur in the lesson but whose meaning you may have forgotten; they also specify new meanings for old characters.

5. Finally, the lesson closes with a comprehensive list of all new characters encountered in it. The new characters are divided into four categories, which are based on frequency lists compiled by E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks in Chinese Character Frequency Lists (n.p.: SinFac Minor, 1976). The Brooks lists are based on a survey of a wide range of important literary Chinese texts: category I includes the 871 most common characters of literary Chinese; category II the next 734; and category III the next 639. Category IV is everything else. Though which characters you encounter will be determined somewhat by the kind of text you are reading, these category breakdowns should give you some sense of what are the most commonly occurring characters overall.

Vocabulary Learning

You may wonder why I have not given the vocabulary lists solely based on the meanings encountered in the individual lessons—that is, I have not given vocabulary glosses, repeating characters encountered before when they have new meanings in the individual lesson. There is a very good reason for this: If you are forced to think through what a character may mean in an individual context out of a choice of different meanings, you will develop the peculiar skills you need for understanding literary Chinese. Moreover, you may occasion-
How to Use This Textbook

Dictionaries

I am asked constantly: What dictionaries should I use for studying literary Chinese? There is unfortunately no reasonable answer to this. Part of the problem is rooted in the process of learning the language; until the student becomes accustomed to how words are used and to intuicing the gist of a passage, any dictionary, no matter how good it is, can potentially mislead. When you look up a character, you may be confronted by a dozen or so meanings, and you may have no clue as to which one is most appropriate.

All of the major East Asian languages have produced dictionaries of greater or lesser size to assist in the reading of literary Chinese texts. This is especially true in China and Taiwan, where the publication of little handbooks of literary usage runs into hundreds of volumes, of varying quality. If you’re a fluent reader in an East Asian language, my advice is to explore and see what you can find, and to use good sense.

As your literary Chinese abilities improve, you’ll soon be able to use the big, scholarly dictionaries that have their definitions written in simple literary Chinese. But, you will probably need to work for at least a year on your abilities before this becomes an option. The two most important dictionaries are the Hanyu da cidian 漢語大辭典, now generally considered the OED of Chinese dictionaries (and easily available in CD-ROM format), and Morohashi’s older Dai Kanwa jiten 大漢和辭典, which provides definitions in Japanese and (usually) literary Chinese as well. You may also find useful the Taiwan-produced Zhong-wen da cidian 中文大辭典, which is a literary Chinese translation (with some changes) of Morohashi’s dictionary.

As for Chinese-English dictionaries, some scholars say there is no such thing as an adequate Chinese-English dictionary for literary Chinese. This is true in a sense. But if you need a transitional dictionary until you’re ready to use the native-language dictionaries, your best choice is still Mathews’ Chinese English Dictionary (Harvard University Press, revised American edition, 1943; still in print). Mathews’ has many problems: It is far too short, it is geared largely to literary Chinese usage as it was practiced in the 1930s and 1940s, and the entries give no sense of the history of usage (i.e., they don’t tell you when a meaning first appears for a particular character). It also organizes characters by pronunciation based upon the Wade-Giles system of romanization, which has been largely replaced by pinyin. Nevertheless, it is still a great resource for beginning students. A leaky lifeboat is better than no lifeboat at all.

Cantonese Pronunciation Dictionary @ here
Hakka Pronunciation Dictionary @ here (The 3rd audio is Hakka)
Teochew Pronunciation Dictionary @ here
Taiwanese Pronunciation Dictionary @ here
ENDNOTES

1. By “inflections” I mean systems of suffixes and/or prefixes that indicate tense, number, case, mood, and so forth.

2. From my own experience, there are some other inherent disadvantages of asking English-speaking students of Mandarin to work on literary Chinese in the context of Mandarin: first, students in the first few years of Mandarin study may not be able to understand Mandarin grammar rigorously enough to appreciate why certain Mandarin language structures are said to be “equivalent to” their literary counterparts; second, it encourages them to see literary Chinese as merely a cultivated and somewhat superfluous supplement to their Mandarin knowledge, rather than as a much older and much more widespread form of communication; and third, it allows them (in translation exercises) to move ill-understood classical vocabulary from a literary sentence pattern to a Mandarin sentence pattern, without confronting what the sentence is actually saying.

3. The English reader can get a basic sense of the problems involved by comparing, for example, A. C. Graham’s translation of the Zhuangzi to Burton Watson’s.
Note: It is the habit in scholarship to romanize the state of 韓 as “Hann” to distinguish it from 漢 (in Sichuan, and later the name of a dynasty), and 衛 as “Wey” to distinguish it from 魏. In an earlier period, the states of Wei 魏, Zhao 趙, and Hann 韓 constituted the state of Jin 晉. By the time this map becomes current (fourth century B.C.E.), the territory of Wu 吳 and Yue 越 had been absorbed by Chu 楚.