

Book Reviewed

The Chinese Language: Its History and Current Usage. **Kane, D. (2006). Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing**

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China's rise as an economic and political power has been accompanied by a worldwide upsurge of interest in learning the Chinese language. As such, there is now a vast array of courses, textbooks and other materials available for those who want to study Chinese. However, what is lacking is an up-to-date, readable introduction to the language. This book, "written for people who are thinking of taking up Chinese and would like some insights into what they are letting themselves in for", aims to address this need by providing "a contemporary introduction to modern Chinese as it is used in China during the first few years of the twenty-first century" (p. 11).

Chapter One gives an overview of the language itself, its speakers and Chinese language learning. Here Kane explains that the focus of the book is on the variety of Chinese known as *putonghua*, or Modern Standard Chinese, China's official and standard language. He then goes on to discuss the development and promotion of *putonghua*, the increase in the number of foreigners learning Chinese, how long it will take to reach various levels of proficiency in Chinese, the development of romanisation systems for representing Chinese and finally introduces some basic features of the language such as tones, dialects and grammar.

Each of the proceeding chapters then deals in detail with a specific aspect of Chinese. Chapter Two explores the origins, development and features of the Chinese script. Topics covered here include the classification of characters, the development of simplified characters and the revival of traditional characters in Mainland China. Kane advises language learners to approach the Chinese script in terms of learning words rather than characters then suggests some practical techniques for reading and writing characters and explains how to use a Chinese dictionary. Chapter Three discusses the history of Chinese and its regional varieties. It begins with a brief history of Chinese from the earliest written records on oracle bones from 1300 BC through to modern times, with examples of how Chinese may have sounded at various stages of its development. It then goes on to describe the distribution and characteristics of the nine dialect groups. Here too there are example conversations in various dialects to show how they sound, although the transcriptions may be hard to follow for those unfamiliar with the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Given the spread of *putonghua* within China and the overseas Chinese community discussed here and elsewhere in the book, it is not surprising that Kane's advice to learners on the issue of dialects is that "unless you are a missionary or a linguist, however, it is unlikely you will ever need to learn any of the dialects" (p. 105).

Chapter Four gives a concise overview of Chinese grammar. Starting from the premise that Chinese is grammatically less complex than European languages and other Asian languages such as Japanese and Korean, it deals with basic grammatical categories such as nouns and adjectives, concepts such as days of the week, months and seasons and some salient grammatical structures such as the use of *le*, past experience with *guo*, the continuous *zhe* and the disposal form *ba*. All of this is clearly explained with many examples to help demonstrate how Chinese grammar works. Chapter Five then moves on to cover pronunciation, which Kane rightly suggests is "one aspect of Chinese you will have to work on constantly, trying all the time to approximate the ideal, and often falling short" (p. 139). In an attempt to alleviate the unfortunate situation in which almost all Chinese textbooks have a chapter on pronunciation but use technical linguistic terminology without explanation and lack practical advice on how to position your tongue and teeth to pronounce Chinese, the first section of this chapter gives a clear explanation of such terms with useful practical advice on how to actually produce Chinese consonants. The next section deals with vowels and is again very clear, with plenty of pronunciation tips. The chapter then goes on to discuss tones, central to Chinese but probably the most difficult as-

pect of the language for many learners. Along with some background information on the nature of tones, there are some very useful oral exercises for distinguishing and producing tones which will undoubtedly be helpful for students of the language.

Chapter Six discusses Chinese in its social and cultural context, covering topics such as polite language, culturally specific words, conversation fillers, euphemisms, rude language, Chinese proverbs and classical allusions, again with plenty of interesting and practical examples. Concluding the book is the Suggestions for Further Reading section which contains useful advice for those wanting to pursue studies in Chinese, such as choice of textbooks, dictionaries, academic works on various aspects of Chinese and materials for learning Classical Chinese.

Throughout the entire book information is clearly presented in a readable way, often accompanied by useful tables, figures and diagrams. The individual chapters also strike the right balance between information *about* Chinese and advice on *how* to learn it. However, apart from the Sources of Illustrations and Quotations, a source is not often cited in the text itself and there is no bibliography or index, both of which would likely be useful for the book's intended audience.

Overall, this book succeeds admirably in providing a thorough yet readable introduction to the Chinese language and what is involved in learning it. It will make a valuable addition to the collection of Chinese language students and teachers as well as linguists interested in Chinese.