

EAST ASIA

Van Els, Paul. *Van orakelbot tot weblog: Lesboek Klassiek Chinees, deel 1.* Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2011. IX + 212 pp. ISBN: 978-90-8728-109-0.

Van Els, Paul. *Van orakelbot tot weblog: Lesboek Klassiek Chinees, deel 2.* Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2011. X + 198 pp. ISBN: 978-90-8728-138-0. – Review by *Oliver Weingarten.*

How best to teach a dead language? By demonstrating that it is still very much alive, as Paul van Els does in his excellent new introduction to Classical Chinese. Based on teaching materials used for several years at the University of Leiden, his textbook employs various means to make the language accessible and attractive to students. Visual materials such as maps, photographs, calligraphies, and reproductions from Chinese editions of classical texts make the book a pleasure to work with. More importantly, Van Els addresses his readers in a conversational, friendly style, offers encouragement and patiently points out potential difficulties, while warning about linguistic pitfalls. He opts to cordially invite his students to engage in a joint intellectual enterprise rather than to talk down to them from a position of authority.

The textbook is suitable for students who possess at least a basic knowledge of Mandarin pronunciation and Pinyin and have been taught the rudiments of the script before. Experience with bilingual dictionaries is desirable as the second half of the course requires learners to look up vocabulary on their own. The structure of the textbook is didactically well thought-out and suitable for a two-semester course.

Part one outlines fundamental grammatical features and imparts basic vocabulary of pre-Qin and early Han Chinese. The presentation is systematic and proceeds at a gentle pace. Initially, simple nominal and verbal phrases are separately introduced and students are given the opportunity to consolidate their grasp of these basic linguistic units before encountering nominal and verbal sentences. The distinction

between phrases and sentences, as with other grammatical terms and categories, is clearly explained and illustrated with numerous examples from Dutch. Where conventions of their own native language might mislead or confuse learners, differences are expressly addressed (e.g., pp. 45–47, 48–49). Gradually, more word classes such as pronouns and stative verbs are introduced, as are means and functions of nominalisation and more complex syntactic structures. By the time they have finished the first volume, learners will have begun reading original texts from the writings of the Warring States philosophers and should possess a sound understanding of the basic grammar.

The readings in part two afford students the opportunity to familiarise themselves with different genres ranging, as the title indicates, from Shang divination records to contemporary web literature. The periods in between are represented by excerpts from pre-Qin Masters, the *Shiji*, medieval “records of the strange” (*zhiguai xiaoshuo*), Tang and Song poetry, and late imperial occasional jottings (*biji*). This selection creates a sense of historical depth as well as stimulating variation with regard to language, style, genre, and content. More grammar points are discussed throughout and received ones are frequently reinforced by references to previous sections. Explanations often go beyond the mere reference to grammar points and also address issues of style and rhetoric. A useful feature are the questions that conclude lessons and the frequent suggestions for classroom discussions in relation to the contents of the readings rather than their language alone.

In addition to readings, word lists, and notes on the readings, each chapter comprises a generous amount of supplementary material elucidating historical and cultural contexts, and also offering guidance on sinological issues. For instance, students learn what bamboo and silk manuscripts look like and how premodern punctuation differs from modern conventions; how Shang divination by bone-cracking was

conducted; how the sexagenary cycle was used to keep track of days and years; what an imperial reign period is and how to look it up to determine a date; that historical phonology has revealed the changing pronunciation of words over time, and where to find reconstructions. Glimpses on aspects of material culture such as the shape and material of pillows are likewise included and add to the richness of contextual information. Throughout the book, brief introductions to reference works, translations, and studies point novice students to further readings and research tools. And should this not satisfy their hunger for information, then those among them with a more culinary inclination will undoubtedly enjoy the mouth-watering photograph of “Pork à la Su Shi.”

The author’s didactic and editorial decisions convey a palpable sense of cultural continuity and emphasise the unique significance of Classical Chinese as a key to both the Chinese past and present. If vestiges of the ancient language still adorn parking signs, cinematic adaptations of *Mozi* anecdotes serve to attract moviegoers, Mao can be shown to have pounded out austere tetrasyllabic lines in his letters, and a web author reflects on the ambiguities of femininity in contemporary society by translating her quarrel with a Beijing cabby into literary Chinese capped off with an allusion to *Mengzi*, then, perhaps, students can be convinced that the many hours spent working through writings of the distant past are not wasted.

A number of textbooks for Classical Chinese are already on offer. What are the characteristic features of this one, aside from the fact that it is specifically designed for a Dutch-speaking audience? The answer is two-fold, didactic and linguistic. Most students of Chinese now wish

to acquire Mandarin for practical purposes. Few choose to study literary Chinese, and where their degree programmes force them to do so, the classes often suffer from a lack of interest on the part of the participants. These unhappy conscripts tend to wonder, quite understandably, why they should be burdened with yet another variety of Chinese when they are already busy coping with the modern language. Van Els’ textbook does a very good job in demonstrating the relevance of Classical Chinese for the present. Furthermore, learners growing up in the digital age will be much more easily motivated if they are taught with student-friendly, visually attractive materials. This should not be dismissed as a concession to an unhealthy superficial zeitgeist, but rather as a necessity to keep the study of Classical Chinese alive at a time when the scholarly engagement with the past, and especially with non-Western pasts, becomes an increasingly difficult proposition in Western academia. Moreover, van Els admirably demonstrates that an orientation towards the needs and wishes of students does not require a lowering of standards. The aim to impart linguistic competence is very well served by his step-by-step build-up of grammatical knowledge. It avoids both the frustration and confusion that arise when students are forced to tackle original passages before they possess even the most basic level of comprehension. It is to be hoped that this first-rate textbook will soon be translated into English for the benefit of those who wish to learn Classical Chinese but do not read Dutch.

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