
Ross, Claudia and Jing-heng Sheng Ma.
Modern Mandarin Chinese Grammar:
A Practical Guide.

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Modern Mandarin Chinese Grammar: A Practical Guide is a Chinese grammar book that lives up to its title, being both modern and practical. It consists of two parts. Part A, titled “Structures,” describes the major features of Mandarin grammar and covers the traditional grammatical categories, such as phrase order, nouns, verbs, and specifications. Part B — “Situations and Functions” — emphasizes the appropriate usage of the Chinese language in different situations, such as how to make introductions, how to apologize, and even how to conduct modern-day telecommunications. These two parts are not totally unrelated; in fact, all sections are cross-referenced throughout the book. This book is intended as a reference for Mandarin Chinese learners of all levels from elementary to advanced and is complemented by the *Modern Mandarin Chinese Grammar Workbook*, which, unfortunately, I did not have access to and therefore cannot cover in this review.

Modern Mandarin Chinese Grammar: A Practical Guide is quite comprehensive and definitely very handy. The author claims that no prior knowledge of grammatical terminology is necessary and provides a complete glossary of grammatical terms for easy reference. In addition to the structures, both Chinese pronunciation and the Chinese writing system are included in Part A. This inclusion makes it easy for beginners to gain an overview of Chinese language as a whole. Most of the grammar points in Mandarin textbooks are presented at random, according to the lesson content, and usually are limited to a specific topic; Part A thus serves as a good source for supplementary information. Part B illustrates various situations, such as how to write addresses on envelopes correctly, how to prepare a name card, how to ask for assistance, how to express needs, worries, opinions, gratitude, good wishes — almost every situation is covered. For users who merely want to find out what to do or say in real-life situations (at different levels of formality), Part B is definitely a sensible guide. Readers can always follow the cross-references to explore more regarding a topic of interest.

Anybody who has had the experience of struggling to read and understand a grammar book will find this one very readable and easy to understand. The explanations are clear and straightforward. Moreover, the abundance of examples enhances understanding. Besides Hanyu Pinyin, the examples are also given in both simplified and traditional characters. This arrangement makes this book suitable for Mandarin learners everywhere in the English-speaking world, no matter

which textbook has been adopted. Furthermore, the expressions and usages in Taiwan and mainland China are compared and contrasted, preparing the Mandarin learners for their encounters with native speakers from different Chinese-speaking regions.

It has been noted that culture is an integral part of language learning, but it is not typical for a grammar book to contain many cultural notes. This book, by contrast, devotes many lengthy sections to describing various aspects of Chinese culture, informing readers as to what is or is not appropriate in China and explaining why certain words or expressions should or should not be used. This approach makes much more sense to readers rather than simply telling them what to say without any explanation.

The section titled *Telecommunications and e-communications: telephones, the internet, beepers and faxes* is particularly eye-catching. It keeps the new generation of Chinese learners up-to-date and helps them to function easily in the modern electronic world. However, it would be even more accommodating if other Chinese vocabulary related to e-mail and the Internet had been included. For instance, it would have been useful to learn how to say “reply,” “forward,” “search,” “click,” “homepage,” “download,” “text,” “message,” and “blog” in Chinese.

A distinctive feature of this book is its richness of examples. Some seem awkward, which may be a result of regional dialects. However, even taking these regional factors into consideration, a few examples seem questionable. One is “*zōngéryánzhī*” on page 140, under the heading *Summarizing and concluding*. The phrase is translated as “in other words” or “to put it another way.” However, the *Far East Chinese English Dictionary* defines the same phrase as “in a word” or “to sum up,” which is the standard usage accepted by native Chinese. In addition, on top of page 385, “*Qìngzhù bìyè diǎnlǐ*” is used for “congratulations on your graduation,” but native speakers from different regions all feel that the phrase actually conveys the meaning “Congratulations on your graduation ceremony.” In Chinese, it is proper to say “*Qìngzhù nǐ bìyè*” but not “*Qìngzhù bìyè diǎnlǐ*”. Chinese people congratulate someone on a special event or occasion, but not on a ceremony. There may be some other discrepancies that need to be identified for a future edition.

It is delightful to review a refreshing grammar book like *Modern Mandarin Chinese Grammar*. This book is innovative in its organization and content. It brings traditional and functional grammar together in a single volume and teaches culture as well as modern technological terms for practical use. Most of all, it can be used by Mandarin learners of all levels. Overall, this grammar book is very up-to-date and user-friendly. Despite some imperfections in its examples, I recommend it wholeheartedly to both teachers and students.

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