

Learn Mandarin through Chinese Proverbs

Emma Lee

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Chinese language teacher Emma Lee found a need for language books that would teach not only vocabulary, but also give a flavor of the value and cultures of China. To that end, she has created *Learn Mandarin through Chinese Proverbs*, a monumental 535-page compilation that is accompanied by two cd's.

Lee begins with a section that introduces Mandarin Chinese to the reader. She introduces "Romanizing" systems—those that convert Chinese characters in a manner that allows Western students to pronounce them—and includes a comparison and brief history of the most prominent of these systems. Lee continues with introductions to initials, finals, and tones. She then offers a guide for writing Mandarin Phonetic Symbols (MPS) and a chart showing the origin of MPS.

This whirlwind tour of Mandarin complete, Lee moves on to the bulk of the book: Chinese proverbs. Divided by content (for examples, proverbs dealing with plants, men, women, friends, business, etc.), these proverbs span the gamut of Chinese history. Lee has done a remarkable job compiling these proverbs, which impart a true taste of Chinese values. But it is in her asides that students learn the most about this culture. Her brief stories of the philosophers and historical events associated with certain proverbs evoke the flavor of the culture most keenly.

Each proverb is written in several different forms:

1. Mandarin Phonetic Symbols (MPS)
2. Traditional Chinese characters (a written form of a Chinese)
3. Simplified Chinese characters (another written form)
4. The Pinyin system (a "Romanizing" system that converts Chinese characters in a way that allows Western students to pronounce them)
5. Mandarin Phonetic Symbols Second Form (MPS II, another Romanizing system)
6. A word-for-word English translation
7. A full sentence English translation

Lee often expands on the meaning of the proverb or the life of its source after the entry. As well, she identifies similar English-language proverbs where appropriate. For example, a proverb translated as "The wind and water rotate every thirty years, so does one's lot." is likened to "Every dog has his day."

Complete novices to Mandarin will likely want a more general book to begin their studies with than this one. While Lee's explanations of Romanization systems, pronunciation, tones, and the like are well written, they are somewhat intimidating for the person approaching the language for the first time. However, students who have begun to grasp the very basics of the language will find that *Learn Mandarin through Chinese Proverbs* offers fascinating content made user friendly, allowing them to deepen their appreciation of Chinese culture as they do their knowledge of her language.

EMMA LEE, a resident of Massachusetts since 1986, has a degree in Chinese literature and a graduate degree in English. She has been teaching Mandarin Chinese since 1996 and has written three books on learning Mandarin. She is currently teaching at historic Thayer Academy near Boston and working on her next book project on Chinese characters.

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