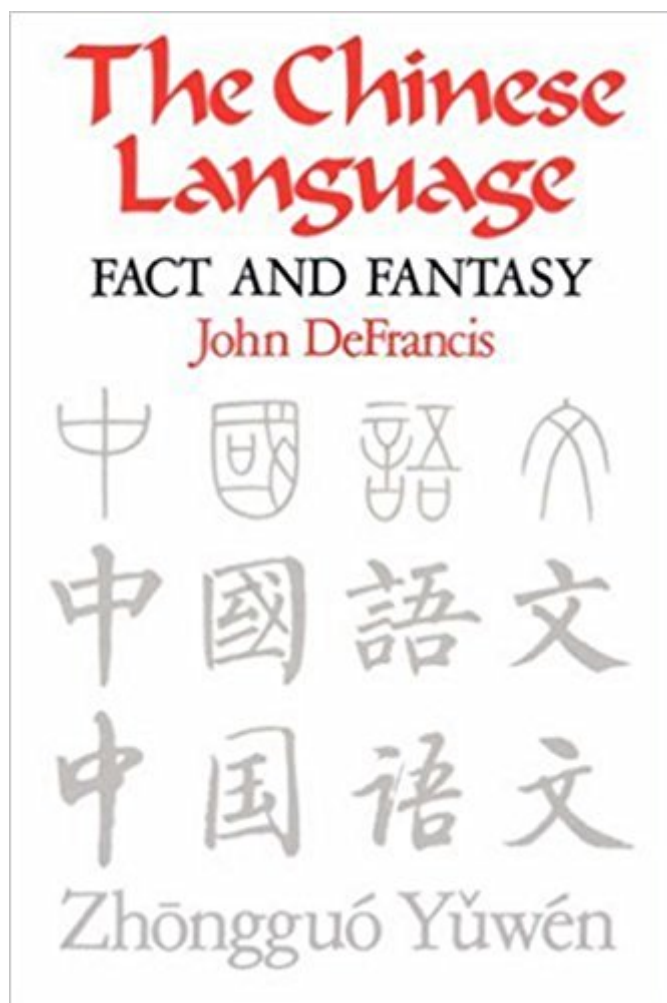


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# The Chinese Language: Fact And Fantasy



## Synopsis

Book by John DeFrancis

## Book Information

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"Delightfully engaging. . . this book contains a wealth of hard facts about Chinese." "Delightfully engaging ... this book contains a wealth of hard facts about Chinese.-- "Canadian Journal of Linguistics"

Delightfully engaging ... this book contains a wealth of hard facts about Chinese. (Canadian Journal of Linguistics)

Excellent book. A great reference for those interested in China and or language.

This is an excellent overview of the Chinese language and written scripts. I found the book to be highly enjoyable and actually read it while on vacation. The book, however, is bound to be controversial for two reasons:1) It debunks the myth that the Chinese written scripts (characters) are based on pictographs and ideographs. The majority of the characters are actually phonetics-based.2) DeFrancis actively promotes the transformation of the Chinese writing language from characters to alphabets. He argues that the character-based system makes the written language much more difficult and underpins the high level of illiteracy within rural China. These

points are bound to be controversial, as some people--both native Chinese and educated Westerners--are very passionate about the Chinese characters. I am sure DeFrancis's arguments and thesis are not flawless, but simply attacking his book as Western-centric is just unprofessional and unproductive.

What can one say about another masterpiece of Mr. DeFrancis? That it is a must for those interested in the Chinese language? That he really goes deep in his appreciation of the origins (and future) of that language? The book is really fantastic, incredible !!!

There is something for almost everyone in this chock-full-of-facts-and-information-book. For people who have never studied Chinese, there is a description and discussion of the formation of the characters. For people who have studied Chinese (but are not linguists), there is a detailed description of the language that's full of factoids and compares it (in some respects) to other languages. For people who ARE linguists, it's a discussion of some major works and schools of thought in the literature (though only up until 1996). For starters, this whole book can be synopsized by the witty parody essay ("The Singlish Affair"). One significant downside to the whole book is that he chose to put the photo inserts at the very beginning of the book (rather than next to the relevant prose within the text). If you speak Chinese on a regular basis, you'll already know a lot of what DeFrancis discusses. But there is a lot of good quantification. There are answers to questions such as: "How many characters are in the language? How many does one need to know to be literate? What percentage of characters sound like their phonetic? How many syllables are in the language? (377 with no tones. 1289 with tones)" There are even neat factoids about Japanese and English (they have, 113 and 8000+ syllables, respectively). One thing that he talked about that I wish he had expanded on (which may have been too much to hope for in a book on Linguistics) is clarifying that people who speak Chinese use RELATIVE PITCH to discern the meanings of different words and not absolute pitch (everyone seems to think that there is more absolute pitch among Asians because of their languages). I enjoyed his clarification of the "language" vs "dialect" discussion. Every person who has worked in China has been told 1,001 times that "Cantonese is a dialect of the Chinese language." This book takes that claim to task and concludes that if that is true, then English and Dutch are both Germanic dialects. We all knew that the "one language" theme is more political than anything, but it was nice to see that corroborated by a reputable author. He makes a \*painstaking\* (and tightly reasoned) case for describing the Chinese as a syllabry by going through several studies that have actually counted the number of words for which a phonetic corresponds

roughly to the pronunciation. He finds it to be upwards of 65% in all cases. Who knew? The Chinese language is actually much simpler today than it was in times past. DeFrancis says that there were 3,877 syllables in use in earlier Chinese. But he does not say how much earlier. Pre-Qin? Han? His argument is that the language started out as phonetic, but that the script never changed to reflect that. (On p.115, he says that the last writing reform was in the 3rd century BC.) And so that led to the mapping of many different words onto phonetically inappropriate characters. His discussion on the origin of the myth of mutual intelligibility is brief and good. He details the exact author and the exact book-- as well as how many editions each book went through. He even lists prominent names who have taken up this foolish idea (Leibniz/ Margaret Mead) so as to make the point of how far it has spread and for how long it has been believed. The discussion gets a bit.....angry around the last 1/3 of the book. He takes to blowtorching the arguments that other linguists have made with a gleeful fervor. At one point, he even alludes to Eric Hoffer in calling the people that have such beliefs "True Believers" (p. 144). I think his single best point is that writing systems don't exist independent of the spoken word, and so there is no reason to think that they can be made to exist under those circumstances. The book is not a cultural judgment, nor does it take up cultural issues. It simply discusses the feasibility of the Chinese writing system as it is and if an alphabetic writing system would be moreso (Vietnamese has even more tones and it can be written with merely some tones and diacritical markers.) What else? He introduced us to a great (and simple) method to calculate the size of a person's vocabulary (p. 237). The book took a different direction in the last couple of chapters on the uneven/ herky-jerky way that language reform was accomplished. The take-away message that I got was this: 1. Language reform was on the table and there was discussion of many aspects and possibilities. 2. It got interrupted by the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. 3. As long as it took to get even the simplification reform (the characters had not been updated since the Han Dynasty), we are lucky to have even gotten that much. The speech that he quotes (at length) by Mao (p. 263) makes the point surprisingly clearly and eloquently. There's even a little Eric Hoffer here (a la "The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements" (Perennial Classics)) on p. 249, where DeFrancis points out that the people who resisted steps toward mass literacy more than any other were the intellectuals (because being able to read gave them a superior status). Of the book itself: 1. This book is not 344 pages (like it says in the book information). There are 287 pages of text and the whole book runs to 330 pages when you include an excellent index, a decent glossary, and footnotes. 2. The prose is easy to read, and quite acerbic in some places. 3. It's about 3-4 afternoons worth' of reading time. 4. A good deal of the predictions turned out to be incorrect. These days, the whole country can read-- and probably at

a lot lower income per capita than DeFrancis would have predicted. Overall evaluation: It's worth the secondhand purchase price.

Much can be said about this book, both pro and con, but the bottom line is that history has made the argument DeFrancis proposes obsolete. China has entered the modern world and the computer age quite nicely without having to abandon its character-based script. And the ubiquity of television, still not available to most Chinese when DeFrancis was writing, is rapidly neutralizing many of the differences in regional dialects. As an elderly Chinese man told me on a recent visit to China: The young people all know how to speak Mandarin; it's only us old people who can't understand each other. Even in Cantonese speaking Guangzhou and Shenzhen, the schoolchildren are being taught Mandarin. (In fact, even in New York City's Cantonese speaking Chinatown, according to a recent article in the New York Times). In fairness to DeFrancis, however, pinyin has assumed a prominent role in this transition, but as an adjunct to the characters and not as a replacement. And his Beginning Chinese Reader is still as good an introduction to traditional Chinese as you are likely to find.

Great information about the Chinese language with details often not known or understood by Chinese people. First read it in 1986 and found it a treasure of interesting facts and ideas about Chinese.

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