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## The concepts and methods of Western Chinese learning in the early period: A study based on Spanish missionary Francisco Varo's *Arte de la lengua Mandarina*

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**Abstract.** Spanish missionary Francisco Varo (1627-1678) is a pioneer in the history of Western and Chinese cross-cultural communication and Chinese Linguistics. His work *Arte de la lengua Mandarina* (*Grammar of the Mandarin Language*, written in 1682 and published in 1703) is not only one of the earliest Chinese grammar books officially published, but also a Chinese language teaching material especially designed for western missionaries. Its significance for the studies of the history of Chinese linguistics and social-culture has aroused concerns in the academic circle over last decade. However, its enlightening meanings as a Chinese second language textbook is undervalued. From the view of second language teaching, this paper discusses the language teaching concepts and methods of the early western Chinese learners reflected in the book and discloses its implications to the international Chinese language education at present.

**Keywords:** Spanish missionary, westerner, Chinese learning, Francisco Varo, *Arte de la lengua Mandarina* (*Grammar of the Mandarin Language*)

[es] Los conceptos y métodos del aprendizaje de chino en el periodo inicial:  
un estudio basado en la obra *Arte de la lengua Mandarina* del misionero  
español Francisco Varo

**Resumen.** El misionero español Francisco Varo (1627-1678) es un pionero en la historia de la comunicación transcultural china y occidental y también un personaje importante en el aspecto de la lingüística china. Su obra *Arte de la lengua Mandarina* (escrita en 1682 y publicada en 1703) no solo es uno de los primeros libros de gramática china publicados de forma oficial, sino también un material didáctico en chino diseñado especialmente para los misioneros occidentales. Su importancia en la historia de la lingüística y la cultura social de China ha atraído mucha atención en el círculo académico durante la última década. Sin embargo, siendo un libro de enseñanza de chino como segunda lengua, su valor significativo no ha sido tomado seriamente en cuenta. Desde el punto de vista de la enseñanza de segunda lengua, el presente trabajo analiza cómo se plasma en el libro el concepto y la metodología de los primeros estudiantes occidentales de chino para enseñar idiomas y, revela sus implicaciones para la educación internacional de este idioma en la actualidad.

**Palabras clave:** misionero español, occidental, estudio de Chino, Francisco Varo, *Arte de la lengua Mandarina*.

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## [zn] 西方人早期学习汉语的理念与方法：以西班牙传教士瓦罗《华语官话语法》所记为例

**摘要：**西班牙传教士瓦罗(1627-1678)是汉语跨文化传播史和汉语研究中的先锋。他所著的《华语官话语法》一书(写于1682年, 出版于1703年), 不仅是最早出版的汉语语法专著之一, 更是一部专为西方传教士学习汉语的教科书。其语言学史价值及文化史价值近年来开始引起学界的关注, 然而其作为第二语言教科书的身份却未能被给予足够关注。本文从第二语言教学的角度出发, 讨论《华语官话语法》所体现的西方人早期学习汉语的理念与方法, 并阐释其对当代汉语国际教育的启示。

**关键词：**西班牙传教士, 西方人, 学习汉语, 瓦罗, 《华语官话语法》

**Sumario.** 1. Introduction. 2. Western Chinese learning in the early period. 3. Varo and the *Grammar of the Mandarin Language*. 4. The concepts and methods of learning Chinese reflected in the book. 4.1. Principle of pertinence. 4.2. Principle of practicality. 4.3. Principle of appropriateness. 5. Conclusion. acknowledgements. References.

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### 1. Introduction

As the Norwegian linguist Even Hovdhaugen (1996:14) said, missionaries are “the first professional fieldworkers”, given that the very nature of missionary work is to communicate with people from different areas, and learning different languages is their obligation in many situations. The 17th and 18th century is the first climax when western missionaries came to China. These missionaries’ exploration of Chinese language in that early period is recognized as the foundation of European sinology and modern Chinese linguistics. The Spanish missionary Francisco Varo (1627-1678) was among these pioneers and his work *Arte de la lengua Mandarina* (*Grammar of the Mandarin Language*) also was one of the earliest Chinese language books written by westerner.

The language described in the book was a Nanjing-based dialect, a standard form of Chinese mandarin (guānhuà, language of the officials) used in late Ming (Coblin, 1998). The book was originally written in Spanish in 1682 to facilitate missionaries to learn Chinese. Most extant copies were held by major European libraries (Henri Cordier, 1904). For a long time, the book didn't attract much attention of the contemporary linguists until Sandra Breitenbach finished her doctoral dissertation on this book in the University of Göttingen in 1996. Very soon, people began to notice the book especially after its English version published in 2000, and its Chinese version published in 2003. However, previous studies have mainly focused on its significant historical linguistics and social-culture values. Very few research has studies its language teaching nature.

The aim of this article is to use a case study, based on Varo's book of different versions, to explore the concepts and methods of westerners' learning Chinese at

that time. We will show that this book was in comply with many modern language teaching concepts such as the principles of pertinence, practicality and appropriateness. The novelty of this article lies in giving a more comprehensive understanding of Varo's work and to uncover the strategies that Varo used to achieve a good balance between learning Chinese language and conveying religious mission. These findings will be helpful to enrich the studies of China-Europe communication and to contribute to international Chinese language education at present.

## 2. Western Chinese learning in the early period

In the history of Chinese language cross culture broadcasting, it spread to Central Asia as early as the Han dynasty (B.C.202-220), when Zhang Qian (B.C.164–B.C.114) went on a mission to the Western Regions for alliance. Following Zhang Qian's trip, Chinese has extended westward along the Silk Road to Western Asia and then to Europe afterwards. "But the real western Sinology study didn't start until Marco Polo (1254-1324), and especially during the middle and late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when some western missionaries and scholars began to study Chinese more intensively and deeply." (Li Yuming, 2007)

Zhang Xiping (2001) distinguished two historical stages of the Western missionaries' learning and researching of Chinese language: the late Ming and early Qing dynasty (1636-1912) as the "early period" and the late Qing dynasty as the "modern period". This division was largely based on the fact that the late Ming and early Qing dynasty was the first climax when western missionaries came to China and to study Chinese for missionary work. This period witnessed many great missionaries and their works on Chinese language. For example, Michele Ruggleri (1543–1607) compiled the first "*Portuguese-Chinese Dictionary*"; Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) wrote the "*Wonder of Western Writing*" which used Latin letters to spell Chinese characters; Martino Martini (1614–1661) wrote "*Grammatica Sinica*", "the first grammar of Mandarin Chinese ever written and published" (L.M. Paternicó, 2012); Joseph de Premare (1666–1736) wrote the "*Notitia Linguae Sinicae*", "the first completed integrated Chinese textbook compiled by Westerners" (Li Zhen, 2005) and so on. Among them, the Spanish missionary Francisco Varo is also one outstanding example.

## 3. Varo and the Arte de la lengua Mandarinina

As Georg Bossong (2013) described, Francisco Varo was born in Seville Andalusia on 4 October 1627. He entered the missionary order in 1643. At that time, the Spanish Dominican missionary Juan Bautista de Morales (1597-1664) who had devoted some years to missionary work in the Spain's colony Philippine Islands was preparing for a band of Dominican missionaries to China and Varo was recruited to that band. In 1646 Varo embarked on Sanlúcar de Barrameda, a port in southwestern Spain and headed to Mexico and finally, arrived at Philippine capital

city Manila in 1648. In Manila, Varo began to learn Chinese language from some Chinese business person in Philippines. In a year, Varo became familiar with the Hokkien (Fújiàn) dialect and also with the Mandarin language. In 1649 Varo entered China from the southeastern coastal region Fujian. Varo spent his life in China for missionary works until he died in China in 1687.

During Varo's missionary life in China, he had numerous writings including letters, treatise, but most of them were not printed and kept. However, the book of *Arte de la lengua Mandarin* which he wrote for other missionaries to learn Chinese in 1682 and later was printed in 1703 became his most important work. Because it is "the earliest Chinese grammar books in existence" that was published in China. (Yao Xiaoping, 2001). Although Martino Martini had finished his writing "*Grammatica Sinica*" no late than 1653, but it was kept and copied as the form of manuscript until 1998 (Giuliano Bertuccioli, 2003). Manel Ollé (2008) also views Francisco Varo as the author of the first grammar of the Chinese language "because at that time, China had a great tradition lexicographical, rhetorical but not of grammatical systematization".

The *Arte de la lengua Mandarin* was written in Spanish (Figure 1, *Arte de la lengua Mandarin*) and aroused some scholars whose interest is in Spanish missionaries such as González, who studied the missionary life and writings of Varo in the 1950s and 1960s. According to John W. Witek (2008), the documents found in volume come from the Fugger-Archiv in Dillingen and were primarily written by Maria Teresia. Few people studied this book from the perspective of linguistics until 1996, when Sandra Breitenbach completed her doctoral dissertation on this book in the University of Göttingen. In 2000, American linguist Coblin W. South translated this book into English and brought the book into the field of academic research in English (Figure 2, *Grammar of the Mandarin Language*). Very quickly, this book aroused the attention of Chinese scholars. Yao Xiaoping and Ma Youqing translated the book from English into Chinese and published it in 2003 (Figure 3, *Huáyǔ Guānhuà Yǔfǎ*). The publication of its Chinese version can be considered as a return of this book to modern China, and has quickly attracted the interest of many scholars in China and abroad. For example, Matthew Y Chen (2004) examined the book's significant values from the phonological perspective and took Francisco Varo as "a pioneer in the history of Chinese linguistics". Lin Zhang (2004) studied the Nanjing Mandarin recorded in this book. Nishiyama Michie (2003, 2008) examined the book's language and grammatical features.

Figure 1. Cover of the *Arte de la lengua Mandarin* (Original from the Library of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana, Roma)



Figure 2. *Grammar of the Mandarin Language* and the Protrait of Francisco Varo (page liv of the book)

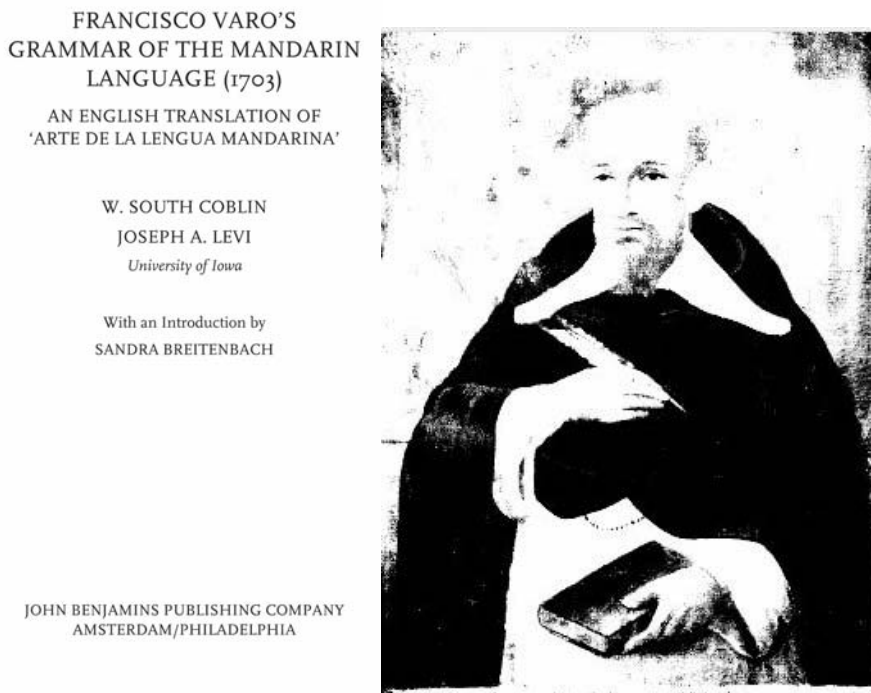


Figure 3. Contents of *Huáyǔ Guānhuà Yǐfǎ* (华语官话语法)

目 录		F2 华语官话语法	
中译序 .....	( F3 )	如何在口语和书面语中称呼自己 .....	( 152 )
英译序及鸣谢 .....	( F5 )	第十六章 交谈中的礼貌用语,以及拜访、邀请时的礼节 .....	( 157 )
英译出版前言 .....	( F6 )	附:《解带手册》 .....	( 167 )
导论 .....	( F19 )	附录一 美国国会图书馆手稿(第一章第五节) .....	( 180 )
		附录二 美国国会图书馆手稿(第十五章第三节) .....	( 186 )
		人名、术语索引 .....	( 187 )
<b>华语官话语法</b>			
弁言 .....	( 3 )		
第一章 若干规律 .....	( 10 )		
第二章 汉语的声调 .....	( 20 )		
第三章 名词和代词的格变 .....	( 30 )		
第四章 名词和形容词,比较级和最高级 .....	( 43 )		
第五章 抽象动名词,指小词,多次性,行业名称,以及性 .....	( 53 )		
第六章 代 词 .....	( 60 )		
第七章 叹词、连词、否定词、疑问词,以及表示条件的词 .....	( 67 )		
第八章 动词及其变位 .....	( 80 )		
第九章 被动动词和被动结构 .....	( 93 )		
第十章 介词和副词 .....	( 100 )		
第十一章 构句方式 .....	( 121 )		
第十二章 数词与量词 .....	( 126 )		
第十三章 各种小词 .....	( 139 )		
第十四章 官话礼貌用语 .....	( 147 )		
第十五章 如何称呼官员及其亲属,以及其他人士 .....			

However, previous studies on this book have mainly focused on its linguistic features and its values of culture and history. Much less research has been devoted



to its nature as a textbook for westerners to learn Chinese. This issue was noticed by the field of Chinese language teaching in recent several years. Cai Jianfeng and Zhou Xiaobing (2015) examined the interrogative sentence system of this book and pointed out that “as the first grammar book for foreigners to learn Chinese, *Arte de la lengua Mandarina* is a classic work of Chinese language textbooks which later generations can learn from”. Huang Jianbin and Zhou Zhuoying (2016) also pointed out that this book “is a successful teaching material for foreigners. Its own characteristics and historical values are worthy of exploration.” Wu Huiyi (2017) described the details of one French missionary Foucquet’s Chinese learning experience based on Varo’s book and other materials.

Therefore, from the second language teaching perspective, this article focuses on the characteristics of this book as a textbook and examines the concepts and methods of how Westerner’s learned Chinese in the early period. We hope that, with the guidance of modern second language teaching theory, this research will help us to understand the original intention of the book and further expand the research on this book, as well as offering insightful suggestions for today’s Chinese learning.

#### **4. The concepts and methods of learning Chinese reflected in the book**

At present, second language teaching has been studied from different aspects and many methodological principles for language teaching has been proposed and well accepted such as rich input, pushed output, focus on form, corss language compararions, timely feedback ect (Doughty & Long, 2003). Some principles were also embodied in the book of *Arte de la lengua Mandarina*. We conclude them as (1) the principle of pertinence—Weather the textbook was designed for specific learners? (2) the principle of practicality—Weather the textbook teach selected and elaborated contents? (3) the principle of appropriateness—Weather the textbook teach both grammatically correct and pragmatically right language.

##### **4.1. Principle of pertinence**

The original purpose of the *Arte de la lengua Mandarina* was to facilitate missionaries to learn Chinese. The audience of the book is very clear as Varo wrote in the book’s Prologue (quotations are from the English version of the book):

(In Chinese), there are many conventional rules; and these, with some added monitions and notes, can form a grammar or handbook, from which the new ministers should start their studies. Therefore, from the material that I have gathered from other ministers, and from my own study and investigation, I have spent 20 years composing this small work, from which many ministers have already benefited. And some who have used it have asked me to publish it. And so now it has appeared, and I trust in God that it will be useful, in that it will alleviate the afflictions of many ministers. (page 1a)

The pertinence of the *Arte de la lengua Mandarina* is not only reflected in its very clear object of application and purpose of writing, but also reflected in its

selected learning contents. They were embodied in many aspects such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and pragmatic communication.

Taking teaching phonetics as an example, the book starts from basic vowels, tones, and pronunciations of consonants in Chinese. The book also explains the manner of articulation in many ways. Such as similar sounds in Spanish (Castilian), French or Italian are often used to help learners to understand Chinese and they are specifically emphasized where they are more likely to cause errors. Such as,

Castilian n is pronounced like the French ne, where the e is “silent”, as they say. Therefore the words which end in n, are pronounced by the French adding a silent e...The syllables which in Castilian start with ch, the Italians pronounce as ci in their language, e.g., for ch'â “tea”, the Italian would say c'iâ, as one says ciascuno [“everyone”], only a bit stronger. (Page 3a)

We also advise that the words which begin with ç should have an h before the vowel which follows it, e.g., çhó, çhi, because, due to their pronunciation,[insertion of the h] is especially required for the Spaniards. These words are written in some glossaries only with the vowel, e.g., çõ or çã. But [the h] is perceptible in the way Chinese is pronounced, so h is necessary [in writing]. (Page 7)

The method of learning by comparing is not only used in teaching pronunciation, this method is also widely used through the teaching of vocabulary and grammar. Such as,

For the minister of Christ who studies this language, so that he may not only learn the words easily but also well and scientifically, I would point out that in this tongue it is quite customary to form the meaning of something, which in our language is only one term, by compounding two separate things, which are distinct terms with distinct meanings. Hence the result is that the meaning of a given word bears in itself two distinct terms, in both the sound and the meaning. For example, “Hell” in Spanish consists of only one term, but in the Chinese language there are two different ones, which are distinct in sound and meaning. They are as follows: tí is “land”, io is “prison”, which then means “prison of the earth or which is within the earth.”(Page 6)

Learning Chinese through comparisons between the target language Chinese and learner’s native language is not only an obvious embodiment of the principle of pertinence, but also meets the general requirements of second language acquisition, which undoubtedly helps to improve the efficiency of learning. Even at present, this language learning concept and method it embodies isn’t out of date.

## 4.2. Principle of practicality

As we have shown above, the motivation of writing the book *Arte de la lengua Mandarina* was to help the ministers of Christ to learn Chinese, therefore, the selection, interpretation and the practicing of the teaching contents are for practical purposes. For example, Varo suggested that learners learn Mandarin Chinese first rather than local dialects because Mandarin is more commonly used. Such as,



We should like to point out here that, besides the Mandarin language, which is common to the [whole] Kingdom, there is in every city or town yet another very different language, which they call *hiāng t'ân* ["local patois"], which is understood only by the natives of that particular city or town. If the minister is assigned to a specific place or city, he should learn this other language in order to become a consummate minister, because if he does not know it well he will not be able to preach, or exhort, or hear on his own the confessions of women and peasants, who do not understand Mandarin. But it is not good to try and learn it right away. Rather, it is necessary to wait until one first speaks Mandarin with some confidence, lest one end up not speaking either of the two very well. (Page 8)

When it comes to the selection of specific teaching contents, the book applies the grammar system of European languages which is more familiar for Westerners to analyze and understand Chinese language. However, it also placed special emphasis on the features of Chinese. For example, the book refers to the characteristics of Greco-Roman languages and classifies Chinese words into eight categories: noun, pronoun, adjective, interjection, conjunction, verb, prepositions and adverbs. However, it is not a simple correspondence to the European language analysis. For example, Chinese quantifiers (measure words) are specially introduced as a kind of particle, which are supplemented by a list of examples to illustrate their usages. After introducing different words and forming parts of sentences, it also analyzes how a sentence is constructed. Chinese sentence patterns were separated into two active and two passive categories according to the objective of the sentences by the book. In addition, sentences of different tones (negation, interrogative, and conditional) are also discussed in the book. Overall, a unique analysis of the grammar system of Chinese is made by Varo. As Henning Klöter (2008) points out, although missionary documents of Chinese grammar were strongly influenced by the Greco-Latin tradition of grammatical analysis, they also recognized some Chinese linguistic features foreign to European languages.

In order to enhance the practicality of teaching Chinese to missionaries, the book is accompanied by a handbook of confessions: a brief method for undertaking confession. This adds to the grammar book the function of a reference book, which is, as Varo wrote in front of the handbook, "not only useful to confessors, for learning the language, but also necessary, especially for those who are newly entering (the mission)." The handbook of confessions is mainly composed by series of confessional interrogatories such as,

(1) From your last confession until now, how many days have passed? (你解罪后到如今过了多少日子)(2) How many months has it been that you did not confess?(有几个月没有告解了) (3) Did you complete the acts of restitution which the priest ordered you [to do] in your previous confession?(你以前解罪时神父吩咐补赎工夫曾行了么)(Page 1b of the handbook)

One very important reason why *Grammar of the Mandarin Language* is a language teaching textbook, rather than simply a record of Chinese language, is that it has a good balance between language practicability and teachability: what

should be taught and what could be taught. When Varo wrote this book, he was clear about the relationship between learning and acquisition. On one hand, he put emphasize on mastering Chinese through rational cognition like language comparison and grammar learning. On the other hand, he was also aware that a language could only be acquired through a lot of emotional activities like imitations and practical communication. Reflected in the book, it both emphasizes the importance of learning grammar and also emphasizes the usefulness of imitation. The book encourages learners to learn language by using it and recognizes the rationality of natural acquisition. Such as,

But one must note that the reason for this misunderstanding might lie not in the grammatical usage but rather in the lack of the correct pattern and of that gracefulness in saying a thing which is called by the Chinese k'liāng 腔 or k'èu k' ý 口气 . To learn this pattern there is no specific rule; conversing with those who speak the language well and trying to imitate them is the only way. (Page 3)

The language will come with practice. If the minister prefers to stay alone in his cell without communicating and learning the terms, then much will be forgotten. And in order to maintain a sound memory he should not forget that, without either the phraseology or the word order, which is the main thing in the language, he will not speak it correctly. (Page 6)

### 4.3. Principle of appropriateness

Language is one part of the culture. Learning a language is inseparable from understanding the culture. Especially for the missionaries, their ultimate goal of coming to China is not to learn Chinese but to complete their missionary tasks. However, to achieve this goal, Varo was very clear that to successfully complete the missionary tasks, a balanced acquisition of Chinese language and culture is necessary. Missionaries had to appropriately use Chinese in cross-cultural situations that may create potential communication barriers and to avoid pragmatic failures that could have been caused by cultural differences. Varo gave many suggestions in his book. Such as,

The Chinese are notably courteous and ceremonial and devote a great deal of attention to such things. And they are exceedingly sensitive as regards speaking and external etiquette.....Hence the minister should be very careful in this, in order that by heeding it his good will may win them over, and that they may attend him with pious affection, thus yielding benefits for their souls. (Page 86)

Therefore, the book shows strong concerns on the appropriate use of Chinese in many ways. Firstly, it focuses on the communication culture in the language. Special explanations are given for the meaning and usage of courteous words to address people or to name things politely. Let see how Varo explains “令, 贵, 尊”.

This syllable líng 令 is very commonly used and is always anteposed to the term for some person, who is a relative or is connected to the person with whom one is speaking, e.g., “your noble [father]” líng 令尊. (Page 85)

This syllable *kuéi* 贵 is used to name things which belong to the person who is talking with us, and it means “precious, rich, and noble”, e.g., “your noble and precious kingdom” *kuéi pang* 贵邦. (Page 85)

The word *çhūn* 尊, means noble and is anteposed to certain terms, e.g., “your surname” *çhūn síng* 尊姓. (Page 86)

Furthermore, it also teaches cultural customs which may affect cross-culture communication directly. After explaining the basic features of Chinese pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, the book has three whole chapters on how to actually use Chinese to communicate appropriately in a variety of situations. It covers not only how to address officers and their relatives, how to refer to oneself orally and in writing, but also clarifies the courtesies of visiting and inviting, and even small issues like the value of gifts, the occasion of bowing, and the technique of using chopsticks are mentioned. Varo suggested that these contents are very helpful for foreign missionaries when they are dealing with Chinese people. For example,

When the master of the house gets up, then they all get up, and [he comes] to my table to set out the wine and chopsticks. I step out a pace from where I am; and, doing a *çhô iê* “bow with hand gesture” 作揖 I say to him “dare not” *pô kàn* 不敢 After wine has been poured for everybody, then I go and offer it to him, imitating his earlier ceremonials. (Page 97)

If, after a mandarin has invited me, I leave, and then after [that] he sends me some money, [this] should be accepted and I should send him thanks with a “single card” *tán t'ie* 单帖.....If he brought a “whole card” *çh'iuên t'ie* 全帖, [then I must respond] with a *çh'iuên t'ie* 全帖; if [he brought] a “single card” *tán t'ie* 单帖. [then I must respond] with a *tán t'ie* 单帖. As for when we should use the *çh'iuên t'ie* and when we should use the *tán t'ie* one cannot give a rule. The ways in which to perform the bows, to take the chopsticks, etc. are not things that can be described in writing; they must be learned by watching others do them. (Page 98)

## 5. Conclusion

In the above, we examined the book *Grammar of the Mandarin Language*. It was originally written as a teaching material for western missionaries to learn Chinese in the early period. Besides its linguistics values, this book is also an embodiment of westerner's methods and concepts of learning Chinese at that time. In summary, three different aspects of Chinese teaching have been discussed.

(1) The teaching of language knowledge: learning pronunciation by comparison; learning grammar systemically; learning vocabulary with the knowledge of word-building.

(2) The teaching of communicative functions: the teaching contents and their practical values; the proper use of language in context.

(3) The teaching of cultural factors: emphasis on the strategies of integrating into the foreign culture while insisting on the original purpose of religion domestication.

These concepts are consistent with the principle of pertinence, practicality, and appropriateness of modern second language teaching. We sum up these concepts as one word “intermediacy”, pursuing a balance of rationality and emotion in the way of learning Chinese, and holding a dual purpose in the aim of learning Chinese. Meanwhile, we can find a lot of very modern teaching methods in *Grammar of the Mandarin Language* such as cultivating the sense of language through reading, distinguishing expressions between formal and informal styles, studying Chinese in immersion, reading Chinese characters before writing etc. These methods still have implications for contemporary Chinese teaching.

In conclusion, discovering the concepts and methods of how early Western missionaries learnt Chinese that reflected in the book *Grammar of the Mandarin Language* has important reference values for the current Chinese cross-cultural communication and the compilation of Chinese textbooks. This article briefly introduces the features of this book as a teaching material. We hope that there will be more studies on Chinese textbooks in the early period in the future which will help to strengthen the historical consciousness of international Chinese teaching and enrich the multi-dimensional studies of China and the world.

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