

# **Authentic Texts as Reading Materials in a Chinese as a Foreign Language Classroom: Learners' Perceptions and Pedagogical Implications**

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## **Abstract**

Authentic texts refer to spoken or written language produced in the process of real-life communication (Nunan, 1999). This classroom-based case study inquiry focuses on a university Chinese class where authentic texts were used as supplementary reading materials. Using a survey and interviews, it investigates learners' perceptions about the impact of the authentic texts on their learning, their evaluations of different types of authentic texts, and how class instruction affected their perception of reading authentic Chinese texts. Results have revealed positive student feedback toward reading authentic texts. Students believed authentic texts supported their learning of Chinese language and culture, and made the class more interesting, fun, and engaging. Some learners thought using authentic Chinese texts boosted their motivation to read after class, though text topics and learners' schedules also affected their motivation to read outside the class. With appropriate instructional strategies, reading authentic materials in class increased student awareness of the benefits of authentic materials and their confidence in reading this type of texts.

**Key words:** authentic materials, reading, Chinese as a foreign language, learners' perceptions

## Introduction

Authentic texts refer to spoken or written language produced in the process of real-life communication, and not for the purpose of language instruction (Nunan, 1999). Second language scholars and educators believe that authentic materials bring multiple benefits, such as helping students acquire effective communicative competence in the target language (Guariento & Morley, 2001), improving learners' cultural awareness (Richards, 2006), and relating closely to learners' needs (Richards, 2006). However, due to the rich vocabulary and complicated sentence structures contained in authentic texts, using this type of texts in instruction is usually a challenge for language teachers, and there are concerns that inappropriate use of authentic materials may even frustrate and demotivate learners (Martinez, 2002).

Chinese is one of the most difficult languages for American learners to read (Everson, 2009), which makes it more challenging to incorporate authentic texts as reading materials into a Chinese classroom. This study is based on an assumption that an investigation into the perceptions of learners of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL learners) regarding the use of authentic texts in Chinese classes will inform pedagogical suggestions to guide classroom instruction. However, thus far, an extremely limited number of studies has explored this issue. To address this gap, this study focused on a university Chinese course where various authentic texts were used as supplementary reading materials. The study was designed to explore learners' perceptions about the impact of these authentic texts, their preferences for different types of authentic texts, and how the instructional strategies used in this particular Chinese reading class influenced their experiences with the authentic texts.

## Literature Review

### Authentic texts: Definitions and Impact

Authenticity of the texts used in language instruction has gained much attention in the language education community. Nunan (1999) defined authentic materials as texts that comprise language produced in real-life communication. Based on the definitions suggested by language educators and scholars (AbdulHussein, 2014; Gilmore, 2006; Nunan, 1999; Rogers & Medley, 1988), several characteristics that distinguish authentic materials from non-authentic materials are summarized below:

- Authentic materials are produced for real life communication purposes.
- They reflect appropriateness of cultural and situational contexts.
- They often contain colloquialisms, idioms, jargon, collocations and specific terminology.
- They often contain features in spoken discourse such as ellipsis or “slot” at the beginning or end of the clauses for speaker orientation or evaluation.

Many language educators and scholars believe that authentic texts bring benefits to language learning contexts (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Brinton, 1991; Gilmore, 2006; Nunan, 1999; Richards, 2006). These benefits include (a) reinforcing the direct relationship between classroom language and the outside world (Brinton, 1991) and exposing learners to real languages (Peacock, 1997; Richards, 2006); (b) providing cultural information about the target language (Peacock, 1997; Richards, 2006) and helping learners overcome cultural barriers (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990); (c) increasing learners’ motivation (Cross, 1984; Little & Singleton, 1992; Mishan, 2005; Peacock, 1997); (d) facilitating active learning and increasing engagement by exposing students to real language use (Erbaugh, Gopalakrishnan, Hobbs, & Liu, 2016); (e) relating more closely to learners’ needs (Peacock, 1997; Richards, 2006) ; (f) exemplifying particular registers to which the texts belong and often

containing specific terminology, jargon, typical organizational features, and sentence patterns (Ellis & Johnson, 1994).

Despite the values that language educators and scholars have attached to the use of authentic texts, there are voiced concerns that authentic materials may actually set back reading development (Day & Bamford, 1998). Williams (1983) thought that an authentic text at too difficult a level of language forces the readers to focus on decoding words, instead of helping them to read for the meaning of the messages. Nuttal, in her discussion of authentic materials, also pointed out that linguistically difficult texts are unlikely to be suitable for developing many reading skills (Nuttall, 1996). Other scholars worried that authentic materials may demotivate learners because these materials usually contain challenging structures, vocabulary, or cultural information (Martinez, 2002; Widdowson, 2003; Widdowson, 1996, 1998). Nunan (1989) also warned that using authentic materials without proper selection and planning, and/or with learners at a low level of proficiency, may be a distressing experience for students. Learners may experience high levels of frustration if they are not cognitively ready to comprehend the text, or if they are not sure about the expectation of the learning tasks (Nunan, 1989).

### **Recommendations for Selecting and Using Authentic Materials**

In order to limit the possible negative impact on learners from the use of authentic materials, scholars have suggested recommendations for the selection and use of authentic texts in language classes. Some scholars (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984; Day & Bamford, 1998; Silberstein, 1993) believed that simplified and authentic texts are not mutually exclusive opposites. Instructors then can make appropriate adaptations of the real world texts as long as they keep the qualities of natural speech or writing. Another suggestion is using authentic texts with an appropriate difficulty level by considering factors such as genres, delivery speed, content, and text length (Gilmore, 2006). The third approach to control for the linguistic difficulty inherent to authentic materials is to adjust learning tasks (Gilmore, 2006; Nunan, 1989). For instance, instead of expecting learners to understand every word and sentence, the

instructor can draw learners' attention to important facts or the main idea of the text. This approach targets partial comprehension of the text by learners, grounded in the understanding that even native speakers usually operate without total comprehension of a text (Gilmore, 2006; Guariento & Morley, 2001).

Reading is an essential skill in language learning. Scholars believe that authentic materials help learners develop reading skills (Berardo, 2006; Marzban & Davaji, 2015; Maxim, 2002; Rogers & Medley, 1988). In order to reduce stress of reading authentic texts, Berardo (2006) suggested eliciting students' existing knowledge in pre-reading discussion, studying new vocabulary before reading, and asking students to perform easier tasks, such as skimming for main ideas, before they begin more intensive reading. As for text topic, Berardo (2006) suggested using a variety of texts about diverse topics to cultivate student interest in learning a broad range of subject areas. He also recommended using the Internet to search for authentic materials, because online materials are continually updated, visually stimulating and interactive, easily accessed, and relevant to students' daily life (Berardo, 2006).

A pedagogically informative research study conducted by Maxim (2002) showed that several instructional techniques helped beginning-level German learners to read extended authentic texts: 1) a guided procedure model that employed represented a logical progression in cognitive difficulty; 2) in-class group reading that exploited students' prior knowledge, reading strategies, and their language ability to construct meaning from the text; 3) instructor input that guided learners toward key information in the text; and 4) handouts that directed students to focus on major events.

### **Learners' Perceptions of Authentic Materials**

Since language instruction is expected to meet students' needs, research into learner perceptions signals a useful pedagogical inquiry. As such, investigation how learners perceive classroom use of authentic materials should deepen our understanding of how to effectively integrate authentic materials into L2 instruction. Most

studies relevant to this issue are about the impact of authentic materials on learner motivation.

Kienbaum (1986) studied the effects of authentic texts on learners' motivation toward learning German, French, and Spanish as foreign languages and found that students were motivated by the use of authentic materials. Similarly, findings from a study (González, 1990) conducted with Spanish language learners also revealed students' positive reaction to authentic materials. In another study (Peacock, 1997) conducted with beginning-level EFL students at the South Korean University, results showed that authentic materials helped to increase observed motivation. Shirai (2013) conducted a similar study about EFL learners in a mixed-level class at a university in Japan. Questionnaire results showed that authentic materials had a significantly more positive effect on first-year students' self-reported motivation than textbook materials, but not on second-year and fourth-year students. This study also revealed that students felt authentic texts were significantly more enjoyable and interesting than artificial texts, but factors such as topics and learning activities affected how they perceived a particular text. Another interesting result suggested by interview data was that, rather than being a demotivating factor, a sense of difficulty related to authentic texts could motivate learners.

### **Reading Chinese as a Foreign Language**

Chinese is considered one of the most difficult systems for learners whose first language is alphabetic. One of the essential reasons is the special linguistic properties of The Chinese writing system. Chinese writing system is often regarded as a logography, because its primary unit, the characters, are thought to represent meaning instead of sound, although characters do often contain phonetic cues (Everson, 2011; Perfetti & Dunlap, 2008; Perfetti & Liu, 2005). Approximately 85% of Chinese characters are compound characters, which contain a semantical radical conveying semantic information, and a phonetic radical that hints at how the character is pronounced (Everson 2011). At the morphological level, more than 75% of Chinese words are compound words formed by two or more

characters. In most cases, the meaning of each constituent character contributes directly to the meaning of the compound word. In Chinese, two-character words constitute 80% of all compound words (Lin, 1972) and there are no boundaries between Chinese words.

As Everson (2011) pointed out in his review about teaching logographic and non-Roman writing systems, due to the linguistic distance between Chinese and alphabetic languages, it's not surprising that much of the research on L2 Chinese reading focuses on lower-level processing such as word and character decoding. Many studies (Ke, 1998; Shen, 2005; Shen & Ke, 2007; Taft & Chung, 1999) have pointed to the important roles of orthographic awareness and radical knowledge in processing Chinese characters. Another group of studies focused on word processing strategies. Shen (2008) conducted a study to examine word decision strategies of 40 college students who were beginning and advanced learners of Chinese. The results of the study showed that learners tended to use various strategies that require multiple levels of linguistic knowledge. Among these strategies, matching the target item to an existing mental lexicon was used most frequently by both beginning learners and advanced learners. The results also indicated that, compared with beginners, advanced learners were more likely to use contextual information to make word decisions. A study of CFL learners' word inferring strategies (Jiang & Fang, 2012) also suggested that using multiple linguistic and context cues helped learners infer unknown words. Results indicated that integration of both context information and word morphology resulted in better interpretations of word meaning. A qualitative study of CFL readers' word inferring strategies used in reading Chinese sentences revealed that learners who were good at word processing were skillful in using multiple strategies, interpreting contextual information, and identifying character meaning in words (Huang, 2014). This study also revealed that since Chinese characters have multiple meanings and can be combined with each other based on various rules, one of the most frequently encountered difficulties for CFL readers in word inference was identifying meaning of constituent characters. This explains why CFL readers need to use context and their world knowledge to facilitate their word inferring processes.

Thus far, there is a limited number of studies that investigate reading beyond the word and sentence level. Among them, a study (Shen, 2013) investigated the relationship between lower-level processing and reading comprehension among adult L2 Chinese learners. Correlation and regression analysis showed that character naming accuracy is the strongest predictor, followed by character naming speed as the second strongest predictor for reading comprehension. This study provides strong support for the important role of fluent lower-level processing in reading comprehension. Two representative studies investigated how CFL readers process texts with multiple paragraphs. An early study of adult CFL readers' reading process (Everson & Ke, 1997) suggested that intermediate students had many difficulties with lower-level processing, such as recognition of characters and words, and isolating word units in the text. This study was validated and extended by Lee-Thompson (2008), who investigated eight CFL learners' reading strategies using a think-aloud and recall protocol as well as interviews. Results showed that learners used both bottom-up strategies (e.g. translating, marking the text, and writing a Pinyin and/or English equivalent) and top-down strategies (e.g. background knowledge of the text topic, text structure, and monitoring) to work through problems in comprehension.

At the time of the present study, the researcher is unaware of other studies published on CFL learners' perceptions of reading authentic texts in the classroom. A possible reason is the concern that authentic materials may contain more low frequency characters and words which make lower-level processing even more challenging. Instructors usually feel hesitant to use authentic texts as reading materials and are concerned that they frustrate and demotivate CFL learners. Therefore, it is important to investigate how CFL learners perceive using authentic materials as reading texts in class, as well as how they view various types of authentic materials. In addition, given the fact that the learning environment has shown to be important to learners' perceptions, there is a critical need to expand the investigations of interaction between these two factors in different programs (Wesely, 2012). In other words, it is worthwhile to explore

how using authentic texts in class affects learners' perceptions of authentic texts. To contribute in addressing these gaps, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do CFL learners perceive the impact of authentic materials used in their Chinese class?
2. How does the class affect CFL learners' perceptions about reading Chinese authentic texts?
3. How do CFL learners perceive different types of authentic materials?

### **Methodology**

Case study is widely accepted as a research approach in education (Simons, 2009). A case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances (Stake, 1995). The researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a bounded system (Merriam, 2009), such as an organization, a program, a class in school, or a person. By using survey and interview data, this classroom-based case study focused on a third-year Chinese class of a public state university and investigated students' perceptions of authentic texts as classroom reading materials. Survey data were used to gauge students' reactions to and levels of positive/negative response toward the use of authentic texts and text types. Interview data collected from two stages of interview were used to explain students' perceptions, views, and attitudes toward the use of authentic texts, the text types, and class instruction using authentic texts. Addressing the research questions using multiple sources of data also allowed for triangulation of results to substantiate the trustworthiness of the study's findings.

### **Participants and Setting**

Fourteen participants, including eight males and six females, participated in this study. By the time of data collection, they had studied Chinese in the university setting for at least two years. Except for one participant who studied Chinese in high school, all other participants had no previous Chinese learning experience before college. Six participants had some experience with reading authentic

texts prior to taking the course. Among them, four mentioned their exposure to authentic texts occurred while studying abroad in China. The authentic texts that they read while abroad included menus, brochures, advertisements, sale signs in supermarkets, and instructions on maps. One participant had some limited experience with reading authentic Chinese texts during high school, and another described intrinsic motivation to independently read some authentic texts such as Chinese newspapers. None of the participants had read authentic texts as a part of their previous college-level Chinese classes. One participant majored in Chinese, while others majored in International Business, Public Relations, Economics, International Affairs, and Computer Engineering. In addition to Chinese, two participants had experience learning other foreign languages such as Korean and Spanish.

This study was carried out in a third-year Chinese class in a large public university. The semester-long course was required for Chinese majors and minors, although any students who were interested in Chinese could select it. The course was designed to improve learners' Chinese literacy, particularly their reading proficiency. Students met weekly for two 75-minute sessions. According to the Chinese program curricular framework, upon successful completion of this third-year Chinese course, students were expected to be able to attain the intermediate-high level of reading proficiency, according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 2012). They were expected to be able to read different genres of Chinese texts, and write short texts such as New Year wishes, short messages, and emails. They were also expected to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding about Chinese culture through completing various reading and writing tasks.

The class sessions were organized according to text genres with particular functions. They began with short and non-complex texts (e.g. greeting cards, notes, short messages, and small ads) and moved to longer texts with multiple paragraphs featuring narration and description (song lyrics, segments of celebrity speech, personal correspondence). Following a Multiliteracies framework for reading instruction (Paesani, Allen, & Dupuy, 2016), classroom activities were divided into several steps: (a) pre-reading activities that activate

learners' background knowledge and prepare them to interpret the text by pre-studying important vocabulary; (b) initial reading that focuses on global text comprehension; (c) detailed reading that focuses on important details and overt instruction of textual languages; (d) critical reading that explores cultural concepts, genre features of texts, and evaluates knowledge gained from texts; and (e) knowledge application activities, where learners apply their knowledge gained from reading through transformative practices, such as retelling stories and writing activities.

Authentic texts were used in class to supplement the course textbooks. When selecting the authentic texts, the instructor adhered to the following criteria: (a) the difficulty level is appropriate for the students; (b) the text topic and genre are related to the unit content of the textbook, so these materials can be incorporated into the curriculum as supplementary texts; (c) the authentic texts provide multimodal input such as visual or audio information. The selected authentic texts included:

1. Birthday, Chinese New Year, and wedding wishes selected from online resources
2. A Chinese New Year greeting video made by Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan, and printed captions of the video
3. A Pepsi TV commercial with captions, which reflected Chinese people's perspective about family bond and Spring Festival
4. Small advertisements about renting houses and tutoring sessions
5. A video and lyrics of a song that reflect work-related stress in modern Chinese society
6. Selected segments of a speech by Jack Ma, the founder and executive chairman of Alibaba Group

The instructor took several measures to facilitate learners' comprehension of authentic materials. First, pre-reading vocabulary learning activities were used to prepare students for the new words. In order to facilitate learners' acquisition of new vocabulary, the instructor designed learning tasks that integrate helpful

character/word learning strategies supported by research. These included identifying radicals, associating new words to mental lexicon, and learning meaning of compound words based on the constituent characters and context. Second, the instructor introduced useful reading strategies (e.g. using context information, focusing on the main ideas, making inferences, etc.) and encouraged students to use them by finishing particular reading tasks. She also introduced and activated related background information about the text topic and used visual input (such as pictures and video) to enhance comprehension. In addition, multiple reading of the same text in various ways (e.g. skimming and scanning for main ideas or important information; detailed reading; reading individually, reading in small groups, etc.) helped to relief students' anxiety to process authentic text.

In addition to attendance and daily quizzes, student assessment for this course included three reading tests and a writing portfolio. In each reading test, an authentic text was included as a bonus task. If students answered the questions correctly, they would earn bonus points, but they would not lose any points if they got them wrong.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A survey and semi-structured interviews were the two primary sources of data. The purpose of the survey was to reveal a general picture of participants' views on using authentic materials in their Chinese reading class, while the interviews were designed to provide insight into the rationales for learners' beliefs and perceptions. Both the survey and interviews were conducted at the end of the semester.

The survey consisted of 28 five-point Likert scale items divided into two parts (see Appendix A). The first part focused on learners' perceptions of the positive and negative impact of authentic texts on their Chinese learning, their preferences for frequency of classroom activities with authentic texts vs. textbook activities, and their opinions on integrating authentic texts into assessment. The

second part focused on learners' perceptions about different types of authentic materials used in the class and their degree of preference for other genres of authentic materials not currently used in the class. The items included in the survey were adapted from a related study (Kaya, Han, & Aybirdi, 2015). Three scholars specialized in foreign language education were invited to check validity and consistency of the survey. Based on their suggestions, some revisions were made and the survey was piloted with two CFL students, one male and one female, who were third-year Chinese students of the researcher. Based on their comments, the researcher made some minor revisions to the survey before applying it to the full study.

There were two stages of interviewing, which generated separate data results. The first phase of interviews focused on participants' responses to particular survey items and elicited further explanations (e.g. Can you explain why you gave item 11 a rating of three?). In the second stage of interviews (See Appendix B), the researcher asked questions about the participants' background and language learning experiences, perceptions of reading authentic Chinese texts, their evaluations of the authentic texts used in the class including rationale for their evaluations, and their comments and suggestions for ways of incorporating authentic texts into the class instruction. The interview questions were submitted to three scholars with specialization in foreign language education and piloted with two CFL learners enrolled in the third year Chinese class. Prior to carrying out the interviews, the researcher revised the interview questions based on the feedback of the specialists and piloting results.

As the instructor of the course, the researcher introduced the research project to the students at the end of the semester. They were told that a purpose of the project was to improve the curriculum design of the course; thus, they were expected to express their true opinions. The researcher also emphasized that learners' decisions to participate or not and the contents of their answers would not affect their final grades. All fourteen CFL learners, including eight males and six females, voluntarily participated in the study and filled out the survey. Ten participants, four females and six males, participated in

follow-up interviews. The face-to-face interviews were conducted individually. With participants' approval, the researcher audio recorded all interviews.

Participants' ratings for each survey item were put into an Excel file and the mean and median for each item were calculated. These results indicated participants' perceptions about the impact of the authentic materials used in the class, their perceptions of benefitting from various types of authentic texts used in the class, and their views on different types of authentic text that might be used in the class in the future.

Interview data were used to cross check survey data and provide explanation for survey results. Interviews were first transcribed and analyzed line by line. Following qualitative analysis coding practices (Saldaña, 2009), themes that emerged from the interview transcripts were identified and coded. The coding of transcripts was conducted in a dynamic and recursive manner, and codes were constantly compared, revised, or merged with each other. The qualitative data analysis software *Nvivo 10* was used to analyze and manage interview data. When all transcripts had been coded, a colleague specialized in foreign language education was invited to review codes and sample transcripts, discuss, and assess the findings. Based on the peer review results, the researcher made some minor revisions to the codes.

## Results

Grounded in results from analyzed survey and interview data, this section reports findings related to the three research questions.

### **Research Question One: Learners' Perception of the Impact of Authentic Texts**

As the survey results show (see Table 1), participants generally had positive views about using authentic texts as supplementary reading materials. Most items about the positive impact of authentic materials (Q1, Q4, Q5, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q12) had

means and medians higher than 4.00. These results suggest participants believed using authentic materials in their Chinese class improved their (a) reading abilities; (b) knowledge of grammar and vocabulary used in real situations; (c) understanding about Chinese culture; (d) knowledge of using Chinese in the real world; (e) general Chinese language proficiencies; and (f) interest and enjoyment in the class. The highest rated positive impacts were: Q5 (increase the knowledge of using vocabulary in real situations) and Q8 (help to know how language is used in real world). Items about negative impacts (Q2, Q3, and Q6) had means and medians equal or lower than 2.00, showing that most participants did not think authentic materials used in the class caused frustration and difficulties due to language and cultural challenges.

The means and median of item 13 (prefer to use Chinese authentic texts as supplementary materials to the textbooks) were 4.5 and 5. The means and median of item 15 (prefer using only textbooks) were 1.64 and 1.5 respectively. These results suggest participants preferred using both authentic texts and the textbooks over merely relying on textbooks. However, lower means of item 14 (prefer using only authentic texts) and item 16 (prefer including authentic texts in assessment) suggest some students are still somewhat hesitant to wholly embrace authentic texts, and that there is still some comfort in having a textbook.

The standard deviation for most of the items do not show a high degree of variability. This result may be attributed to the reason that most students enrolled in this course were in the Chinese major or minor program, thus they showed more homogeneity.

Table 1: *Learners' perceptions about impact of authentic texts*

Item	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
1. Authentic texts used in this class improve my reading comprehension ability	4.5	4.5	0.52
2. Authentic texts used in this class cause cultural conflicts that hinder comprehension	1.71	2	0.73

3. Authentic texts used in this class make me feel frustrated	1.86	2	0.86
4. Authentic texts used in this class increase my familiarity with the use of grammar rules in their original context.	4.5	5	0.65
5. Authentic texts used in this class increase my knowledge of how to use vocabulary in real situations	4.71	5	0.47
6. Authentic texts used in this class are too difficult for me to comprehend	1.93	2	0.83
7. Authentic texts used in this class improve my understanding about Chinese culture.	4.29	4	0.61
8. Authentic texts used in this class help me to know how language is used in the real world.	4.71	5	0.47
9. Authentic texts used in this class improve my Chinese language proficiency	4.29	4	0.47
10. Authentic texts used in this class help develop my Chinese writing skills.	3.93	4	0.83
11. Authentic texts used in this class motivate me to do more reading outside the classroom	3.43	3	0.94
12. Authentic texts used in this class make the class more interesting and fun	4.5	5	0.65
13. I prefer having Chinese authentic texts as supplementary materials to the textbooks	4.5	5	0.76
14. I would prefer to use Chinese authentic texts rather than textbooks in reading class	3.79	4	1.12
15. I would prefer to use only textbooks in reading class.	1.64	1.5	0.74
16. I prefer to include reading authentic texts as part of the assessment.	3.93	4	0.83

The following section focuses on several themes identified in the collected interview data related to the impact of authentic texts. Their frequencies in interview data were reported in Appendix C. Pseudonyms were used to represent participants.

**Exposure to Chinese language used in the real world.** Consistent with the high rating of items Q5 (increase the knowledge of using vocabulary in real situations) and Q8 (help to know how language is used in the real world), the theme that emerged from the interview data with the highest frequency of 17 was that authentic texts helped learners to know how Chinese is used in the real world (see Appendix C). As Rose said in the interview: “I feel like overall reading authentic texts is a part of learning, how to speak and be able to read versus just to see what is in the textbook, because that is not real life situation.” Lily also said reading authentic texts is “a cool way to see how Chinese is actually used in real life.”

Several participants (Toby, Sophie, James and Jenny) mentioned they felt textbooks were usually unnatural, simplified, formal, and fake. The natural setting and contexts provided by authentic texts, they believed, compensated for this weakness of textbooks. For instance, James believed authentic materials helped people understand Chinese used in “a natural setting.” Adam mentioned authentic texts provided a context for Chinese. Toby shared the same view that authentic materials helped learners understand how Chinese is used in real situations. When specifying his reasons, he mentioned that authentic texts, varied in genres or register, may contain commonly used expressions such as colloquialisms and slangs, which are not usually found in textbooks.

Authentic materials really help us understand how Chinese is actually used because a lot of times textbooks can be very formal. Whereas when we look at authentic texts, what’s actually being used like in advertisements, and we learn more commonly used language like colloquialisms and slang

Similar to Toby, Sophie believed that exposure to authentic texts help her learn colloquialisms and slang, which are usually

omitted from textbooks. She also pointed out that the evolution of language made authentic texts an important source for learning newly-emerged vocabulary and patterns of grammar:

Chinese is a language that's always changing and evolving. You know, there are lots of borrowed words there are lots of new words...The patterns of language change and by using modern authentic texts or authentic advertisements, authentic videos, I feel like you get the best sense of what modern Chinese is like and what the patterns of grammar are.

Toby not only talked about the importance of learning real Chinese from authentic texts, but also emphasized that knowing what he learned was authentic strengthened his belief that he could apply what he learned in real life:

I guess it's also nice to see that the stuff we are learning is actually used and it is the correct way. I guess it is a nice reinforcement that what we are learning is actually useful, is actually being used. Cause I really like being able to learn something and also to apply it. The authentic texts show that I definitely will apply it.

Other participants also thought they could apply the Chinese language more accurately in life with language input provided by authentic texts. For example, Lily and Aaron both mentioned that learning authentic expressions on cards helped them prepare New Year cards and birthday cards for their Chinese friends and relatives. Similarly, Sophie believed that words and expressions included in Ma Yun's speech could be useful for her job interview.

**Exposure to Chinese life and culture.** A second major theme from interview data with a frequency of 13 (See Appendix C) relates to the learners' shared belief that authentic texts reveal Chinese culture and life. This finding is consistent with the moderately high rating (with a mean of 4.29 and a median of 4.00) of survey item 7 (Using authentic texts in this class improves my understanding about Chinese culture). For example, Jenny said: "I think authentic text helps you know life

in China right now. I think it connects us with Chinese culture.” Adam also mentioned that authentic Chinese texts helped him “get connected with Chinese people” and they provided “the context of language and culture.” Similarly, Toby expressed his preference for authentic texts: “I like the balance of it, like we focus on the language and how it is used, but we also get to learn about culture. It’s a good balance.”

Some participants mentioned that particular authentic texts used in class helped them understand Chinese life and culture. For example, Adam mentioned song lyrics that helped him understand Chinese people’s life: “They were singing in a funny way, but they were singing about the actual things like do you like your job, and are you working too much.”

Both Rose and Jenny mentioned that the Pepsi commercial presented in class helped them understand what a TV commercial is like in China. Rose, who defined herself as a visual learner, believed that the Pepsi commercial gave her a visual input of Chinese culture: “We don’t just see what advertisement is, we also see Chinese culture, like Chinese New Year, and also family is introduced in the commercial because it is part of Chinese culture. I feel like it gives you a visual input.” Similar to Rose, Toby mentioned that he learned about the importance of Chinese New Year: “It [the Pepsi commercial] was great because I got to learn the culture. It’s about Chinese New Year, right? I did not know everyone goes back to their home and family for Chinese New Year.”

**Making the class fun, interesting and engaging.** Survey item 12 (using authentic Chinese texts in this reading class makes the class more interesting and fun) received a high rating (with a mean of 4.50 and a median of 5.00). This result is also supported by interview data, such that words repeatedly occurring in the interview transcripts with a frequency of 7 were “fun,” “interesting,” and “engaging”. Adam felt that using only textbooks is boring and authentic texts made the class “more fun.” Lily thought textbooks lack variety because they are usually only written by one or two authors. Rose had a similar feeling and believed that authentic texts provided “variety in the genres of

texts,” which made learning “more interesting.” She also mentioned that authentic texts increased “dialogues and interaction,” and helped to “engage” the learners. Toby enjoyed learning different types of media, and he thought that only learning from textbooks made him bored. He emphasized that although some authentic texts may be more challenging, they helped keep his “interest” and made him more “passionate about learning.”

**Impact on motivation: a more complicated picture.** The mean and median for survey item 11 were 3.43 and 3.00, showing a relatively positive, but not highly positive effect of authentic texts on learners’ motivation to read outside of the class. This rating was not as high as other items about positive impact. Data from the interview transcripts point to several possible explanations underlying this result.

First, results from some participants who identified a neutral or lower rating for item 11 indicate that some, but not all, authentic texts motivate them to read more. When considering the connection between an individual participant’s background and personal interest in the text topic, these personal links are noted as influencing a positive impact on student motivation. As Frank explained, majoring in international business, he was not interested in reading wedding cards but motivated to read more about the speech of Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba. As a music lover, James said he was “more motivated to read the song lyrics than the cards, even though the cards are easier.” King expressed that Chinese movies would motivate him to read more outside the class. Secondly, a tight schedule explained why some participants selected a neutral rating for the survey item related to motivation. Most students in the class were working part time to support their college education. Both Rose and James mentioned that they would like to read more outside of the class if their schedules allowed, but that was not the case. It shows that some students may not completely understand the close relationship between literacy acquisition and the time they spent on reading. A third possible explanation for the lower mean results from item 11 is a pre-existing motivation to read outside class. Some learners already considered themselves highly motivated readers who

read Chinese beyond the classroom. For example, Sophie claims: “I wouldn't say that watching a Chinese video or reading authentic Chinese text really encourages me to do more reading outside of the classroom. I ALWAYS do reading outside of the classroom, you know, because I need to learn...but I think it HELPS me to read outside of the classroom.”

Despite these factors mentioned above, five participants did emphasize in the interview that using authentic texts in class increased their motivation to read Chinese. For example, Lily said: “Having been familiar with real life examples makes you want to look more into the topic and explore other ways of writing and even other texts about that situation or topic.” Frank mentioned that some of the authentic texts used in the class made it more interesting for him to “go out and read what is there outside.” Toby believed that using authentic text in the class kept him “motivated to learn,” and showed him “There is still a lot I don't know. And it also makes me want to learn more.” Similar to Toby, Adam also mentioned that authentic texts used in the class “reminded me that I'm not as good as I thought. It keeps me humble, keeps me motivated.”

### **Research Question Two: How the Class Affected Learners' Perceptions about Reading Authentic Chinese Texts**

Interview data revealed themes of student awareness and student confidence.

**Awareness of importance of reading authentic materials.** When asked how this class affected their perceptions of reading authentic texts, some participants mentioned their increased awareness about the significance of reading authentic materials. For examples, Rose said: “I thought it would be probably better if we had been introduced to them (authentic texts) in past courses. I feel that overall it is part of learning, how to speak and be able to read versus just to see what is in the textbook, because it is not the real life situation.” Adam also acknowledged the importance of reading authentic materials: “I think it is something that more people should do, either on their own or in the class.” Toby, who had some experience

reading Chinese authentic materials in high school, mentioned that this Chinese course reaffirmed his perceptions of the need to read authentic texts: “It really helped to emphasize the fact that it is important to look at the stuff outside the textbook, and see how it is really used.”

**Confidence in reading Chinese authentic texts.** Some language instructors hesitate to use authentic texts due to their concern that authentic texts are too challenging and may frustrate students. However, as the survey results show (see Table 1), the means for item 3 (reading authentic Chinese texts in this class makes me frustrated) and item 6 (reading authentic Chinese texts in this class is too difficult for me) were each lower than 2.00, which indicate that participants did not feel frustrated by the difficulty levels of authentic texts used in the class. In addition, five participants mentioned in the interview that using authentic texts in class increased their confidence in reading Chinese authentic texts. For example, Jenney said: “Before this class, I probably would feel intimidated to read authentic texts, but now I can look at it and see here it is actually making sense. So I feel a lot better with it.” Similarly, Aaron mentioned that reading authentic texts in the class made it “less intimidating.” Frank also believed using authentic texts in class definitely made reading them “easier.”

Reading authentic texts in class also improved James’ confidence. His words support the premise that choosing authentic texts that match student language levels helps to increase learner confidence: “It showed me that there are authentic texts out there that are not that overwhelming. If I look in the right places, I can find texts that are more suited towards my knowledge base.”

Another factor that contributed to learners’ confidence in reading authentic texts is the instructional step of pre-studying key vocabulary, as Jenny said: “The texts are not really difficult in most parts, especially when we go over the new words before we read it.” Adam mentioned that he “had no challenges once we learned the words.” James also said, “At first I was a little bit frustrated by the unknown words/characters, but later I noticed when we went

through them in the class, that eased my frustration on that.” Toby also emphasized the scaffolded instruction: “I think learning the vocabulary and looking at the passages is a great order, because I guess it is important to understand the vocab and then be able to practice your understanding by going through the passages.”

A third factor that contributed to learners’ confidence relates to the reading tasks that helped learners practice supportive reading strategies. For example, James mentioned the strategy of grasping the main idea: “It [reading authentic texts in class] gives me more confidence because some of the authentic texts we read, although I did not know all the words, I can catch the general gist of it.” Frank also mentioned the same strategy: “I think this class helps me because I would get so frustrated trying to figure out every character. Now I’m focusing on understanding the big picture of it.” Aaron mentioned context cues helped him to ease his frustration and gain confidence: “They [authentic texts] are not as easy to comprehend at first...after I take a moment to just find the context for everything, and I move through it, then I don't have any problems, and I feel fine.”

### **Research Question Three: Learners’ Perceptions of Different Types of Authentic Texts**

Survey results (see Table 2) show that the means and medians for items 17-22 were equal to or higher than 4, indicating that most learners believed all types of authentic texts used in the class were beneficial. Item 19 (celebrity talks/blogs) and item 21 (greeting cards) received the highest means (4.57 and 4.5). Interview data revealed that learners preferred these two types of texts because they thought these texts were more related to their life, and they could apply what they learned from these texts to their lives. Frank expressed that the text he liked most was the speech of the founder of Alibaba, because his major was business, and he would like to do business in China after graduation. Sophie mentioned that reading celebrity talks and blogs helped her to learn useful words, expressions, and topics such as “determination, knowing what you are doing, and a story of starting a business,” which could be used in job interviews. Lily liked

reading greetings on cards because it helped her to know how to write a birthday card for her Grandma, who is Chinese. Similarly, Aaron also preferred reading cards because he was able to send wishes to his friends in China during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Table 2: *Learners' Perception about Authentic Texts Used in Class*

<b>I benefit from the use of following authentic materials</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
17. TV commercials with captions	4	4	1.21
18. Small ads	4.43	5	0.85
19. Celebrity talks/blogs	4.57	5	0.65
20. Song lyrics	4.14	4	0.95
21. Greeting cards	4.5	5	0.65
22. Short video and its transcribed caption	4.21	4	0.73

Interestingly, although most learners believed all types of authentic texts used in the class were beneficial, interview data revealed that learners did have diverse preferences for types of authentic texts, due to their different backgrounds, majors, and personal interests. For example, although Aaron and Lily shared a strong interest in reading greeting cards, Frank and James expressed less interest in reading this genre of texts. Adam mentioned song lyrics as one of his favorite types of text because “It is entertaining and informative,” whereas Frank and Sophie mentioned song lyrics as a kind of text they like less. Frank felt he just did not “connect with the song.” Sophie explained because of the new vocabulary and the difficulty level of the text, she did not learn as much from that text as other ones. Similar situations apply to celebrity talks. Although Frank and Robert gave high value to the celebrity speech, James said: “Personally I’m not very interested in celebrity life.”

A similar trend is found in the ratings of authentic texts that learners would like to read in a future class (see Table 3). Except for item 27 (essay), all the other items had means higher than 4.0, suggesting learners view these texts (e.g. poems, TV series/movie scripts; newspapers) as beneficial. When interviewed, however,

participants expressed diverse interests in other types of authentic texts not included in the survey. For example, Jenny hoped to learn about more multimedia materials related to contemporary Chinese culture, such as reality shows and dramas. Lily expressed interest in Chinese mythology. Sophie showed strong interest in Chinese literature, such as poetry, novels, and drama. Aaron preferred to read newspaper articles because they are formal and can provide guidance for Chinese writing.

Table 3: *Learners' Perception of Authentic Texts that can be used in Class*

<b>In the future, I would like to use the following authentic texts in the reading class</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
23. Newspaper	4.21	4	0.97
24. Magazines	4.29	4.5	0.83
25. Poems	4.36	5	0.93
26. Short stories	4.5	4.5	0.52
27. Essays	3.71	4	0.99
28. TV series/movie scripts	4.5	5	0.94

## Discussion

Consistent with several previous studies (Kienbaum, 1986; Peacock, 1997; Shirai, 2013), the results of the study showed this group of CFL learners had positive perceptions about the use of authentic materials in the class. They believed authentic materials had multiple benefits, which were also mentioned by L2 educators and scholars in previous literature. Among these benefits are exposing learners to real language and reinforcing the direct relationship between classroom language and real life (Brinton, 1991; Peacock, 1997; Richards, 2006); helping learners learn the culture of the target language (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Peacock, 1997; Richards, 2006); and making the class more engaging, enjoyable, and interesting (Erbaaggio et al., 2016; Shirai, 2013).

Similar to several previous studies (Kienbaum, 1986; Peacock, 1997; Shirai, 2013), this study also pointed to some positive effect of

authentic materials on students' learning motivation. Factors such as participants' backgrounds and personal interests, text topics, as well as their schedules also affected learners' motivation to learn. In addition, this study supported the claim in previous literature (Rebuck, 2008; Shirai, 2013) that a moderate level of difficulty brought by authentic materials did not necessarily demotivate learners. On the contrary, a sense of difficulty may even motivate learners by inspiring the need to study more.

This study revealed several pedagogical suggestions. First, results showed that this group of CFL learners perceived authentic materials positively and believed they benefitted from these materials used in class. This finding suggested that, with scaffolding and supportive instructional strategies, it is possible and practical to incorporate authentic texts into intermediate level Chinese classes with similar learning contexts. Second, the results suggested several effective measures to limit potential demotivating effects of authentic texts. Without these pedagogical strategies, the integration of authentic texts could not have been as smooth as they seemed to be. These measures include pre-studying key vocabulary before reading (Berardo, 2006), choosing texts based on learners' proficiency (Gilmore, 2006), adjusting the difficulty of the tasks (Maxim, 2002; Nunan, 1989), encouraging students to apply helpful reading strategies (Maxim, 2002) such as focusing on the main idea and important facts instead of every text detail (Gilmore, 2006), and using context and background information about the text topic (Berardo, 2006; Maxim, 2002). Foreign language instructors may consider taking these measures when using authentic texts in class. Third, to use authentic texts as reading materials in a Chinese class, the Chinese language instructor may need to apply more instructional strategies than most other foreign language instructors to facilitate CFL learners' acquisition of new characters and words contained in authentic materials. This is due to research that has shown that character recognition is fundamental to Chinese reading comprehension (Shen, 2013) and intermediate CFL students had many difficulties with word and character decoding (Everson & Ke, 1997; Lee-Thompson, 2008). Instructors may consider introducing strategies for character and word learning, such as identifying radicals,

associating new words to the mental lexicon, interpreting the meaning of compound words based on their constituent characters and context. These strategies are supported by research (Huang, 2014; Jiang & Fang, 2012; Ke, 1998; Shen, 2005; Shen, 2008; Shen & Ke, 2007; Taft & Chung, 1999). Fourth, the results also revealed that due to various majors and backgrounds, learners had diverse interests in text genre and topic. Therefore, as Berardo (2006) suggested, when selecting authentic texts, the foreign language instructor should make sure text genres and topics are diverse enough to address a range of interests and needs. The instructor may even encourage learners to identify and share some authentic texts in class, in order to foster their autonomy and motivation to read outside class. In addition, some learners were not aware of the close relationship between literacy development and the time on task, which suggests the need of arousing this awareness.

Although the trustworthiness of this study's findings is substantiated by multiple measures, such as triangulation of multiple data sources (two phases of interviews and a survey) and peer review of instrumentation and findings, the results cannot be generalized to all L2 Chinese learners due to the study's limited sample size and variables such as learners' proficiency levels and learning contexts. Since the specific results are contextualized, readers need to be cautious about directly applying the results to other settings. Full-scale quantitative studies with large sample sizes at different proficiency levels need to be conducted to verify the results of this pilot research. It would also be worthwhile to conduct additional qualitative studies in various learning contexts and with various student groups (e.g. beginning L2 Chinese class focusing on communicative competence) to bolster further pedagogical suggestions for the use of authentic materials in other learning contexts. In addition, since this study was designed to collect data only at the end of the semester, it would also be worthwhile to repeat this study using a pre-/post- instructional approach to gain further insight into how class instruction affects learners' perceptions of reading authentic Chinese texts.

## Conclusion

By investigating CFL learners' perceptions of using authentic texts as classroom reading materials via survey and interviews data, the findings from this study contribute to bridging the gap in literature about classroom use of authentic materials. The results of this pilot study reveal students' positive perceptions of reading authentic texts as supplementary reading materials in a third year Chinese class. Most learners in this class preferred to use both textbook and authentic texts as reading materials. They believed authentic texts helped them to learn Chinese culture as well as Chinese language used in the real world, and made the class more interesting, fun, and engaging. Some learners believed using authentic Chinese texts boosted their motivation to read more outside of class, though text topic and personal schedules also affected their motivation to read beyond class time. Rather than demotivating learners, authentic materials used in this class increased participants' awareness of the benefits of learning from authentic materials and their confidence in reading these types of texts. Data from this study also demonstrated the important role of pedagogy in enhancing learners' comprehension and promoting their confidence in reading authentic materials. More studies are needed to verify the preliminary findings of this study.

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## Appendix A

### Survey

#### Survey of Students' Perception about Using Authentic Materials in Chinese Class.

The purpose of this survey is to collect your opinions about using authentic reading materials in the course CHIN3200. Each statement is followed by five numbers and each number means the following:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

Using authentic Chinese texts in this reading class

1. Improves my reading comprehension ability.  
1 2 3 4 5
2. Causes cultural conflicts that hinder comprehension.  
1 2 3 4 5
3. Makes me feel frustrated.  
1 2 3 4 5
4. Increases my familiarity with the use of grammar rules in their original context.  
1 2 3 4 5
5. Increases my knowledge of how to use vocabulary in real situations.  
1 2 3 4 5
6. Is too difficult for me to comprehend.  
1 2 3 4 5
7. Improves my understanding about Chinese culture.  
1 2 3 4 5
8. Helps me to know how language is used in the real world.  
1 2 3 4 5
9. Improves my Chinese language proficiency.  
1 2 3 4 5
10. Helps develop my Chinese writing skills.  
1 2 3 4 5

11. Motivates me to do more reading outside the classroom.  
1 2 3 4 5
12. Makes the class more interesting and fun.  
1 2 3 4 5
13. I prefer having Chinese authentic texts as supplementary materials to the textbooks.  
1 2 3 4 5
14. I would prefer to use Chinese authentic texts rather than textbooks in reading class.  
1 2 3 4 5
15. I would prefer to use only textbooks in reading class.  
1 2 3 4 5
16. I prefer to include reading authentic texts as part of the assessment.  
1 2 3 4 5

I benefit from the use of the following authentic materials in this Chinese reading class

1. TV commercials with captions  
1 2 3 4 5
2. Small ads  
1 2 3 4 5
3. Celebrity talks/blogs  
1 2 3 4 5
4. Song lyrics  
1 2 3 4 5
5. Greeting cards  
1 2 3 4 5
6. Short video and its transcriptions  
1 2 3 4 5

In the future, I would like to use the following authentic materials in the reading class

7. Newspapers  
1 2 3 4 5
8. Magazines

- |                             |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
|                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Poems                    |   |   |   |   |   |
|                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. Short stories           |   |   |   |   |   |
|                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. Essays                  |   |   |   |   |   |
|                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. TV series/movie scripts |   |   |   |   |   |
|                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Others (please specify):

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

1. What is your major? How many years have you studied Chinese? What language do you speak at home? In addition to Chinese, do you have experience learning other foreign languages?
2. Before taking this CHIN3200 course, did you have experience reading authentic materials in Chinese? What did you think about reading Chinese authentic materials at that time?
3. In the class, we have used multiple authentic materials (e.g. cards, TV commercials; small ads, blog/speech of celebrities; lyrics) as supplementary reading materials. What did you think about these authentic materials? How did you feel about the ways the instructor incorporates these authentic materials?
4. How do you think this reading class has affected your perception about reading in Chinese?
5. How do you think this course has affected your perception about reading authentic texts?
6. Do you have difficulties reading the authentic texts in this class? Could you specify these challenges?
7. In the class we used different kind of authentic texts such as birthday/new year/wedding cards, on-line videos, speeches of celebrities, lyrics, commercials and advertisements, etc. Among all these materials, what materials do you like most? What materials do you like least? Please specify the reasons.
8. Do you have suggestions about other authentic texts that can be used in this class? Do you have suggestions about the ways of using authentic materials for this class?
9. In our unit tests, authentic texts were used as bonus passages. Do you like this way of incorporating authentic text into the reading assessment? Why or why not? Can you suggest other ways to integrate authentic materials into assessment?

## Appendix C

### Interview Data

Frequencies of codes about impact of Authentic Materials

Code Names	Sources <sup>1</sup>	Frequencies
Expose learners to language used in the real world	6	17
Improve knowledge about Chinese culture and life	5	13
Increase learner motivation to read authentic texts	5	9
Make the class fun, interesting, and engaging	3	7
Increase learners' confidence to read authentic texts	5	5
Improve reading skills	2	3
Provide varieties in genre and topic	2	3
Improve vocabulary	1	1
Improve writing skills	1	1

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<sup>1</sup> Sources refer to how many participants said words related to the coded theme.

## Appendix D

### Sample Authentic Texts Used in Class

1. Chinese New Year Card: <http://so.redocn.com/heka/cdc3c4ead0c2c4eabad8bfa8.htm###>



2. Chinese New Year greeting from Mark Zuckerberg and his family. Video link:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnCeliaHxWI>

#### *Transcripts:*

大家好, 新年快乐, 今年能和Max一起庆祝新年, 我和Priscilla非常兴奋。我们希望你也正在和你的家人朋友一起庆祝。昨晚是Facebook的年度春节晚会。很荣幸的, 我们今年有几位从中国来的大厨。他们让Facebook的员工吃上了中国各大菜系的美食。我最喜欢的是烤鸭。为了庆祝新年, 我们全家人在一起吃了团圆饭。这个新年对Max也是很有意义的。因为我们为她取了中文名字。她的中文名字叫陈明宇。陈是妈妈的姓, 明是明天的明, 宇是宇宙的宇。明宇是代表希望世界的未来更美好。

最后，我们这个小家想祝福大家身体健康，阖家幸福，猴年大吉。

3. Apartment Renting Advertisement.  
<http://www.58pic.com/tupian/fangwuchuzu.html>

