

**Book review:**

**Pragmatics of Chinese as a second language, Shuai Li (Ed.). Multilingual Matters, Bristol (2024). pp. 376. ISBN: 9781800410176. Hardback: \$179.95.**

Yilei Li

*The University of Arizona*

**Abstract**

As a timely volume, *Pragmatics of Chinese as a Second Language* presents empirical pragmatic studies on acquisition, instruction, and assessment in second language (L2) Chinese, responding to Kasper's (1995) initial proposal. It is also the second collection of works on L2 Chinese pragmatics, following Taguchi and Li's (2017) edited journal issue. While early groundwork has been laid under the cognitive framework, other approaches to this field remain largely underexplored. To bridge this gap, the current collection, edited by Dr. Shuai Li, integrates varying theoretical perspectives and methodological innovations in response to the interdisciplinary call toward L2 pragmatics. This collection not only outlines the development of L2 Chinese pragmatics scholarship over the past three decades but also marks a significant step forward with its cutting-edge assessment instruments and attention to virtual contexts. Thus, researchers working with other L2s may also find this collection useful.

The book opens with an introductory chapter and a systematic review. The following ten empirical chapters are categorized into four parts, looking into the 'Acquisition of Key Pragmatic Features' (Chapters 2, 3, and 4), 'Methodological Innovations for Pragmatics Assessment' (Chapters 5, 6, and 7), 'Individual Difference Factors in Pragmatics Acquisition' (Chapters 8 and 9), and 'Web-based Approaches to Teaching and Learning Pragmatics' (Chapters 10 and 11). Finally, this book ends with an annotated bibliography that serves as a valuable supplement to the opening review.

Chapter 1 is a state-of-the-art review that synthesizes L2 Chinese pragmatics research from 1995 to 2022 based on 98 publications in English and Chinese that are annotated by purpose, method, and findings in the final bibliography. By introducing the evolving concept of pragmatic competence and analyzing existing L2 Chinese studies on pragmatics acquisition, instruction, and assessment, the authors (Shuai Li, Ting Wen, and Yali Feng) smoothly guide readers in an accessible manner to understand what has been done and where to go. The future agendas proposed include investigating more pragmatic features, applying diverse frameworks, and exploring digitalized learning and teaching contexts.

**Part 1: Acquisition of Key Pragmatic Features**

Part 1 (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) calls attention to three unexplored L2 Chinese pragmatic aspects. Wenhao Diao and Chen Chen embarked on a corpus approach in Chapter 2 to compare the use of Chinese utterance-final particle BA in spontaneous talks between L2 study-abroad students and their Chinese roommates. L2 speakers were found to produce the pragmatic marker BA less frequently and with limited functions. Individual variations also became salient when analyzing BA in discourse, which further evidenced the claim that more informal exposure might

engage L2 speakers with pragmatic markers. This study is illuminating as it examined spontaneous conversations quantitatively and qualitatively. Its post-hoc analysis on the distribution of BA in textbooks reveals possible roles that formal instruction may have on students' acquisition of pragmatic markers. Chapter 3, by Li Jin, explored American learners' knowledge of and motivations for Chinese internet slang through questionnaires and interviews, addressing the gap in research on formulaic expressions in virtual and playful contexts. Though the students knew little about internet slang, their desire to interact with Chinese youth was strong, leading to their frequent exposure to such slang. The findings also enlighten us to reconsider whether to incorporate internet slang in class (if so, what kinds of slang and at which proficiency level) and whether language instructors would be knowledgeable and comfortable teaching it. Chapter 4 is a traditional study using oral discourse completion tests (DCT) to examine requests by Japanese learners. Though L2 Chinese requests have been widely studied, Chen et al. contributed by analyzing the micro-level strategies in a fine-grained way. They found that both proficiency level and situation type affected their use of request strategies. While learners could adaptively employ different strategies based on situation types, their preferences differed from L1 speakers, likely due to cultural backgrounds, such as the Japanese honorific system.

### **Part 2: Methodological Innovations for Pragmatics Assessment**

Part 2 (Chapters 5, 6, and 7) focuses on assessment, featuring interdisciplinary and innovative ways to evaluate L2 pragmatic competence besides regular instruments such as DCTs, role plays, and multiple-choice questions. In Chapter 5, Tianyu Sophie Qin first showcased the application of a slide ruler to measure both accuracy and certainty in implicature comprehension. The slide ruler (0-100 scale) allowed more flexibility and sensitivity compared to the Likert scale. Moreover, grounded in the sociocultural theory, this study adopted a dynamic assessment framework. For instance, instructional intervention sessions were given to the learners with prompts on the items they had answered incorrectly in the pretest. By showing that learners with similar accuracy scores can differ markedly in confidence, this study contributes to the field by proposing the certainty level as a valuable complement to accuracy in assessing pragmatic ability. Chapter 6, by Qiong Li, utilized Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques to deal with the inconsistency in human ratings. L2 speakers' speech acts were assessed through their similarity with native speakers' responses operationalized by the Word2Vec model and the cosine similarity score. Although NLP could identify differences in pragmalinguistic forms with a small-scale dataset, the method faces challenges when confronted with Chinese-specific features like utterance-final particles. This chapter takes an initiative in the NLP approach to pragmatics assessments, though its reliance on a reference group suggests such methods may not operate independently. Shuai Li's study in Chapter 7 demonstrated how to evaluate the quality of researcher-developed instruments, such as DCTs, using the Rasch model from psychometrics. The Rasch model proved useful in checking the fitness and consistency of participant responses, item functioning, rater behaviors, and rating scales. This thought-provoking study highlights the necessity of ensuring data collection and analysis quality, exemplifying how new analytical frameworks can help address problematic testing items and responses in L2 pragmatics research.

### **Part 3: Individual Difference Factors in Pragmatics Acquisition**

Part 3 (Chapters 8 and 9) investigates overlooked individual differences (ID) factors in L2 pragmatic development. In Chapter 8, Yunwen Su and Xiao Hu reported a strong effect of proficiency and a moderate role of motivation, including cultural interest and practical incentives,

in learners' ability to produce conventional expressions. However, its reliance on a limited proficiency measure (EIT) and the omission of key motivational constructs (e.g., the ought-to L2 self) limit the scope of interpretation. Chapter 9 by Jia Yang compared learning strategies by high and low performers in the same pragmatic tests. She found their pragmatic learning strategies differed in informal learning, seeking feedback, in-depth cognitive processing, and managing unknown information. Contrary to previous findings, this study underscored the depth of strategy use rather than mere frequency. However, studies in Part 3 would have benefited more from data triangulation and treating IDs as a dynamic and interrelated system.

#### **Part 4: Web-Based Approaches to Teaching and Learning Pragmatics**

Part 4 (Chapters 10 and 11) directs readers to virtual approaches for pragmatics instruction. Yang Li explored in Chapter 10 the efficacy of an open-access website in teaching speech acts. Through a six-week self-study, all learners showed significant gains in their metapragmatic awareness of appropriateness in gratitude expressions, suggesting the potential of web-based pragmatic instruction for out-of-class and self-paced learning. Chapter 11, by Xiaofei Tang, drew attention to learners' beliefs in technology-assisted pragmatic learning. As a component of a broader initiative on L2 gaming, this qualitative study specifically answered whether and why games like Questaurant could be more appealing than picture-based online lessons from the users' perspective. While they both improved learners' formulaic competence, gaming offered fun and reduced their anxieties. Learners' preferences for interactivity, aesthetic features, and stories also shed light on the design of pragmatic games.

#### **Conclusion**

Overall, this book is well organized in a reader-friendly structure. It is groundbreaking in terms of its diverse research contexts, broad scope, and inclusion of quantitative, qualitative, and computational methods. The empirical studies are rigorous in their analyses, and they bring fresh insights to L2 pragmatics scholarship. The rich appendices, such as the adapted strategy inventory for pragmatic learning and DCT scenarios, provide hands-on tools for future research. Additionally, the book offers e-learning resources, such as the Chinese Pragmatics website (<https://www.k-state.edu/chinesepragmatics/>), for language teachers and students. The most up-to-date methodological innovations, especially in Part 2, will undoubtedly inform scholars on how to better design valid instruments and assess L2 pragmatic competence.

Despite these strengths, the comparison designs employed (e.g., Chapters 2, 4, 5, 6) indicate the book's certain limitations to native speaker baselines, which may reinforce the deficit-oriented assumption of L2 users. Instead, developmental perspectives comparing pragmatic abilities across different learning stages or proficiency levels, if adopted, would orient more toward competence in a dynamic way. There is also a lack of discussion on the multilingual/multimodal encounters in pragmatics, with most studies relying solely on L2 textual data. A translingual framework that conceptualizes pragmatic ability as interconnected and shaped by users' entire repertoires (Ishihara, 2021) would better reflect language realities in fluidity and superdiversity. Shifting the focus from native speakers' interpretation, future research might also further explore learners' agency in meaning-making pragmatic processes through diverse semiotic, social, and discursive resources. Besides, while teaching implications are available for various pragmatic features, a whole picture of their systematic organization in terms of what, when, and how to teach is still needed to benefit the incorporation of pragmatic instruction in language programs.

As another milestone in L2 Chinese pragmatics, this book is insightful and highly recommended for researchers, language instructors, textbook editors, and e-learning developers. The chapters, individually and collectively, bring vibrant and dynamic discussions to the L2 pragmatics field.

## References

- Ishihara, N. (2021). From a native-nonnative speaker dichotomy to a translingual framework. In J. Félix-Brasdefer & R. Shively (Eds.), *New directions in second language pragmatics* (pp. 300–313). De Gruyter Mouton.
- Kasper, G. (1995). *Pragmatics of Chinese as native and target language*. Honolulu, HI: Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.
- Taguchi, N. & Li, S. (2017). Introduction to a thematic review: Pragmatics research in Chinese as a second language. *Chinese as a Second Language Research*, 6(1), 1–6.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/caslar-2017-0001>

### **Declarations:**

**Competing Interests:** The author declares that they have no competing interests.

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Author's Contribution:** The author has written and reviewed this paper.

**Acknowledgement:** Thanks to the editors and reviewers for their constructive and encouraging feedback.

**Ethics Statements:** This conceptual paper does not include human subjects.