Evaluation Report from the Advisory Board
for the Project Titled

**"An Engaging Digital Curriculum for Intermediate Chinese Language
and Culture"**

Allegheny College

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Introduction

The Advisory Board for this project, which consists of established scholars with various types of expertise, was assembled by Dr. Xiaoling Shi, the Director of the NEH funded project titled *An Engaging Digital Curriculum for Intermediate Chinese Language and Culture*. Board members were invited to provide advice to the project and evaluate it. The products of the project include a conference, a white paper, and a website (at https://engagingchinesedigital.github.io/index.html). This evaluation report addresses these three products in order.

The Conference

The three-day conference was held at Allegheny College from January 10th to 12th, 2022. It was successful and, indeed, exemplary in every sense. Before the conference, in addition to asynchronous communication, Dr. Shi hosted an online synchronous meeting via Zoom in December 2021 for board members, invited conference presenters, and the project internal members to get to know each other and prepare for the conference. Due to the pandemic, each participant was given the option of attending the conference onsite and/or participating online. Six members attended onsite, eight online, and two participated partially online and partially onsite. The technologies used for the conference ran smoothly, participants being able to interact with each other seamlessly.

At the conference, Dr. Shi presented in detail the blueprint for the curriculum. She and the internal team members also presented for discussion sample modules that they had designed. Additionally, they shared the recorded demo videos of teaching both in the physical classroom and online, as well as the sample products that students had made as part of their learning outcomes. The conference agenda also included presentations given by each board member and invited presenters on topics they had chosen related to the project. Time was allotted for questions and discussion after each presentation, with a considerable amount of discussion taking place on how the project could benefit from each presentation.

The detailed conference agenda is available at the project website. The key issues discussed at the conference were well summarized in the white paper (cf. page 7). We will not repeat here the content of the white paper but only highlight three special features of the conference.

First, the participants came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds with various types of experiences in teaching and research, which facilitated discussion of the curriculum and related topics from different perspectives. In addition to professional Chinese language instructors and researchers, the project included professionals teaching other languages such as German and Russian as well as researchers and practitioners in instructional design and technology and a librarian. Additionally, most participants worked at different institutions (e.g., large public university, private university, liberal arts college), and there were detailed discussions on the application of the curriculum in

different institutions. These discussions helped strengthen the robustness of the curriculum and expanded its dissemination and impact.

Second, the discussions at the conference were focused, thorough, thought-provoking, and fruitful. Participants attended the conference because of this project, and hence the discussions were focused on the project with multiple perspectives. Additionally, different than a regular conference where participants do not have to raise questions and provide suggestions, participants at this conference, as invited stakeholders, were obliged to provide comments and advice. Furthermore, the occasion was also different from the typical situation where teaching demos are being judged and one usually only showcases their strengths. Dr. Shi and her team showed what they did in their regular teaching openly and invited suggestions sincerely. Participants all provided candid and constructive suggestions for improving the curriculum, because of the same goal shared among each participant and the open and collegial nature of the meeting.

Last, the scale of the conference was just right. In addition to the team members, board members and invited presenters, the conference was open only to language instructors at Allegheny College, including those teaching other languages. Notably, one anonymous reviewer of the original grant proposal advised Dr. Shi to "open the conference up to others teaching intermediate Chinese language, especially since this is so exploratory." Based on our actual experience at the conference, the board felt that Dr. Shi was correct in limiting attendance at the conference to specified members. Because the group was relatively small (fewer than 20 participants) and each participant had been invited by Dr. Shi, participants had sufficient opportunities to participate and exchange ideas. Additionally, it was easier to build trust and connections among the small group, and participants felt more comfortable to express their views frankly and openly.

The White Paper

The advisory board was greatly impressed by the 44-page white paper that Dr. Shi produced with her team. The white paper was comprehensive, informative, and professional in every respect. As one board member commented, the white paper "offers a comprehensive summary of the conference and thoughtful integration of the comments on different issues from different board members and conference presenters." The paper "is written in clearly accessible language"; "the length is good"; and "the sections are concise and still contain useful information." Ms. Yalin Chen, a senior lecturer in Chinese from Smith College, as one of the three invited presenters at the conference, also thought highly of the white paper. As she commented, "I think this report has stated a very clear goal (critical thinking) but with the understanding of its challenges to implementing them at the intermediate level. I am impressed by how well the team took the critics, such as 'how to achieve the objectives' and 'how to assess the work,' and incorporated them with more clear directions and approaches."

Since the goal of the project and the focus of the white paper are building an engaging digital curriculum for intermediate Chinese language and culture, below we will summarize our comments on the curriculum described in the white paper.

Strengths

First, we applaud the fact that the curriculum is learner-centered, built upon an analysis of the characteristics of Generation Z, many members of which prefer that learning is relevant, instantly useful, and fun (cf. page 8 of the white paper). Additionally, the curriculum takes into consideration the online learning ecosystem (e.g., abundant available digital tools and resources for language learning) of the learners and takes advantage of it to facilitate student self-study.

Second, the objectives for the curriculum cover four aspects: language, content, critical thinking, and socialization. Strong justification was provided (cf. page 9) regarding the importance of socialization in language learning and why the curriculum needs to be content-driven and critical thinking-driven for Generation Z. The curriculum specifically aims to investigate contemporary trends and issues, and helps students develop disciplinary and interdisciplinary insights, as well as critical cultural awareness and global citizenship. The curriculum, as one board member commented, is "a bold move" and can "potentially transform the field of second language teaching, if the pedagogical design is well thought-out and field tested."

Third, using the backward design approach, the process of how to achieve the curriculum objectives is comprehensively mapped out. The blueprint includes general guidelines for four categories of topics (cf. page 15) and lists materials from various sources (e.g., blogs, podcast, movies). The white paper also provides examples of instructional materials the team developed with technology tools (e.g., Edpuzzle and Perusall) and teaching demo videos (i.e., on phone anxiety) to illustrate how to implement the curriculum in three stages (pre-class, in class, and after class). The design is "creative, thought-provoking, and full of new ideas about teaching materials, technology integration, and classroom interaction", as some board members commented approvingly. Board members also praised the curriculum for "guiding learners efficiently on where to find high quality resources" and for its well-thought after-class activities, which are "a key factor" for engaging learners. The white paper also provides suggestions for using pre-class activities (including games) to learn vocabulary and grammar to help alleviate the mechanical aspects of language learning, so that the focus of in-class activities might be on developing critical cultural awareness and disciplinary/interdisciplinary insights. Additionally, the white paper includes assessment (both formative and summative) in the curriculum, and discussion of how to build a learning community.

Fourth, it is also commendable that the white paper discusses the selection of platform (Learning/Course Management System) for the curriculum, and accommodation of students with special needs, as well as licensing, copyright, and privacy issues. These aspects are all important for design, implementation, and dissemination of the curriculum.

Areas that can be further strengthened in the future

First, some board members believe that there are gaps at different levels of the curriculum that the team needs to bridge, such as between intended communicative functions in each unit and corresponding language forms, between the learner's actual linguistic ability at the intermediate level and the curricular goal of engaging in cultural analysis and critical thinking, and between low-complexity and high-complexity tasks in each unit. Level-appropriate balance and pedagogical cautions need to be further specified.

Second, scaffolding measures should be mentioned and specified for different classroom activities so as to ensure the quality and depth of discussions. Full preparation, detailed prerequisites, and clearly spelled-out expectations for projects should be planned and worked into the proposal. Similarly, assessment can be further elaborated to allow readers to see exactly how it is implemented at both formative and summative levels.

Third, there are some other minor aspects of the curriculum that can be improved. For example, for teaching activities such as the unit on "phone anxiety," perhaps the team could highlight what students already know and what is new to showcase the scaffolding-building process. Similarly, for teaching activities such as the unit on Covid statistics, which presents a great way to connect social issues with language learning, perhaps the instructor – in addition to having the students practice reading and statistics – could also incorporate critical thinking elements such as comparison among different countries, cities, and/or towns and analysis of any differences.

Finally, the board encourages the team to explore further use of interactive games and other immersive learning technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) in developing the digital curriculum in Phase II, as they have already planned. In the meantime, the board concurs that technology should be used for the sake of supporting the instructional objectives of the curriculum, not for its own sake. One must always keep the pedagogical goals foremost in mind. After those goals have been set, one can consider how technology may facilitate attaining them; but it should always be the pedagogical goals that drive the technology and not the other way around.

The Website

The board is impressed that the website for the project has already been created and that important content including the PowerPoint slides from the conference presentations have been made available on the website. The web pages are clear and easy to navigate. The project website (hosted at github.io) is not institution-bounded, allowing team members from different institutions to collaborate more conveniently. Additionally, the open-access website can be accessed by anyone freely, which is certainly conducive to disseminating the impact of the project.

Summary and Conclusion

While there have been previous discussions and attempts to use social media and other digital tools for the teaching and learning of languages including the Chinese language (Liu & Da, 2022), no systematic curriculum has heretofore been discussed and

developed including at the intermediate level. This project is the first of its kind to systematically discuss all aspects of building an engaging digital curriculum for intermediate Chinese language and culture with creative and cautious use of digital tools and real-world resources. One of its innovative features is to not only help students improve their language proficiency, but also help them develop intercultural citizenship and critical thinking. This highly successful conference, which included participants from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, discussed in depth various aspects related to the development of an engaging digital curriculum for intermediate Chinese, both theoretically and practically.

To conclude, the project has successfully achieved well beyond what was planned for Phase I. We fully support the team's plan to apply for Phase II of the grant and look forward to its further refinement and development. We are convinced that the impacts of this initiative go well beyond the field of Chinese language learning and teaching and that it can serve as a model for the teaching of other languages both nationally and internationally.

Reference:
Liu, S. & Da, J. (2022). *Technology in Chinese language teaching.* In Ye, Z. (ed.) The Palgrave handbook of Chinese language studies. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6844-8_3-2