[Marc D. Winter is an independent scholar, currently doing post-doc research for a thesis on Qing-dynasty hanxue scholarship and one of its main opponents, Fang Dongshu. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Zürich, Switzerland, where he worked as a research assistant for four years. During this time he helped produce the journal Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques and attended numerous conferences. Mr. Winter has published several articles and is the author of an introductory study on the Shuowen jiezi.]

Urs P. Pretôt is teacher and clinical instructor at the “Institut für Traditionelle Chinesische Medizin Basel” in Switzerland. He studied 6 years TCM in China, Germany, and the USA and earned his Master Degree of Sciences (TCM) in 1991. He passed the program of the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, San Francisco / USA with honors. He has written three books and numerous essays about TCM.]

This two-volume publication attempts a great task. It not only intends to be a language-course for traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) terminology, but one for contemporary Chinese as well. The book is in German and Chinese. The authors are well-known specialists of Chinese medical history, one, Paul Unschuld, a professor at the University of Munich, the other, Zheng Jinsheng, a professor from the Academy of traditional Chinese medicine in Peking. The two have previously co-written a twenty-three-page article in vol. 48 of Monumenta Serica (2000) on “Manuscripts as Sources of Chinese Medical History”. A CD is intended to accompany this language course published by the Springer Publishing House in Heidelberg, Germany, but it was not included in the review copy, and we suppose, the same is the case for the resale copy, because online bookstores report the CD as “out of print”.

The book, the title of which translates as Language Course for Medicine and Every-day Life is in two volumes. Volume one contains eighteen lessons of situational dialogues, i.e. situations the authors believe one may encounter in China as a student of TCM. The second volume offers variations of, and explanations for, the situations introduced in the first volume. Since reviewing this course requires linguistic as well as medical expertise, this review was coauthored by Urs P. Pretôt, an experienced TCM physician, and Marc D. Winter, a sinologist at the University of Zürich, Switzerland.
The first volume starts with a very brief foreword, the table of contents and then right away with lesson one: what to say when meeting somebody? The next lessons deal with the vocabulary and phrases needed when fixing a date on the phone (L2), visiting somebody (L3), and when sharing a meal (L4). The lessons following that assume realistic situations within the context of a TCM-enthusiast studying in China. Thus, the situations are a general introduction to the Chinese medical system (L5) and to the medical treatment administered to foreigners (L6). Next the student is taught much of the vocabulary and phrases used in a pharmacy (L7), and when taking an acupuncture class (L8). Thereafter the circle of the imaginary student grow larger, as he or she goes to the hospital with an injured child for a checkup (L10) after having provided First Aid (L9). There is then also a pregnancy-check (L11) and a visit to a medical bookstore (L13).

The authors claim in the foreword that the book is not only intended for students of TCM, but also for medicine or pharmaceutical salesmen or the general public. Lessons 14 through 18 are therefore even more general than those that precede them. They deal with traveling and health issues (L14), visiting an acupuncture and moxibustion department of a hospital (L15), discussions among university students of medicine (L16), going to a trade fair (L17) and negotiating a trade agreement (L18).

Each lesson consists of a dialogue, where every statement is in three lines: Characters, romanization, and German translation. The romanization throughout is non-italic Hanyu Pinyin, complete with tone markers on the vowels. As always in Pinyin there is some confusion concerning the method for writing more than one syllable: For the first ten lessons, Zhang and Unschuld hyphenate words they feel belong together, from then on and for the later eight lessons, syllables in one word are written together.

After the dialogue some standard questions and answers are repeated. They are concise enough to fit on a word-card, but still long enough to actually be more than just vocabulary. To pick a random example: In lesson 6 the standard phrases are: “haizi daxue biye le ma? 孩子大学毕业了吗”, which translates as “Has your child graduated from university.” The sentence in Pinyin is spelled: “hái-zǐ dà-xué bì-yè-lè ma?” Each lesson consists of some annotations of very diverse content related to the dialogue, and finally, vocabulary. At the end of the first volume we find a list of all the words in the book. There is a lot of vocabulary to be mastered in each lesson. Lesson 11 for instance features 64 new words.

Volume two is divided into the same 18 lessons, each one offering variations of the sentences given in the lesson in volume one. The variation is highlighted in red, which is set in italics here. For instance for the sentence from lesson 6 “wo qing-jiao ni 我请教你”, meaning “I ask your advice” the authors give three variations: “wo de qing-jiao ni 得” => “I have to ask your advice”, “wo de xian qing-jiao ni 先” => “I have to ask your advice first”, “suo- yi wo qing-jiao ni 所以” => “therefore I ask your advice” (p. 130). These variations aim to teach a feeling for the language. As similar elements are used repeatedly, the reader gets the idea that Chinese consists of fixed elements that can be combined freely. This
is of course correct, and the reviewer assumes that once the basics of studying Chinese have been mastered, these variations can teach a student a lot about the Chinese language. Another example, this time from lesson 13: for the sentence “Beijing you chubanshe 北京 有 出版 社” (=> “In Peking there are publishing houses”), the authors give six variations: “… you hao ji jia chubanshe 有 好 几 家 出版 社” (=> “several publishing houses”), “… you hao ji jia yiyao chubanshe 有好几家医药出版社” (=> “several medical publishing …”), “… you hao ji jia zhuamen de yiyao chubanshe 有 好 几 家 专 门 的 医 药 出版 社” (=> “several publishing houses specialized on medicine”), “dan Beijing you hao ji jia yiyao … 单 北 京” (=> “Only in Peking …”), “dan Beijing jiu you hao ji jia chubanshe 单 北 京 就 有 …” (=> “In Peking alone, there are several …”) and “ni zhidao, dan Beijing you … 你 知 道, 单 北京 …” (=> “You know, in Peking alone …”) (p. 272).

This course was clearly written with a practical and hands-on approach in mind. It puts practice before theory, and it doesn’t waste time explaining phonetics or even the pinyin system. But the authors take it one step further: what makes this book very particular is the fact that often-used words in language courses like “subject”, “object” or “clause” won’t be found here. It is a language course almost entirely without linguistic jargon or even grammatical explanations. All the basics are left out, so the characters are merely given with the words of the vocabulary, though there is no explanation as to how to write them. Chinese is understood as a system of unchangeable expressions that can be combined at random, when following the rules concerning the order of a sentence.

Because of the beautiful simplicity of the Chinese language, this may even work. Of course, the disadvantage of a didactic system that never deduces a rule from examples is that students don’t develop a sense of language method. If, for instance, they have a sentence like “ni xue de hao 你 学 得 好” (=> “You study well”) and “wo jue de bu shufu 我 觉 得 不 舒服” (=> “I don’t feel well”) it is not necessarily the case that they are able to deduce the rule for the complement of grade. It is the strong impression of the reviewers that a novice of Chinese who uses this book will most certainly go awry, especially since the CD is unavailable, and for an autodidact there are absolutely no guidelines for pronunciation. However, a student who has mastered the basics of Chinese and wants to deepen his or her knowledge in Chinese medicine will most likely find this book to be very useful indeed.

The two authors, Unschuld and Zhang, are not, primarily, linguists. They are mainly concerned with Chinese medicine. Therefore, we shall now leave the linguistic arguments and turn to the question of medicine. Since this publication not only claims to be a language course, but also a course for medicine, we also need to look at the medical vocabulary and knowledge taught through the course of lessons. Generally speaking, we were not at all impressed with the results of this core element.
In this respect the reviewers were left somewhat clueless as to who would actually profit from this book. For a student of TCM it contains far too little information. Hardly any vocabulary from the fields of physiology, pathology, diagnostics or therapeutics is given. So the student doesn’t learn the names of acupuncture points or meridians, nor materia medica, save for a few random examples. Most students who attend a European institute studying TCM will make a sojourn of one to four months in China as a part of their education. For these students, the course is not focused enough to really learn the relevant vocabulary. And while for students attending a traditional medical college in Chinese it is not broad enough, neither is it specific enough for the needs of salesmen.

In addition, the vocabulary here is not strictly traditional medical jargon, since many modern Western terms are introduced, as well. For a Western reader looking to start his or her studies in the People’s Republic, the authors have assembled a very general—and also very basic—choice of vocabulary, which in our opinion satisfies nobody. It appears to the reviewers that the book is a general language course centered around medical situations. It is much more concerned with everyday life in Mainland China than it is with introducing the student of medicine to the arcane world of TCM-terminology. It is a compromise between too many influences, and, as is often the case with compromises, will leave most readers a bit frustrated and desiring more about whatever their interest in medicine is.

To sum up our findings, we consider this book to be a hybrid between a language course and an introduction to only a limited amount of medical terminology. But on both aspects, the book falls short. Those expecting a language course will find the sentences helpful, but will not get a solid foundation in Chinese language, because no help on grammar or even pronunciation is offered, let alone on writing. Those who look for an introduction to medical terminology will wind up needing a separate list of medical terms for their sojourn because the course introduces too little of relevant medical vocabulary. The ideal reader will be someone who has already finished a course of Chinese language and now wants to study some of the words related to TCM and enlarge his or her repertoire of sentences and constructions, because he or she is about to go to China to study Chinese medicine for some years. And this person will most likely not pack this language course either, but be better of with a decent dictionary.