Professional Interactive Chinese, Level I. Venture Tech, Inc.,

Reviewed by Steven A. Leibo

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From my perspective, my qualifications for reviewing <cite>Professional Interactive Chinese</cite> are especially good. I spent only a very limited amount of time studying Chinese in college--my primary language efforts in that period were on French and Japanese. Since then though, I have spent more than a decade in intense but usually private study of Chinese. Who better to discuss a learning program for Chinese self-study? <p> My commitment to improving my Chinese has been a very determined one. Over the years I have audited classes, hired tutors, studied with a wide variety of records, cassettes, flash cards, and spent hundreds of hours listening to Chinese on world band radio and wondering around China from time to time. <p> I have always known that a computer program would be the best way for me continue my studies at home. In fact, I have spent years looking for such a program. More than ten years ago, when I got my first PC--a Radio Shack color computer--I even wrote a note in <cite>Rainbow Magazine</cite> looking for such a program for the "coco." That, not surprisingly, was not very effective. Why the concern with a computer program? Well, basically because it is embarrassing to keep asking a tutor/teacher to keep repeating a tone so this poor tone deaf student can finally get it right. And of course cassettes are a pain to keep rewinding because one always spends more time trying to find the desired phrase than studying and hearing! <p> More recently though things have begun to look up. The

Chinese Character Tutor, came out a few years ago and has proven invaluable in helping me develop my reading skills. But I wanted more practice in the very areas I am weakest in ... oral comprehension and production. Thus I read the original announcement for <cite>Professional Interactive Chinese</cite> with considerable interest. The ads promised sophisticated work in character reading, oral comprehension, voice recognition and practice in writing skills. For the most part, the package, of which I have had part one to review, delivers. <p> The program really is quite remarkable. Written Chinese can be studied both in its traditional and modern forms, as well as using both Taiwan phonetic symbols and <cite>hanyu pinyin</cite>. A whole host of activities from serious grammatical and hearing comprehension efforts to games are available to practice without having to engage in repetitious behaviors which bring on boredom so quickly. With the possible exception of the rather awkward writing practice section, it really delivers on all the skill areas promised. <p> Obviously the program does have its drawbacks. Unlike my long term favorite, The Chinese Character Tutor, which remains less sophisticated, Professional Interactive Chinese is very limited in its record keeping abilities. In many sections, the only records kept are on seat time (keyboard time) rather than whether a particular student has actually improved. The voice recognition sections show how well one does in a particular activity but not overall. Personally, the

ability to note one's progress is terribly important.
<p> There were some technical problems as well. I had major problems trying to get the voice recognition sections to work. Although the first two machines I tried at my college supposedly had appropriate sounds cards, I and a few others with greater skills simply could not get the program to recognize sound input. On the other hand, my own new COMPAQ 7240 multi-media machine handled the software with no problems at all. Thus I still have no idea how to resolve problems with sound recognition when they come up. I should add that the products developers did try to offer suggestions though they did not work.
<p> When compared to other language programs, such as the Triple Play series (I have looked at the Japanese Program), <cite>Professional Interactive Chinese for Windows</cite> seems considerably more sophisticated and usable for serious students. In short I would very highly recommend this program. I might add that I am planning to get some of my language teaching colleagues to go over the program to get their insights from the perspective of a in class language instructor. I personally look forward to seeing the later volumes and upcoming refinements. <p>

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