

MANDARIN CHINESE SHORT COURSE

Paper 1341/01
Speaking

Key messages

- There are two parts to this examination – Section 1 is a Prepared Topic and Topic Conversation and Section 2 is a General Conversation. Candidates are reminded that their Prepared Topic must relate to the Chinese-speaking world
- The Speaking test should last 12–15 minutes. The prepared Topic Conversation should last 5–7 minutes and the general conversation should last 6–8 minutes.

General comments

It was pleasing to see that all candidates had chosen topics which were relevant to the Chinese-speaking world. Most candidates had prepared well for the examination, revealing the excellent effort put in by both the Centres and the candidates themselves.

Most candidates were able to hold a good conversation in Mandarin Chinese. Some tried to use a variety of Chinese idioms to express their thoughts and opinions and many Examiners asked suitably open questions to encourage candidates to produce their best. At the same time, there is room for improvement in the conduct of the examinations, specifically in the areas of helping and encouraging candidates to speak more fluently and in getting candidates to use longer sentences with a view to creating more depth.

The quality of the recordings was of a high standard, with background noise reduced to a minimum, and all Centres involved in this year's examination are commended for creating a good environment for the candidates to perform in.

Most Centres kept well to the prescribed timings, which allowed candidates to show the full range of their linguistic skills. A small number of conversations were shorter than the prescribed 12 minutes (excluding the presentation) which often deprived the candidates affected of the opportunity to show more complex language and achieve higher marks.

Comments on specific sections

Section 1 – Prepared Topic Conversation

Many Centres had made every effort to ensure their candidates could deliver a well-prepared Presentation on his/her chosen topic. Most Presentations lasted no longer than the prescribed two minutes.

Centres will need to remind their Examiners that they should avoid holding 'warm up' conversations with their candidates. As soon as the recording starts, the candidate should be prompted to proceed with their Prepared Topic Presentation. It is suggested that examiners use the following first sentence to get the test going: 你今天讲什么题目?

Topics should be carefully chosen; the topic should interest the candidate but also be well within their linguistic reach.

Candidates have the opportunity to work on their Prepared Topic throughout the school year and should therefore be able to present it fairly fluently in the examination itself. Whilst it is not expected that tones and pronunciation are perfect, candidates should aim at ensuring their presentation can be easily understood by a sympathetic native speaker with no knowledge of other languages. It will count in candidates' favour if they can display a good feel for the rhythms of the language within their sentences.

After the candidate finishes his/her presentation, the Examiner may say 好, 现在我来问你一些问题 before beginning to ask questions.

If, for any reason – e.g. a major bout of nerves/hesitancy – the Presentation lasts longer than two minutes, the Examiners should not shorten the Topic Conversation to compensate as this will deprive candidates of the precious time needed to demonstrate what they know.

It may also be tempting for an Examiner who knows the candidate well to say too much him/herself during the examination, by way of response; again this should be avoided. All candidates should have the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to answer more stretching questions; even though he/she knows the candidates well and may feel that certain candidates may struggle with stretching questions. The Examiner should make sure to extend this opportunity to all.

Candidates will score highly on the Prepared Topic when they demonstrate they have prepared well both in the content of what they say and the vocabulary and the structures they use – e.g. good use of conjunctions, correct word order and timeframes etc. The best conversations ensue when the Examiner asks the candidates good, open-ended questions to which the candidate can respond on a variety of levels, depending on their ability. The Examiner should play the part of the intelligent layperson in the Topic Conversation and should be genuinely interested to talk with the candidate about the Prepared Topic.

Candidates, in turn, need to prepare for the Topic Conversation by anticipating and preparing for the general kinds of questions which could be asked by an interested layperson. Pre-learned Topic Conversations are not allowed.

Section 2 – General Conversation

It is helpful for the Moderator if the Examiner makes it clear when s/he is moving from the Topic Conversation to the General Conversation and when moving between Topic Areas within the General Conversation, e.g. 现在我们讲一讲其它的题目. This will help avoid any confusion on the part of the candidate. Candidates should of course also practise holding general conversations with teachers before the examination. Once the test has started, the Examiner should not speak any English.

Many Examiners began with straightforward questions about the candidate's background and interests and then moved on to a more mature conversation covering two or three of the following Topic Areas: Family, Young People and Education. Examiners are encouraged to ask various questions on these topics, rather than using the sample questions from the syllabus only.

Concluding remarks

Examiners may well get used to understanding their own candidates and making allowances for their errors. However, the candidate needs to be understood by the Cambridge Moderator as well. It is very natural for the Examiner to want to correct or help the candidate, but this must be avoided.

Many Examiners kept the flow of conversation going in a relaxed and friendly manner, which is highly commendable. Teachers are encouraged to converse with their students freely in Mandarin throughout the learning process to help ensure they are able to respond to unexpected and more complex questions well. The candidate should be doing most of the talking and the Examiner will need to be flexible enough to adapt questioning to a candidate's line of thought, so that a proper conversation ensues. If a candidate feels particularly confident in certain areas of their topic, it is also up to the candidate to take the initiative and to try to steer the conversation in the direction of those areas.

Candidates should not worry that their answer to a question is factually untrue or does not really reflect what they think; the Examiner is only interested in the level of their Chinese and will not judge them on what they think.

MANDARIN CHINESE SHORT COURSE

Paper 1341/02
Chinese Culture

General comments

Overall the standard of essays was higher this year, with few entries from very weak candidates. It was pleasing to see many candidates with a firm grasp of the historical and geographical topics and literature they had studied and also the ability to write a cogent essay in response to their studies. However, some candidates were let down by their poor standard of English, which made it hard at times to understand what they were trying to say.

The term 'communist' was used quite loosely, sometimes seeming to mean little more than 'anti-Western'; a common fallacy seems to be that the Chinese Communists were fighting for a more 'equal' society. It was rare to find any awareness that the Cultural Revolution situation with respect to Western culture was not typical of China prior to 1956.

Candidates are required to answer one question for this paper, either from the Topics in Chinese Culture section or one from Chinese Literature and Film. Their essay is marked out of 30 with a mark out of 25 for content and a mark out of 5 for structure. In all cases, questions are open to interpretation; it is up to the candidates to develop an analytical response to the question with clear, specific examples/evidence (not generalized statements) to back up his/her argument. The mark scheme gives some indicative content for each question on the paper. However, there is often no right or wrong way to answer a question; it is up to the candidate to develop an argument and find evidence to support it. There were some very successful essays which demonstrated in-depth analysis backed up by specific reference. In general, candidates seemed to find Section One – Topics in Chinese Culture – slightly more challenging.

Candidates should make sure they read the question very carefully before they start, making a careful assessment of what is asked for; it is strongly recommended that they draft a plan before beginning to write.

Their essay should start with an introduction which should outline how the question is going to be tackled; giving away all the concluding points in the introduction to the essay should be avoided. Subsequent paragraphs should develop a clear argument/line of thinking with specific, relevant examples/evidence to illustrate the argument, which should always link to the question and essays should finish with a strong conclusion. The introduction and conclusion of the essay both need to be relevant and convincing; some good essays were let down by weak introductions or conclusions.

There should not be a descriptive list of facts or the story of what happened in a period of history, a novel or a film. Candidates obviously need to have a lot of facts at their fingertips, but then need to be in a position to manipulate those facts to demonstrate their deeper understanding and analytical capability in response to the question. Evaluation is the key. Organisation of material is vital and an appropriate style should be used. In the case of both novels and the film, candidates needed to have a good grasp of the Chinese history of the period in which they are set.

In order to be able to respond to these essay questions appropriately, candidates need to be exposed during their studies to a range of commentaries/viewpoints about a particular topic and to have had the opportunity to discuss ideas with their teachers and other students to inform their interpretation of events or their interpretation of a book or film. It is only this exposure to a variety of views that will give candidates the ability to handle these essay questions with sufficient analysis.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1(a)

There were many good answers. The chronology was accurate in most cases, but sometimes candidates strayed outside the period required by the question (1937–49). The successes of the CCP were well balanced with the many failings of the GMD during the Anti-Japanese War and the Civil War. Sometimes the balance between discussions of the various aspects of the period was not good, for example Yan'an and Land Reform were not always given enough attention. There were also some sweeping statements not always backed up by evidence. Weaker candidates seemed to conflate this period with the Korean War, the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine which followed it, or even the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

Question 1(b)

This question also attracted many good answers, with detailed analysis of the issues such as the role of propaganda, the 3 and 5 Anti campaigns, Land Reform and the role of the Korean War, improvements in education, health and the impact of reforms on women. The extent to which the entire population supported the CCP was asserted but sometimes with little evidence. The best essays were well-informed about the CCP's organisation of Chinese society into *danwei*, the use of *dang'an* to make a 'highly compliant' 'society of informers', the rapid industrialisation via Five-Year Plans and reforms of agriculture. The immense successes were contrasted with the large-scale killing of the regime's opponents. Some candidates seemed to have a low opinion of the peasants' ability as farmers.

Some candidates discussed policies which were implemented outside the period required by the question, such as the People's Communes and the Cultural Revolution. It is important to pay close attention to all parts of the question, and one or two candidates failed to respond to the second part about how effective the transformation was, choosing instead just to describe events. When preparing for the examination, candidates should have practice in analysing or evaluating historical events rather than merely describing them. Other candidates did not understand the meaning of 'purposeful' which sometimes affected the direction of their argument.

Question 2(a)

In general, candidates balanced an account of the last 30 years with an assessment of future sustainability. In some cases, marks were lost due to a general lack of knowledge which meant that arguments were not illustrated as thoroughly as they could have been, or that there was not a wide enough range of relevant points to push candidates into higher mark bands. A number of candidates successfully developed arguments around e.g. the urban-rural divide, falls in exports, resource scarcity and an ageing workforce.

Question 2(b)

Some candidates developed a sophisticated and interesting argument in which they pointed out that although poverty has been vastly reduced, there is still an extremely unequal distribution of wealth and clear urban-rural, East-West divides.

Question 3(a)

In general, candidates successfully included discussion of a number of different types of renewable energy, with some also referring to nuclear energy.

Candidates should be advised to be careful about contradicting themselves in the course of their argument. Some candidates, while discussing a particular form of renewable energy, did not attempt to give examples to illustrate developments in the use of that energy in China, for example stating merely that China is now a major producer of solar panels.

Many candidates spent a long time discussing the Dongtan Eco-City project and how it could solve many environmental problems, only to have to end their argument by admitting that it still has not been built. Whilst brief mention of the project may have helped an argument, given that not only has it not been completed but it would also only affect a small part of China (although of course it could inspire similar initiatives elsewhere in China), giving up too much space to this in the essay did not always serve some candidates' argument effectively.

Many candidates made good reference to dam projects, but in some cases they became overly fixated on one detail which only seemed partially relevant, for example how rotting fish were polluting the water from the dam or how noise pollution from dam building is a major issue requiring attention. While these could be valid points, candidates should always be careful to select the most relevant details and facts that will make their arguments as convincing as possible.

Some candidates chose to argue that renewables could do virtually nothing to solve China's environmental problems because so many of the problems – such as desertification and various water problems – have developed too far for renewables to offer any effective remedy. While there may be some validity to such arguments, if the entire essay only argues that nothing can be done because things have gone too far, it can come across as one-sided and too simplistic to warrant a high mark.

Question 3(b)

There were some very good essays on this important topic, with detailed discussion and a balanced approach to the complex issues. Sometimes the chronology was faulty.

Question 4(a)

Candidates needed to make reference to 'Jasmine Tea' and one other story. One candidate failed to say anything about 'Jasmine Tea'. The best candidates covered all aspects of the quotation in their answers, but others found this challenging.

Question 4(b)

The essays were often rather brief without much depth. In one case the candidate confused 'he' and 'she', which made it hard to follow. In general, candidates had read the question accurately and written about two male characters from two different stories. Candidates should be advised to think carefully before choosing which stories to use for a particular essay question, otherwise they can find themselves trying to force a difficult argument that does not read naturally and convincingly. Candidates are also advised to read the stories carefully and thoroughly when preparing for examinations as there were a number of errors regarding Zhenbao's attitude and behaviour that contradicted the text.

Question 5(a)

There were some good answers but also some that were mainly narrative.

Question 5(b)

Most responses to this question were thoughtful and well-argued. Huixian's battle with being Li Tiemei was well described, as was the contrast between the boat people and the land people. Many candidates struggled to relate the novel to its Cultural Revolution context in a meaningful way. In addition to describing Huixian's character, candidates variously illustrated how she serves to educate the reader about Dongliang (for example, his sexual maturation, lack of a mother figure), drew comparisons between Huixian and Dongliang and examined her connection with the theme of fate in the novel.

Question 6(a)

The best essays were able to encompass the story in its historical context, but some struggled to show to show the power of literature. Some exaggerated the extent to which the books themselves allowed Ma, Luo and the Little Seamstress to 'escape the countryside and be freed for a better life'. Some assertions were overstated and not justified by reference to the film, for instance 'literature sparked China's transition from tradition to modernity'.

However, in general, candidates successfully analysed the role of literature and argued that the film does testify to its liberating power, frequently referring to the examples of Ma's reading experiences and of the Little Seamstress's decision to leave for the city. In some cases, the word 'liberating' was interpreted literally to mean 'physically free'; this can bolster an argument if handled well, but candidates should be advised to practise thinking about the full extent of an essay question, in this case considering how literature might be mentally, emotionally, even 'spiritually' liberating.

Candidates should also check they understand the meaning of all the words in an essay question before choosing to answer it. One or two candidates did not grasp the meaning of 'testifies', which had a slight impact on the direction of their arguments, though this did not, in general, significantly affect the marks awarded.

Candidates are advised to watch the film carefully and more than once, as often small inaccuracies were evident. It makes a better impression on the reader if details cited are true to what actually happens in the film and if characters are not muddled up or lumped together (for example, saying that 'Ma stays up all night reading Ursule Mirouet' shows greater attention has been paid to the film than saying, 'both the boys regularly stay up all night reading the French novels').

Some candidates successfully provided counter arguments, for example questioning whether the Little Seamstress is 'liberated' for the better or whether her transformation leaves destruction behind with no guarantee of happiness ahead. A few candidates discussed various other themes in the film at length in a way that did not contribute to their response to the specific question, which affected their overall mark for the essay.

Question 6(b)

Some essays were very good in dealing with the film as a love story but the discussion of cinematographic techniques was sometimes superficial. The treatment of the love story clearly touched many candidates. Some responded well to the lighting effects used and commented perceptively on the relative positions of the characters at key points in the film.

Many candidates highlighted well the differences between each of the boy's relationship with the seamstress, and some touched on non-romantic love as playing a role in the film as well, for example, the love between the boys or the love of literature.

Given that part of the question refers to cinematographic techniques, in order for a candidate to access the higher marks, it was essential to refer to such aspects as lighting, individual shots or music. Candidates are advised to select the most relevant examples of cinematographic techniques, and avoid getting too caught up in analysing one seemingly irrelevant shot that may not serve the purpose of their argument as well as another one might. Watching the film carefully and repeatedly will help a candidate to perform substantially better than watching it once will.