Getting Kids Reading in Mandarin: The Comic Book Connection
by Elizabeth Weise

We know two things about reading in all languages: the more you do, the easier it gets, and the more you read, the better your vocabulary, grammar, writing, and understanding become.

Dr. Stephen Krashen has done years of research on this topic, which has been backed up by multiple other researchers. Krashen is professor emeritus at the University of Southern California who studies literacy, second language acquisition, and linguistics. Krashen is highly regarded for his work on reading and bilingualism. If you want to do some of your own reading on this topic, try The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research and Summer Reading: Program and Evidence, both of which are by Krashen.

The research clearly shows that reading for fun—academics call this free voluntary reading—really ramps up language development and literacy. But it’s got to be compelling and comprehensible, i.e., fun and at the right level.

Krashen’s research has shown that one way to get nonreaders interested in reading is to have them read comic books, which have great story lines as well as pictures that help draw kids in.

Dr. Christy Lao, a professor of education at San Francisco State University, put those two pieces of information together and created a phenomenal summer program to get kids reading in Chinese. The students she worked with were either in Chinese immersion programs or from Chinese heritage language schools. Lao had a STARTALK grant from the federal government that allowed her to work with a group of kids in San Francisco for several years. These students spent much of their summers at San Francisco State in a big, friendly room lined with bookcases filled with Chinese language comics, which also go by the name graphic novels or manga.

They loved them.

“Some of these students were reading ten books a week,” Lao said. “We had one boy who read 644 books over the summer and wanted to take more home in his suitcase.”

The group of students who took the month-long summer workshop read Chinese graphic novels—and lots of them. The numbers of books each student read ranged from 96 to the boy above, at 644—in one month.

Kids who had never before read a full book in Chinese were devouring the graphic novels. One mother actually called Lao to complain: “You said this was just a
summer program, but you’re making my child read five hours a night!” Lao had to explain to the mom that there was no homework. Her daughter just wanted to read that much.

“What is more encouraging is that when the students finished the summer program, they continued reading Chinese for pleasure,” said Lao. In the months after the program ended, kids read between nineteen and 272 books, in Mandarin, just because they wanted to. While the program had a whole shelf of picture books, the kids ignored those. The comic books, on the other hand, they couldn’t keep away from.

Sadly, Lao has moved on to other projects and isn’t running the STARTALK reading program anymore. But after interviewing her for my Mandarin Immersion: A Parent’s Guide I started thinking about how parents could replicate her program for themselves.

A call for assistance on the various Mandarin lists resulted in amazingly helpful suggestions. What a great group of parents we have engaged in Mandarin around the country!

So here are some suggestions:

- We’re talking fun here, not work. Don’t push science or math or history comics unless your kids like them. What you want are comics that they’ll turn the pages of because they want to know what happens next. Think reading Superman or Archie when you were a kid under the covers.

- There is no homework involved. The books need to be just at or just below your child’s reading level. Kids shouldn’t have to look up words, said Lao. “I discourage consulting a dictionary for new/unknown words. It stops the reading flow and is tedious to do so. Children will be able to figure out the meaning of the words in the story context. If there are too many unknown words, the book is not right for him/her. They should pick another one.”

- Make sure you find materials that use the type of characters your child is learning. Some programs use traditional, some simplified. There are many more comics available in traditional out of Taiwan, but you can also find comics in simplified if you look.
• Your child won’t know how to pronounce all the characters, even if he or she would know the words when spoken aloud. That’s okay. Lao said that by third or fourth grade, most students should be able to make educated guesses about how characters are pronounced from the “phonetic radical” that’s a part of more than half of Chinese characters. That gives kids a good chance of figuring out what the word is because they probably already have heard it used at school.

• Let your child find books that he or she likes. There are many genres of comic books and graphic novels: kung fu, little kids, romance, adventure. Let your kid explore. Children only read if it’s a story that pulls them in.

• Some of the most popular graphic novels according to Lao’s staff are translations from Japanese manga. Don’t feel you have to buy something that was originally written in Chinese. Translations are fine.

• Many comic series have cartoon series as well. You can also buy DVDs or watch the cartoons online to further interest your kids. After watching an afternoon of cartoons children know the characters and the kind of story and will have an easier time reading.

• Most of these won’t look like the comic books we grew up with. They’re thick graphic novels. Both kinds are fine, as long as your kid wants to read them.

So how do you find graphic novels and comic books in Chinese? Here are some suggestions from parents across the United States. Some of these sites are only in Chinese, but ask your child to help you. It will give them a chance to show off their knowledge.

**Parent suggestions about what’s available and where:**

丁丁
Tintin
The Tintin books have been translated into both simplified and traditional. If your kid got hooked on Tintin from the movie, this is a great place to start. You could even have your child start by reading a book in English and then, once the child wants to read more, give him or her the Chinese version.
羊羊与灰太狼 Xi Yang Yang
Pleasant Goat & Big Bad Wolf
This is popular with younger kids and is available in simplified characters.

闹FUN天闹图漫画系列1
Nao Nao series
These books won awards from the Singapore Department of Education. They are available at http://chinasprout.com/shop/BSY061h.

Chinese Books for Children carries a fair number of graphic novels, including the Smurf comics. They’re located in the San Francisco Bay Area and online at http://chinesebooksforchildren.com/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=2_3_9.

Nan Hai Books in Santa Clara, California, has My First Scientific Comic Book, which is good for a fourth-grade level. Nan Hai Books can be found online at http://www.nanhaibooks.com/.

Little Monkey and Mouse is a bookstore in Bay Area that carries many popular comic books in simplified Chinese such as Smurf, Gadget Cat, Pleasant Goat & Big Big Wolf, and more.

Books and Me is based in Los Altos, California. This bookstore has comics, many of which are from Taiwan. The store’s website is http://www.booksandme.org/.

iPad
There are hundreds of comics you can get on an iPad. I just did a search using the Chinese characters for comic strip (漫画 man hua) and got lots of hits.

Someone scanned the entire series of 小叮当 Xiao Ding Dang (or Doraemon, the blue robotic cat from the future) and made the series available on the iPad. Do a search for robotic cat using 机器猫 (ji qi mao) and you should see it. This has been my favorite since I was a kid, and it remains one of the most popular comic strips in Asia.

I had also gotten some 羊羊与灰太狼 Xi Yang Yang comic strips with high-quality graphics for the iPad. My kids really enjoyed reading them. (I mean, having me read to them). The benefit of Xi Yang Yang is that the comics are more likely to be in simplified characters, since this started from mainland China.
I also have some comic strips of 西游记 Xi You Ji (Journey to the West, about the Monkey King) downloaded to the iPad.

dangdang.com
This site requires registration. The hardest part is getting the first purchase done. There’s a credit card verification process that involves an error message that shows up despite a successful transaction, and the company will also do another verification through e-mail. Also, shipping takes about a month. It sounds daunting, but it’s all worth it because it’s the most affordable option I’ve found so far. Here’s the link: http://category.dangdang.com/all/?category_path=01.41.50.05.00.00.

Yes Asia

Elizabeth Weise is a mom with two children in Mandarin immersion programs in San Francisco. She writes the Mandarin Immersion Parents Council blog and has an e-book for parents coming out in September: A Parent’s Guide to Mandarin Immersion.