

THE VALUE OF LEARNING CHINESE

*An Address to the National Conference of the Chinese Language Teachers Federation of Australia
held at Prince Alfred College, Adelaide, 5th July 2003*

STEPHEN CODRINGTON

Headmaster

Prince Alfred College

Adelaide, Australia

E-mail: scodrington@pac.edu.au

May I begin by welcoming you here to Prince Alfred College for what I hope will be a wonderfully stimulating conference. You have honoured Prince Alfred College with your presence, and on behalf of the entire school community, I wish to thank you for that. If there is anything we can do to make you feel at home, please do not hesitate to ask us.

You have gathered from my introduction that I speak very little Chinese language myself. I just have a few phrases that help me to be polite, and as I found during my early trips to China in the early 1980s, just enough to avoid being tortured for taking photographs of bridges and at airports. And yet I AM a great advocate of teaching Chinese language to young people, and I would like to share briefly with you my reasons why this is so.

For many of our parents, the value of learning a language is seen in very pragmatic terms – the value is the business connections or trading advantages it can provide. As an educator, I believe that this instrumentalist view of learning a language misses the real point.

Nonetheless, for many parents, the reality of 22% of the world's population living in China, plus the trading contact with places such as Singapore and Taiwan, are powerful reasons to encourage their children to study Chinese. After all, if 97% of the interpreters who work in trading negotiations between Australia and China are Chinese-born, does that not place Australia at a competitive disadvantage? When I introduced Chinese language teaching at the school in Sydney where I was Principal 14 years ago in 1990, I was challenged as to why I wanted to introduce Chinese rather than Japanese which, it was argued, was far more use in business. My reply was that in terms of trading significance for Australia, Japanese may have been the dominant language for the past 30 years, but that Chinese was bound to

replace it in the next 30 years. I no longer have to make that kind of defence or convince parents of this reality in 2003!

As I said, I believe that the value of learning Chinese extends well beyond any financial benefits that might accrue. It would be hard to think of a culture with a longer history or a greater depth of philosophical thought and literature than China. And language is the key to unlock that cultural tradition, because language is the code, or the filter, through which our thinking occurs. So to learn a language like Chinese that follows a different logic structure to our own actually creates new ways of thinking for the Western mind that leads to new ways of viewing the world. To understand that the Chinese character for peace is represented by a woman under a roof, because during times of war the women had to till the fields while the men were away fighting, gives us a very worthwhile historical insight. And to appreciate that the Chinese character for 'good' is represented by a woman with a child is to understand the strong bonds of family and love that will certainly outlive any One Child Policy to control population growth. Language is a window into the mind, and so mastering Chinese language is a powerful tool to overcome ethnic and cultural stereotypes.

I have heard it said that learning Chinese is very difficult compared with learning a European language. It has been claimed that reaching a given level of proficiency in Chinese requires perhaps four times the time and effort of achieving the same level of fluency with a European language that is related to English such as French, German or Spanish. That may be true, but we get out of anything what we put into it – if we put in more effort, then greater rewards will flow. Learning Chinese is challenging, but *that* is its value – it is one of its great benefits!

And yet I would ask whether learning Chinese is as difficult as some people say. Certainly the grammar is very simple compared with English. Once a student has learned the word “go”, he or she can already then say ‘goes’, ‘went’, ‘will go’, ‘will have gone’, ‘has gone’, and every other variant of the verb, because Chinese grammar implies tense rather than states it. In the same way, Chinese speakers do not have to worry about singular or plural (although there are lots of measure words to balance this), and masculine and feminine apply only to people, not to objects as is the case with languages such as French.

I think the two biggest barriers to learning Chinese for Australian students are the tones, and the characters. Let us look at each of these, because I think that each of these so-called barriers should really be seen as benefits.

It is true that most Westerners do not handle tones very well unless they have started learning Chinese at a very young age. And yet for Australian children, learning a language with tones actually develops listening skills and develops an auditory sensitivity to tone before it is lost. This develops skills that are certainly transferable to other areas, especially music.

And now to the characters. Because Chinese characters bear no resemblance to the sounds of words, but relate to their appearance, learning Chinese is really like learning two languages, one for speaking and one for writing. And for me, this is the single biggest benefit of learning Chinese. Because the spoken language is sequential, but the written language is spatial, learning Chinese links both hemispheres of the brain in a way that very few subjects can do. Contemporary brain research shows very clearly that the left side of our brains controls logical, sequential, rational and analytical thinking, while the right side of our brains controls spatial, random, holistic and synthesising thinking. Most school subjects favour left brain thinking, and a few such as Art favour right brain thinking. A select few, such as my own teaching area of Geography, link the two hemispheres, and Chinese also does this, creating cross-hemisphere cerebral links that develop intelligence in ways that enhance overall intelligence in a measurable way. I was reading a recently about research which shows that irrespective of cultural background, speakers of Chinese language have IQ scores that are 15 to 20 points higher on average than non speakers of Chinese. This difference is believed to arise because of the links that are forged between the hemispheres of the brain by learning Chinese language. And if one thing IS transferable to almost all other curriculum areas, it is an increase in intelligence.

Having said all this about the benefits of learning Chinese language, in my mind the benefits extend still further. When we teach a language in Australia, we do not do so in isolation, but we teach the culture, the history, the art, the music, the literature of the people who speak that language. For me personally, and also professionally as geographer, it was China's

history and culture that first attracted me to the country that I have come to love very deeply.

And I would like to conclude with one of my favourite Chinese folk tales, both to make this point, and also to leave you with a challenge. Many of you will know this 2000 year old Chinese fable, because almost every child in China can recite it, and it was even used for political purposes by Chairman Mao. The name of the story is "The Foolish Old Man who Removed the Mountains". Let me share that story with you.

Once upon a time, long ago in northern China, lived an old man who was known by everyone as the Foolish Old man of the North Mountain. His house faced south, and in front of his house there were two big mountains blocking his view. So one day, the Foolish Old man called his two family together and said, "These two huge mountains are in the way. Let's all pitch in and move them away!". His sons and his grandsons all agreed that this was a good idea.

So the next day, the Foolish Old man took his whole family to move away the mountains and with the hoes they began to dig away at the first mountain. They went out early with their wheelbarrows and they came home each night after dark. Ignoring any difficulty, they dug away at the mountains, day after day, week after week.

Another old man, known by the locals as the Wise Old Man, saw them trying to move away the mountains and thought it was ridiculous. So he went up to the Foolish Old Man and said "You are so silly! It is quite impossible for you to dig up these two huge mountains. How can you get rid of the mountains at your age?" And the Foolish Old Man replied "Although I will die, there will still be my sons. After they die, there will be my grandsons, and then their sons and grandsons, and so on. We will have more and more people, while the mountains will have fewer and fewer stones. The mountains will not grow any higher, and with every bit that we dig, they will be that much lower. As long as we have the determination, we can surely remove the mountains".

When the Wise Old Man heard that, he had nothing so say, so he walked away while the Foolish Old Man and his sons went on digging every day. And the story finishes when the

Foolish Old Man's determination moved God, who sent down two angels to carry away the mountains on their backs.

Although this is an ancient Chinese fable, Chairman Mao told that story to inspire and encourage the masses during the Chinese civil war that brought him and the Communist party to power in 1949. When he told that story, Chairman Mao said that at that time, two big mountains lay like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One was imperialism, and the other was feudalism. He said that the Chinese Communist Party had made up its mind to dig up those two mountains, and he said "We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we too will touch God's heart". He said that if the Chinese people stand up and dig together with the party, then those two big mountains will surely be cleared away.

Regardless of how we see Mao Zedong's politics, we know that this story challenged the Chinese people, and I hope it can still challenge you at this conference. I want to ask you this: as teachers of Chinese language, what do you think are the two mountains that you need to start chipping away at? Is it negative attitudes of your school administrators towards learning Asian languages? Is it the hesitation of students to take up the challenge of learning a language with tones and characters? Is it the view of parents that learning languages is only worthwhile if it promotes trade and raises incomes? Is it the shortage of child-friendly resources?

At the Eleventh National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing in August 1977, just one year after Chairman Mao died, his replacement Hua Guofeng announced the somewhat trite principle of the 'two whatevers'. He stated 'we will resolutely defend whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave'. I would like to challenge you this morning instead with the 'one whatever and two mountains'. My challenge is this: Work together and start chipping away whatever two mountains are standing in the way of your Chinese language teaching. Identify those mountains, and chip away at them in the spirit of the Foolish Old Man who Removed the Mountains.

May I wish you a very successful conference, and congratulate the organisers who have put together a creative, challenging and I hope enjoyable and stimulating program for you.