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Methods for the Promotion of Second Language Education

Speech by Maylene Lai, CLF Founding Trustee & Vice Chair

Mr/Mdm Chairman, distinguished guests, fellow speakers and conference delegates

Two weeks ago in New Zealand, I was welcomed into an elementary school in South Auckland, to celebrate the extension of its Chinese language teaching programme to its 10 year old students. What is unique is not that this is a school in a lower socio-economic area made up of Polynesian children mainly of Tongan and Samoan descent but the fact that this school has been teaching Chinese since the early 1990's. The enthusiasm and energy shown by the children playing the Chinese drum and cymbal, performing the colourful fan dance and two students having a conversation in *putonghua* was inspiring. These students are being equipped with language tools that will give them far greater options for their futures.

This is the vision I had when we began the Chinese Language Foundation more than 12 months ago to encourage and enable non-Chinese New Zealanders to learn Chinese. We want to see every school in New Zealand offer Chinese as the second international language of choice and for businesses to see Chinese language as advantageous to their strategic goals. We wish to connect New Zealand more strongly to the Chinese-speaking world, to build critical mass within the nation and involve all sectors of community, business, schools, universities and government in this process.

We are most indebted to Ambassador Chen Mingming who is our founding Patron and to Minister of Education Trevor Mallard, who gave encouragement, endorsement and support to the Foundation in its early days.

I see New Zealand, a small country in the South Pacific with a strong educational system connected to its British heritage, as well placed to build on its deep historical links with China. Our long history of people-to-people contact herald from the 19th century, with migrants from China to our goldfields. We all know about Rewi Alley, a New Zealander who lived and worked in China for 60 years until his death in 1987. New Zealand was also one of the first countries in 1972 to recognise the People's Republic of China. It was the first developed economy to recognise China as a market economy and is currently in negotiations to be the first developed nation to sign a Free Trade Agreement.

We have also been very privileged to have had high level visits from President Jiang Zemin in 1999, President Hu Jintao in 2003 and senior members of the Chinese Government in the past three years. There have been close relationships with Peking and Fudan Universities through the University of Auckland. In fact my first visit to Shanghai was to accompany Auckland's then Vice-Chancellor (President), John Hood, now Vice Chancellor of Oxford University.

All these relationships and developments have meant that New Zealanders know that China is important to their nation's future and they have watched its economic growth impact the global economy. Young New Zealanders increasingly realise that, to be competitive in the labour market at home and abroad, they need to be China-literate. They need to understand China and to be able to access its society, culture and history through the Chinese language.

This new awareness has created the context for the Chinese Language Foundation:

- to share a vision and
- to create a constituency.

Teaching Chinese to non-Chinese involves much more than putting teachers in classrooms to teach language. We have to create the environment in which Chinese language will flourish. This is a very new task and it has to be shaped to the particular social and educational context. We all know that we cannot teach New Zealanders as if they are Chinese living in China. We have to come to the task afresh and be as creative and bold as possible.

In the 12 months of our existence as the Chinese Language Foundation, these are the critical things we have learnt. I have called them **The Four Kiwi Rules for Promoting Chinese Language Education**. I will speak to each rule briefly:

1. Build key relationships
2. Establish a broad constituency
3. Invigorate the profession
4. Set up the resource base

1. Build key relationships

- Go to the top in government to make your case. Nurture and develop these contacts.
- Seek and lobby influential friends and supporters. Work with the Chinese embassy.
- Target the reputable and recognised levers of influence and use them to spread the word.
- Cultivate contacts in the media.

2. Establish a broad constituency

- Know your community and bring them with you. Awareness raising is important to ensure that you are supported.
- Parents want their children to be successful. Students want good, satisfying jobs. These are powerful drivers for learning Chinese. Use them.
- Begin a national conversation and debate about Chinese language learning.
- As pioneer and innovator, you will find others who cannot grasp your vision. See this as a challenge worth taking on.
- Go beyond the circles of those concerned with teaching of Chinese. There is a lot of untapped support in business, government and the community at large.

3. Invigorate the profession

- Identify examples of excellence in the teaching of Chinese. Build on and support them. Showcase them at every opportunity
- Find the champions – the visionary, passionate and enthusiastic leaders of education. Make them your advocates.
- It helps to have outsiders who see beyond the strictures and confines of educational bureaucracy.
- Keep asking questions – why not and how come?
- Set goals for excellence and high standards in teaching and learning. Do not compromise these. In the pursuit of these goals, leave no stone unturned.
- Examine new technologies, forge alliances and promote exchanges. Emulate examples in the worldwide community.
- Constantly seek innovative and engaging ways of delivering the language in an evolving dynamic century.

4. Set up the resource base

- Identify your needs – human resources, intellectual capital and financial resources

- Systematically develop and build them.
- Have a clear strategy for raising money and creating a sound long term economic base for delivering Chinese language education

In taking on the mission of promoting a foreign language in New Zealand, I have discovered that you need dogged stubbornness and an unrelenting optimism. I am neither a teacher, educator nor policymaker. I am a lawyer born in Singapore and now a New Zealand citizen committed to making my adopted country globally competitive and a shining example of Chinese language education.

We are now very fortunate to have developed a strong partnership with Hanban, our host here in Beijing. We look forward to the establishment of the Confucius Institute at The University of Auckland as this will provide another strong institutional support to our programme. I would like to congratulate Madam Xu Lin for her leadership and also to thank her colleagues.

Along with my colleagues in the Chinese Language Foundation, I enjoy the privilege of changing the face of a nation, of growing a generation of fluent Chinese speakers and forging real international understanding. It has been a pleasure to address a conference of friends who have made this their common task. Thank you.

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