

Chinese Class Enrolments Are Soaring South of the Border—What Can Canadian Language Educators Do?

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The growth of Chinese language education in American schools is stunning. According to the *Christian Science Monitor* (Paulson 2005), from 1992 to 2002, the number of students learning Chinese quadrupled, from 6,000 to 24,000. In 2004, the US College Board polled American schools about offering advanced placement programs for Chinese. It expected a few hundred schools to express interest. Instead, 2,400 high schools wanted to offer the class and said they would be ready the next year. In 2007, just three years later, the American Council of the Teaching of Foreign Languages estimated that 50,000 students were learning Chinese in primary and secondary schools (Arnoldy 2007). Most recently, the US College Council estimated that 120,000 secondary school students are currently learning Chinese, comprising 4 per cent of the American secondary school student population. In addition, the Center for Applied Linguistics claimed that 3 per cent of elementary schools in the United States are offering Chinese classes (Dong 2009).

The soaring enrolments in Chinese language classes in American schools are stimulated by rising interest in China and the desire to strengthen ties with it. People also see that developing Chinese language skills among Americans is an important national strategy to serve their country's long-term interest. Scott McGinnis, an academic adviser at the office of the Defense Language Institute in Washington, DC, pointed out that "Chinese is strategic

in a way that a lot of other languages aren't, because of China's growth as an economic and military force." He continued, "Whatever tensions lie between us, there is a historical longstanding mutual fascination with each other. Planning to be ready to engage with them rather than only thinking of them in terms of a challenge or a competitor is the smart thing to do" (Reuthling 2005).

Chicago stands out in the United States for its Chinese language programs, with 43 public schools teaching Chinese to 12,000 students, from kindergarten to Grade 12, in regular school hours (Dong 2009). Most of the learners are in fact non-Chinese in origin, and range from an all-black elementary school on the West Side, to a nearly all-Hispanic elementary school on the South Side, to more diverse schools throughout the city. Mayor Richard M Daley, a vocal supporter of the program, said that proficiency in Chinese would be critical in understanding the competition, stating, "I think there will be two languages in this world. There will be Chinese and English" (Reuthling 2005).

A report in the *Christian Science Monitor* (Paulson 2005) considered knowledge of Chinese language and culture as a leg up in a global economy in which China is growing in importance. It quoted Michael Levine, director of education at the Asia Society, as saying, "This is beginning to bubble up as this is an interesting way to begin to engage with the world's next superpower. Globalization has already changed

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the arrangements in terms of how children today are going to need to think ... the question is when, not whether, the schools are going to adjust.”

Shuhan Wang, head of Chinese language initiatives at the Asia Society in New York, elaborated more succinctly on the United States’ language deficit. “In our education system, world language has always been marginalized, and Chinese is even more on the outside. That the world is speaking English is really a double-edged sword for the American people. It makes it easier for us [Americans]. ... The problem is that people understand us, but we don’t comprehend them at all” (Arnoldy 2007).

Politicians and the US military have also taken steps to get more Americans to learn Chinese. The *New York Times* reported in 2005 (Reuthling) that the Defense Department gave a \$700,000 grant to public schools in Portland, to double the number of students studying Chinese in an immersion program. In May of the same year, senators Joseph I Lieberman, the Democrat from Connecticut at the time, and Lamar Alexander, Republican from Tennessee, introduced a bill to spend \$1.3 billion over five years on Chinese language programs in schools and on cultural exchanges to improve ties between the United States and China. The bill was referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senator Alexander stated during a news conference on Capitol Hill that, “History has shown that the modest dollars we’ve spent on education programs have done far more good than hundreds of billions of dollars in foreign aid. We can argue, we can send diplomats, we can build up our defenses, we can assert our position, we can spend money on foreign aid, but we all know there’s only one thing that’s worked best and that is when we get to know each other better” (Alexander 2005).

Chinese language programs in Canada have also been developing. Edmonton, Alberta, is a national leader in nurturing a variety of second language and bilingual programs in its public school systems and has the pride of hosting the biggest Chinese bilingual program in the country. With a history of close to 30 years, the Edmonton Public School Board’s Chinese bilingual program currently enrolls more than 2,000 students from kindergarten to Grade 12. In February 2009, the Vancouver, British Columbia, school board trustees approved a motion to implement an early-start Mandarin language learning program in September 2010. Other British Columbia

lower mainland school districts also have interested parent groups starting up in Burnaby, Richmond and the Tri-Cities. Burnaby School Board approved a 30 minutes per day program starting in September 2010, and North Vancouver School approved a one hour per day program starting in September 2009, with expansion to 50 per cent of instruction time by September 2010. Other parts of Canada have been offering different types of Chinese language courses, such as the after-school program run by the Ontario public school system.

Comparing Canada and the US, it appears that Chinese language education in Canada has more potential. In Edmonton, Chinese bilingual programs are still populated mostly by students of Chinese origin. However, even among this ethnic group, the majority of newly immigrated Chinese families do not choose to send their children to learn the Chinese language in school. While trying to make their children succeed in Canada by learning English as their new language, they fail to see that maintaining and further developing their children’s home language is also an investment in their future. In fact, non-ethnic Chinese parents who send their children to the Chinese bilingual program share the vision that learning Chinese will not only help one prosper in the Far East but will also make one more marketable at home.

The delayed visit of Prime Minister Stephen Harper to China seems to have marked a changing relationship between the two countries. The expected increase in economic and diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges will be incentive for more and more people, particularly Canadian school children, to realize the importance of learning Chinese. However, when our students and their parents look for Chinese classes, they will find that our current educational systems are not ready to meet their needs. In most parts of the country, Chinese language programs in schools are scarce. There is still a lot to do for our schools to catch up with the rapidly changing world.

If it is vital for Canadians to learn Chinese for the nation’s economy, this endeavour needs a long-term strategy and lots of hard work. For speakers of English, the Chinese language is one of the most difficult foreign languages in the world to learn. To meet the challenge of mastering Chinese, young Canadians also need to cross the wide cultural gaps between the two very different traditions and civilizations.

It is a daunting job to quickly develop effective programs throughout the country with appropriate instructional models, curriculum guidance, teaching resources and assessment tools. However, the number-one obstacle will be a lack of qualified teachers. This is exactly what our American colleagues are experiencing.

The *Christian Science Monitor* noted in a 2007 report that "American students are clamoring to learn Chinese. The problem: there aren't enough teachers to meet the demand" (Arnoldy 2007). Chicago has a waiting list of schools that want to offer Chinese and the main obstacle is a lack of certified teachers. Similar demands exist all over the United States. Many school districts first looked for capable teachers inside their system. They were seldom found, because very few teachers currently working in the systems could speak Chinese well and teach it. Some schools encouraged their own staff to learn the language in order to become Chinese language teachers. Cheyenne High School, of Clark County School District, in Nevada, succeeded because one of their teachers, Denise Tatum, had the courage to take the challenge. Her path to teaching Chinese has been filled with twists and turns, including selling her home and giving away many of her possessions in order to participate in an immersion program in China (Clark County School District 2008). Very few people have such courage and can make the sacrifice. Nevertheless, the demand for teachers is immediate and huge.

It is not that difficult to find native Chinese speakers in North America, particularly in Canada. In recent years, tens of thousands of well-educated young people immigrated from China and Taiwan. A considerable number of them were trained as school teachers before immigration. Some even worked as English teachers in China, and have good English language skills and experience in second language learning and teaching. This group of people has great potential to be transformed into Chinese language teachers in Canada. However, their lack of understanding of the Canadian educational system and classroom teaching experience remains a big hurdle. There is a discrepancy between the goals and practices of the educational system here and in China. Children in Canada learn and behave very differently in classrooms. Thus, school administrators feel more comfortable hiring someone who has North American teaching

experience but poor Chinese language skills, rather than someone who knows the language well but has no local teaching experience. To become a good teacher in a North American school setting, new immigrants need to acquire new knowledge in pedagogy and practical classroom management and teaching skills.

Currently, American schools that have started Chinese language programs are using a mix of short-term solutions, like alternative certification and teacher exchanges with China, as well as long-term ones, such as developing certification programs at universities (Paulson 2005). Hanban, the Office of Chinese Language Council International, is a Chinese government organization working to support teaching the Chinese language worldwide. Between 2005 and 2008, Hanban sent 800 teachers to North America in support of Chinese language teaching (Dong 2009). These teachers usually have good Chinese language skills and experience in teaching Chinese to young children. However, they face a similar situation of getting to know the educational systems in North America and adapting their teaching to the needs of North American children. For a long-term solution, the US federal government is pouring money into programs to help Chinese speakers get certification, and many states are working to standardize their requirements.

Training more qualified Chinese language teachers is also a big challenge in Canada. In most parts of the country, second language education simply means teaching French to English-speaking children, and the second language teacher education programs cater to this audience. Canadian universities are not well structured to train teachers in a variety of international languages to meet the needs of a more diverse Canadian society in the twenty-first century. Teacher certification programs in the provinces also have difficulties identifying qualified applicants who received their teacher education in a foreign country and have a specialty in teaching an international language. The rigid requirements for English language proficiency often become an institutional discrimination to block many well-qualified second language teachers from Canadian classrooms. Can Canadian Chinese language programs seize the moment and ride the tide when waves of change, similar to what we have seen happening in the United States, come our way?

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