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Learning English, Learning Chinese
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By David Porter

“We are very proud to be Chinese!”

“We welcome everyone to come to China!”

Judging from recent interviews on Beijing streets that have been broadcast in recent days by American TV and radio journalists, these two phrases and others like them have topped the list of essential greetings in the city-wide cram courses in Olympics English that have proven so popular over the past year or so. A bit hackneyed, perhaps, but telling in the striking combination of hospitality and nationalism that has characterized Chinese self-presentation from the opening ceremonies to the China-US men’s basketball match-up.

The current craze for English in China, where seven-year olds study the language daily and charismatic English teachers, as reported in the New Yorker, achieve the status of rock stars, reflects both these impulses. To speak a foreigner’s language, even if it is only a few phrases, is to show due respect to a friend come from afar. But it’s also a sign of increasing confidence and worldliness of outlook, a reflection not so much of China’s opening to the world (speaking of hackneyed phrases) as of the world, at long last, opening to China.

A Chinese journalist covering the Summer Olympics in Atlanta in 1996 would have had a considerably harder time turning up a local resident who could offer so much as a cliche of cosmopolitan hospitality in the journalist’s native Chinese. There seems little doubt that America’s declining stature on the world stage has more than a little to do with its schools’ systematic failure to engage the language acquisition neurons of young students through sustained exposure to any non-English language, let alone Chinese.

There have, however, been some signs of change. In a country where Chinese is now the second most widely used foreign language after Spanish, 200,000 students are learning Chinese at 1000 colleges, 300 elementary and secondary schools, and 600 Chinese language schools across the United States. These numbers have been rising rapidly: from 1998 to 2002 (the most recent year for which the statistic is available), the number of college students electing Chinese as a foreign language rose by 20 percent; more recently, the number of K-12 students studying the language increased eight-fold between 2000 and 2007 to approximately 40,000.

In some regions, the rate of increase has been even more dramatic: the number of Connecticut public school students enrolled in Chinese language courses recently jumped from 300 to 3000 in three years. When the first College Board AP exam was administered in 2006, 3260 high school seniors sat for the exam nationwide. With increasing frequency, local and national papers carry stories of proud (non-Asian) parents showing off their children’s Chinese language skills, acquired courtesy of private tutors or, increasingly, enlightened public school districts.

This growth has been supported by the US federal government, which has designated Chinese as a "critical language," and has awarded 90 percent of foreign language development grants under the National Security Language Initiative to Chinese language programs. Senator Joseph Lieberman recently proposed an additional $1.3 billion allocation to improve the instruction of Chinese language and culture in American schools. States have begun to jump on the bandwagon as well: a recent law passed in Utah stipulates that all public middle schools in the state require Chinese language instruction beginning in 2007.

Current enrollment numbers, while increasing, are still miniscule compared to the numbers of Chinese learning English, or indeed to the number of people learning Chinese across the world, which China’s Ministry of Education currently places at 30 million, with a projected increase to 100 million by 2010. Since the HSK Chinese Proficiency Test began to be administered by the Chinese government in 1990,
350,000 students have taken the test, and the number of participants is growing at 30 percent per year.

These students have clearly taken to heart the kinds of greetings we’re now hearing from the streets of Beijing, and they are, much to their credit, determined to respond in kind.

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics