

Chinese 101

Jane C. M. Kuo, director of the Chinese language program at the University of California, San Diego, and Professor Emeritus of Thunderbird, the Garvin School of International Management, speaks her thoughts on learning Chinese

Now that everyone's talking about it, *Language Magazine* asked a world-renowned expert on the language, Dr. Jane Kuo, to give us the low down on learning Chinese.

Language Magazine: How do you think the current surge in interest in learning Chinese can be best capitalized upon to boost the number of learners of all age groups in the U.S.?

Dr. Jane Kuo: The numbers of those desiring to study Chinese is increasing at a rate unprecedented in history, increasing in double digit percentages in just the last few years. This trend can only increase with the advent of the international spotlight shining on China for the 2008 Olympics. Special attention should be paid to this event, with every effort made to capitalize on the attention drawn to China because of this.

LM: Beginning learners can become frustrated — do you have any suggestions to combat learner dropout/frustration?

JK: There is no magic formula, especially with younger students. However, as long as beginning learners are given informed, realistic goals, and advised to take “baby steps” coupled with positive reinforcement, they will be less frustrated and be motivated to continue on with their studies. Also, understanding the level of each the targeted student

body and providing them with suitable materials are also important.

LM: Speaking basic Chinese is the priority for many learners — what do you think about learning to speak Chinese without writing it?

JK: Speaking is, of course, the primary communicative skill. Many learners can reach fairly high level without the skills of reading and writing. It would, of course, be better for reading and writing skills to be learned in conjunction with speaking skills, but we must also consider the needs and desires of the students. Idealism must work hand in hand with practicality.

LM: After two year's of tuition, what level would you expect an average student to attain?

JK: An average student can generally reach a level of “limited proficiency.” This proficiency indicates that the student will have no problem in communicating with mundane matters such as ordering food, scheduling appointments, holding simple discussions on business matters, but is unable to negotiate significant business interests or to write contracts.

LM: Is it necessary to speak Chinese to conduct business in China?

JK: Yes and No. Most business transactions are conducted in English, and every indication seems to be that this trend will be contin-



ued for a while yet. At some point however, Chinese businessmen with realize the power that they have in the international economy, and will begin to expect, rightfully so, that business will be done in their own language. It would be similar to “buyers market.” If you would like to do business with Chinese, you will have to show a modicum of respect by being able to speak their language.

LM: For the international businessperson, would you recommend learning only Mandarin?

JK: That would be the most likely bet. Even those Chinese who speak other dialects generally communicate in Mandarin as well. Unless you have specific target market in specific area, you had better invest in learning Mandarin, this being the generalized language of business..

LM: Do you know of any examples/anecdotes of Americans who have used their knowledge of Chinese successfully in China?

JK: Many of my former students are in China right now and doing business very well using Chinese. They are absolutely sure that their success would not have been realized without their language skills. Followings are a few examples: Jean-Christopher Brooke, General Manager of Coca Cola in Shanghai; Mark Jared, Senior Management,

Asian Development, Operations & Marketing Executive; Douglas Red, Financial Consultant in Shanghai.

One student in particular springs to mind. After his completion of his Chinese studies and his MBA, he began conducting business in China as a financial advisor. All of this because he started by studying Chinese language while he was in college.

LM: How would you advise an adult eager to learn Chinese to start?

JK: A new learner should not have unrealistically high expectations. It takes time for adult learners to master any new language, and Chinese is understandably one of the most difficult for a Westerner to learn, due to its total lack of similarity with the so called “romance languages.”

One point that is constantly mentioned by my students is how, even after learning a few brief phrases, Chinese people are truly appreciate of the efforts made by the student to communicate in another language. Somehow, this experience could be facilitated by the teacher.

I sincerely believe that learning a new language is a lifetime investment. It takes time, money, commitment and energy, but after all there is a significant advantage in expanding one’s horizons. **X**