

The Rise of China and the Importance of Chinese Language Study

By Joshua Zhong

Consider that...

- China's National Bureau of Statistics announced on December 25 that the new adjusted 2004 Gross Domestic Product was 13.65 trillion Chinese *yuan* (approximately \$1.7 trillion), representing a 9.5% annual increase. (The USA's 2004 GDP was \$11.75 trillion.) China has surpassed Italy to become the sixth largest economy in the world. Economists predict that China will be the third largest economy in the world by 2010, surpassing France, Germany, and Great Britain.
- On January 12, 2006, China's General Administration of Customs reported that China's 2005 trade surplus increased more than three-fold to \$101.9 billion, compared to the previous year's \$34 billion.
- The Central Bank of China reported on January 17, 2006 that by the end of 2005, China's foreign currency reserve had reached \$818 billion, second only to Japan (\$846.9 billion), and is expected to top \$1 billion by the end of 2006.

And...

- In 2005 President Bush launched a \$114 million National Security Language Initiative to encourage systematic study of critical languages such as Chinese, Arabic, and Russian from as early as kindergarten.

There is no doubt that there is a direct correlation between the rapid rise of China and the urgent need to prepare a new generation to understand Chinese culture, politics, economy, military and the lives of 1.3 billion Chinese people.

One of the first things Deng Xiaoping did when he took power in 1978 was to reopen all the higher learning institutes that had been closed for a decade. Recognizing the growth, power, and influence of the United States, Deng called for prioritizing the study of the English language. English is now taught from as early as kindergarten and is a key subject tested in high school entrance examinations. It is an obligatory subject for all majors in universities and colleges, and English skills are tested for all those seeking promotions in education, scientific research, medicine, finance, business, and other-state supported institutes. Since 1978, China has sent more than 200,000 students and scholars to the USA to study language, culture, economics, management and science. Today, thousands of Americans are working in Chinese schools, from elementary to university level, as English teachers.

Compared with China, the USA has had a slow start. The quiet but rapid rise of China on the international stage has forced the issue to the front yard of the American government and people. For continued national security and prosperity, as well as for effective promotion of democracy and a better understanding and respect for other cultures, we must face the challenge of foreign language study.

This challenge is both great news and an even bigger challenge to families who have adopted children from China, as well as adoption agencies like CCAI. In 1996, after placing 440 children from China and witnessing the “rapid Americanization” of these children, Lily and I decided to establish the Joyous Chinese Cultural Center (JCCC) to teach our kids about Chinese culture and language. Today, more than 1,000 adopted children in Colorado and several hundred around the country have benefited from JCCC’s efforts. Starting in 2006, JCCC will offer a “Chinese-only class” to children between the ages of two and twelve.

Adopted Chinese children have both a cultural advantage and a personal need to learn basic Chinese. The “genetic language connection and awareness” can be strengthened and continued if special efforts are encouraged from a very early age. A good resource to support such efforts are schools like JCCC, international immersion programs, weekend language schools run by local Chinese communities across the country, and even Chinese courses offered by more and more American elementary, middle, and high schools.

One of the struggles that many of our adopted children will deal with is the difference in appearance between them and their family members and friends, as well as a disconnection between them and the culture they came from. Encouraging them to study their root culture is essential for them to deal with the “difference” positively and re-connect meaningfully. One key to making both happen is the serious effort to learn some Chinese. Knowledge is power. “You will win every battle when you know who you are and who you are dealing with,” says ancient Chinese philosopher Sun Zi. Knowing the culture and mastering the ability to understand Chinese can instill confidence and positive self-esteem in our adopted children.

It is a common belief that that Chinese is one of the most difficult languages to learn and the lack of language environment makes it even harder to become proficient. That may be true with adults. However, children are in a much better position to pick up “where they left off” and continue a somewhat bilingual comprehension as long as we are willing to create positive language conditions and environments for them. This is not an easy task. It demands active involvement and advocacy from all adoptive families and communities.

The National Security Language Initiative represents not only an increased governmental awareness of the importance of the Chinese language, but also the beginning of more and more opportunities for all our adopted Chinese children. It is not hard for us to imagine that one day we will see many of our grown children become politicians (good ones ☺), diplomats, businessmen and women, teachers and researchers, and leaders of other fields that influence the relationship and friendship between the USA and China.