

Why Is There a Need to Learn Chinese in the 21st Century Australia?

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One Answer: No there is no need

This answer is derived from a mainstream attitude towards Sino-Australia relations and that is: Sino-Australia relations are important as much they are practical and pragmatic, such as providing better services for trade and tourism.

Other than that, according to this attitude, there is not much more to Sino-Australia relations.

We in Australia have nothing to learn from the Chinese.

- The Chinese political system is repressive and oppressive
- the Chinese government violates the very basic human rights of freedom of speech and freedom of religion
- China executes the largest number of people every year
- the Chinese government implements one family per child policy that kills human beings and the Chinese parents kill their female babies
- the Chinese are dirty and smell garlic, they spit and their toilet is appalling.
- The Chinese even eat dogs.
- Tens of Millions of people died of hunger because of the Great Leap Forward policy disaster,
- the Cultural Revolution prosecuted millions of China's brightest and best
- And now there is cultural or even ethnic genocide in Tibet.

So we are told.

There is not even much about Chinese tradition that we need to learn either.

Confucius is often a joke butt at schools because his sayings are either common sense or do not make sense at all.

Daoism is all mysterious and incomprehensible.

By the way, believe it or not, the mainstream Chinese attitude is the same, ever since the May Fourth Movement in 1919. In other words, the Chinese establishment elite also think that China needs to be changed and there is a need for Chinese to learn English and copy the West.

That explains why the Taiwanese writer Bo Yang was worshiped in China in the 1980s. He wrote a book called the Ugly Chinese.

That also explains why there are still Chinese democrat dissidents like Liu Xiaobo and Yu Jie who would declare that whatever the China does must be wrong since there is no democratically elected government in China and whatever the United States of America does must be right because it is the world's leading democratic country.

You may want to learn a certain language because you like the country and you want to know more. You may want to learn a language because you like the people or its way of life. So you may want to learn French because it has such beautiful literature. You may want to learn Japanese because it is such a successful modern country. You may want to learn Indonesia because it is supposed to be easy. So why should we bother about the strange cultures and difficult languages in China?

In South Australia the situation is similar. According to official statistics of public schools in 2007, there are only 21 primary schools that teach Chinese, well behind not only Japanese (90), German (52), Indonesian (50), Italian (46), French (38), but also behind Spanish (29) and Khmer (24). In terms of enrolments from year one to year seven, French, German, Italian and Indonesian all have well over a thousand students and Japanese has more than three thousand enrolment at every year level. Enrolment in Chinese lingers around 400 to a little over 500. At senior secondary level, enrolment in Chinese looks better, but the number does not indicate an increase of interest in learning Chinese by local South Australian students. What happens is that a large number of these enrolments consist of international students.

Another answer: Yes there is a need

For these of us who are here today, the answer to the question of whether there is a need to learn Chinese in the 21st century Australia has to be yes. Why would we have been gathering here otherwise?

But how to we convince the Australia public that we need to learn Chinese at schools? Let me spell out some arguments, for the sake of argument if not for anything else.

To be more competitive in the job market that hunts for skills

It has long been assumed that since English is the most international language in the world there is no need for a native speaker of English to learn a foreign language, let alone the difficult and funny Chinese. This assumption or argument should be turned on its head: precisely because English has become the global language, speaking English has now become a basic skill. Therefore to be more competitive one needs to speak at least an additional language.

Knowing Chinese shows more competence

OK even if the argument that speaking a language other than English demonstrates personal competitiveness is sound, that does not mean one has to learn Chinese. Why would one learn Chinese that is considered to be very difficult? Why not just

Indonesian or French? A school boy from Trinity College that I spoke to last week gave me answer: He choose Chinese instead of French when he was given the choice between the two because he thought that he would be seen smarter when he could speak the more difficult language.

Personal fulfilment

Whether Chinese is more difficult to learn is at least debatable, particularly if by Chinese we mean speaking the language, not reading or writing the language. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that Chinese is a more difficult language to learn, I think the boy is right in thinking that taking up the challenge of learning a more difficult language shows a personal quality. Personally I believe to be able to arrange the meaningless tones together to construct sentences and to be able to read or even write at least some characters that look like drawings or pictures surely is personally satisfying, more satisfying than just knowing how to read and write Indonesian or French.

Appreciation of another culture and civilization that is totally different

We human beings have intellectual curiosity. By learning Chinese, unlike French or German, Italian or Spanish, by learning Chinese that is totally different from one's first language, we enter a different spiritual and cultural world. Just the fact that one is able to enter the world of Chinese culture and society is hugely satisfying and fulfilling, because that will lead to totally different and totally new experience. That kind of experience surely is personally stimulating and enriching.

The Chinese written language embodies several thousand years of a large chunk of humanity that has left the legacy of

- Daoist philosophy of the universe that respects nature and balance of opposites
- Confucianism of human society that stresses obligations as well as responsibilities
- the military ideas of Sun Zi that anticipated modern warfare strategies more than 2,500 years
- the Tang poetry that is beautiful even when it is translated in an European language when at least half of the beauty is lost
- the Chinese food that enriches the diet all over the world
- the treasure house of traditional medicine yet to be explored.
- the material culture of silk, porcelain, tea and so on

Understanding of the present

This kind of understanding through learning Chinese language is not just about China's past. It is also about China's present. Take the example of Australian media reporting of China. Because there is freedom of speech in Australia, and because the media in Australia might not be controlled by the government, many in Australia automatically assume that what the media say about China is the truth, the whole truth nothing but the truth.

When the media reported that somewhere in Australia there was a baby left dead in someone's drive away, and when there was a report that some Australian parents left their children die of starvation (death as a result of hunger in Australia!), does the average Australian automatically assume that that is what the Australians do as a way of life? Do they think that Australia is inhuman and cruel?

No, they do not. Why? Because they know Australia well enough to know that these are isolated cases. But they do not know China well enough to know that terrible things reported about China can also be isolated cases.

Average Australians also would not know how to put some of the happenings in China that is considered unacceptable to Australians in the historical and social and even cultural contexts. Hopefully the learning of Chinese will help in this direction.

Other pragmatic arguments

One very obvious pragmatic argument is that being able to speak, understand, read at least some Chinese will enrich your travelling experience. As China is so big and full of traditional and cultural past as well as diversity, travelling in China is very demanding, even for global citizen from the West. There are also Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan where Chinese will be useful when you travel. As a matter fact one's knowledge of Chinese is beneficial even when you travel in Japan because of the Japanese use of kanji.

Learning Chinese may also lead you to better romantic life: It is "scientifically" proven that you will be seen as cool and intelligent among your peers and you will have a better chance of finding sexual partners if you know a second language. If Chinese is your second language dating is even better not only because you will be seen even more cool and intelligent but also because there are more than a billion Chinese for you to choose from.

To know Chinese may also mean higher earning, better jobs and better career. Past experience and research evidence show that when everything else is equal, knowing a second language is a plus for earning and career path. This should be more so with Chinese since the scale and size related to China and Chinese is much larger. One has to add though that you need to have expertise in something else as well. Language skill alone is not good enough.

There is anecdotal evidence-supported argument that local Australian students don't have the incentive to learn Chinese since they cannot compete with many children of migrants of Chinese language background. There is some truth in this, for children with some background exposure of any version of the Chinese language has an advantage. Furthermore, the fact that in many classes the two groups of students are mixed together could lead to pedagogical problem. Some of you, like Andrew Scrimgeour, have already started to deal with issue.

However I just want to spell out some intellectual assumptions behind this fear. To start with this argument can be equally applied to background speakers of, say, German, Italian, and Indonesian. Though it is true that recent migration from China is more noticeable and therefore has a stronger background connection one has to

remember that these children are learning Chinese for entirely different reasons. For example they may just want to maintain their cultural and linguistic identities. Therefore they may not compete with other students of Chinese in career and profession. For recent migrants and their children there is the main task of coming to terms with English and Australian culture. In other words students without a Chinese language background can gain advantage in personal fulfilment and career path over students of Chinese background.

When you have an Asian face it is taken for granted in China that you speak Chinese. But if you are a “whity” the Chinese will be astonished when you speak Chinese. That is why the fact that Kevin Rudd speaks Mandarin is such big thing for the Chinese.

Though any of the above in the list is important for an individual to learn Chinese, (in fact some of the above apply to other second languages as well), but I would like to go a little bit further beyond the obvious and in a way superficial reasons. I would like to draw you to a more profound argument for learning Chinese, instead of other Western languages.

It is about our existence and about the future of human race.

The Rise of China, either a threat or a disaster

That has something to do with the rise of China, or modernization of Chinese way of life can either be a threat or disaster or both for the Western world.

Let me talk about some problems in the West first and then proceed to how these problems are related to China.

Consumerism and debt

For a long time people in the West are encouraged to spend, to consume, and use energy. Until recently our cars are getting bigger and bigger. Though our family size has become smaller but we are encouraged to build bigger houses: a games room, a home theatre, en suite upstairs, spa bath downstairs, a toilet in the laundry and a toilet in the garden.

How do you pay for this “affluenza” life style? Borrowing. Now the richest country in the world has the highest debt in the world. In the United States of America the debt is something like \$175,000 for every citizen and the influential and pro-capitalist *Economist* magazine calls this fact “another inconvenient truth” (16th to 22nd August 2008: 64), the other one being the environmental disaster that I will attend to later.

Commercialism and inequality

As the society gets more affluent you would think people can spend more time leisurely. But it is just the opposite. Those who work are made to work harder.

This process has pushed the society into two extremities: those who work have not time to enjoy life and those who don't work have nothing to enjoy.

Take the demographic polarity as an example. Those who can afford to have children don't because they are too busy. But those who cannot have children do, but they are dependent on welfare (thanks to John Howard and Peter Costello, some may just want to have a child to get \$4000 to buy a car).

Take medical care as another example. The Australian medical care is probably one of the best in the Western world, but it is already under huge stress, especially since it has been pushed to take on the American model of privatization. Cuba is one of the poorest countries and is still under US and Western economic sanctions, but they have one of the best medical services in the world. On the hand you have the USA the richest country in the world, millions of the poor cannot afford to see a doctor.

As a result there has developed what is called "medical tourism": US citizens go to have medical treatment in countries like the Philippines! This internal brain drain will overwhelm the best medical facilities in the poor countries, but the *Economist* calls it "importing competition" (16th to 22nd August 2008:10).

Welfare dependence

I mentioned above that those who are dependent on welfare provision might want to have more children since it looks as if it is cost free. This of course will lead to a vicious circle: the children of the welfare dependent will be more likely to be welfare dependent since the welfare provision is enough for them not to seek change. In some cases the benefit or pension day is the day to have the means for drugs, alcohol and cigarettes. In some families children and women get abused as result of this situation. The welfare dependent do not have the skills for the jobs they want but they do not want to do unskilled work either.

Now you have this absurd situation: there are unemployed in Australia but Australia needs to import labour, even for picking fruit!

Environmental disaster

I can see how industrial development has been ruining the Chinese environment, but for a long time I did not think the West has much a problem. All we can in front of our eyes are clean sky, fresh water, green field and healthy people. However when I went fishing at the Murray or when I travelled along the north bit of Adelaide I was shocked to see how barren the place was and how the Murray was dried up. Some claim the Murray River problem is already irreversible.

So why do we need to learn Chinese

Learning Chinese will help us question our cultural assumptions, our values and even own way of life.

Since Columbia's travel to America, colonialism led to racism and in this racial conflict the West won.

Since the end of the WWII there was the Cold War and at the end of that confrontation, the political ideology of liberal democracy and market economy in the West won.

What lies ahead in the 21st Century? Who is going win and who is going to lose? East or West? It is likely that we are all going to lose. It is our life style that is the problem.

I am not saying that the Chinese are doing better. Precisely the opposite: I am saying that the Chinese are trying to live a life style like we do in the West. Currently only 2% of the Chinese population have a car there is already too much fuel generated pollution in the air. If the Chinese consumes energy as much as the Americans or Australian we need at least the resources of four planets.

I am not saying that we have to learn Chinese because we want to learn from China and the Chinese. I am saying that we have to learn Chinese so that we can work together with the Chinese. The West and the rest of the world have to work together to find a better way of organizing our life, a better life style that is fulfilling, good quality but not necessarily tied to consumerism. The Chinese think that to have a car is modern. But why is it not modern to ride a bike to work in clean air?

That is why we need to learn Chinese. In other words, we have to learn Chinese to help the Chinese to help ourselves. We have to persuade the Chinese that they don't need to copy us all the way.

Is the rise of China a threat to the status quo established by the West? Yes.
Could the rise of China lead to ecological disaster on this planet? Yes.

But how to cope with this is a question. Should we fight a war to stop the Chinese? Some people in some quarters may have been considering this strategy.

However I think we should find a peaceful approach to cope with the rise of China. That is to change our way of life as much as possible and to change many of the assumptions of what is a good life as much as possible and at the same time try understand Chinese so as work together, work together not only to find practical and technological solutions but also to persuade the Chinese that they don't have to copy the Western way to be modern..

That is a challenge in the 21st century: to change our way of life together with the Chinese. To do that, we need to learn the bloody language.