

Be Sure to Learn Chinese in the 21st Century (I)

-- A Note to Today's Generation

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Chinese is one of the six official languages for the United Nations, and Jim Rogers, of *Worth Magazine* said “If the 19th century belonged to Britain, and the 20th century to the United States, then the 21st century will surely belong to China. My advice: Make sure your kids learn Chinese.” In the 21st Century, the Chinese language is becoming important as a tool for cultural understanding and international exchange. In the past, we all learned English or French as a second language, but with the rise of China as an economic power, learning Chinese is becoming essential to take part in this globalization.

As a Taiwanese-American, learning to teach the Chinese language is one of my most important goals. Not only do I wish to learn how to impart the ability to converse in Chinese, but also I feel strongly that language cannot be separated from culture, history, and philosophy — so I would make them integral parts of the teaching of Chinese. Chinese is the language spoken by more people in the world than any other, yet, in the western world, it is a less commonly taught language. Lack of knowledge and misinformation has produced an abundance of myths and misconceptions about the language. I hope that teaching Chinese will help to dispel some of these mysteries.

As one philosopher put it, to know a second language is to gain a second soul. Also, many elements of Chinese culture and philosophy are immensely profound and deserving of study and

understanding. Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism have been interwoven to form Chinese culture, and this rich tapestry is neither fully understood nor appreciated in the western world nor among second-generation overseas Chinese and Taiwanese. Although the *Tao Te Ching* has been translated into more languages than any book except the Bible, it is still best appreciated in the original. The proliferation of English translations testifies to the fact that none of them is truly satisfactory. So the teaching of Chinese is vital for the understanding of philosophy, history, and culture. On a more pragmatic level, bridging the gap between East and West will never be possible as long as each regards the language of the other as completely foreign.

Let me discuss the mechanics of teaching.

A good language teacher should always be patient, is always positive, and is always willing to communicate with and encourage students. His or her own pronunciation should be clear, and oral practice is always necessary. A successful teacher of Chinese must be knowledgeable regarding the Chinese language and its words, structure, and grammar. The teacher must be able easily to compare and contrast languages. Even more important is a wide knowledge of Chinese culture, society, and history. The teacher should learn the culture of the language being studied, and use multiple ways and different directions to help the student learn the language.

(To be continued)