

Transforming linguistic skills

By **PROFESSOR MICHEL HOCKX**

DIRECTOR, SOAS CHINA INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



MICHEL HOCKX is Professor of Chinese at SOAS, University of London and founding director of the SOAS China Institute. He studied Chinese language and literature at Leiden university in The Netherlands and at Liaoning and Peking universities in China. He has been involved in teaching Chinese language and culture in the UK for the past twenty years and he is a past president (2011-14) of the British Association for Chinese Studies.

British people have an unenviable reputation when it comes to learning languages. With so many speaking English as a second language all around the world, there often does not seem to be a need for native speakers of English to aspire to becoming bilingual.

The manner in which people in the UK have taken to learning Chinese in recent years is therefore nothing short of amazing. English is widely spoken in China, so objectively there was no need for Brits to make the effort, yet they did. In the twenty years that I have been involved in teaching Chinese language and literature in the UK, the landscape of learning has been dramatically transformed.

When I joined the Chinese department at SOAS, University of London, back in 1996, there were fewer than ten universities in the UK offering Chinese as a subject. The learning and teaching of Chinese was, by and large, the territory of a small number of enthusiasts. Students embarking on a BA Chinese typically had no prior knowledge of the language at all and needed to be taught from scratch. Indeed, those who did already know Chinese were often not accepted onto such programmes because they were seen as overqualified!

The situation could not be more different nowadays. According to a 2013 survey by the University Council of Modern Languages, Chinese is now taught at 90 per cent of all UK universities. Only Spanish, French, and German are taught more widely across the UK. What this means is that in addition to the universities traditionally offering full degree programmes in Chinese, virtually every other university in the country now offers at least some elective courses in Chinese language. Fluency in Chinese is increasingly widely seen as a useful element in the any graduate's skill set.

Since 2012, when higher tuition fees were introduced at UK universities, the number of students applying to do full degrees in foreign languages has drastically declined. In the first two years of the new fee regime, the number of applications for French courses had gone down by 25 per cent, and for Japanese courses by 40 per cent. However the number of applicants for Chinese courses remained stable. In fact, Chinese was one of the very few subjects in the humanities where recruitment did not seem to suffer significantly as a result of higher fees. Amidst widespread uncertainty about the prospects for humanities graduates on the

future job market, Chinese once again bucked the trend. Here, too, the conclusion can only be that knowledge of Chinese is perceived as a very useful skill.

A large part of Chinese language teaching at UK universities, and indeed in UK schools, is connected in some way with the establishment of Confucius Institutes. No country in Europe has been more welcoming to the Confucius Institute movement than the UK. There are currently 25 Confucius Institutes based at UK universities and the vast majority of them are actively involved in the provision of Chinese language teaching. The UK also has 92 Confucius Classrooms, which are Chinese language teaching programmes in schools that are supported by Confucius Institutes. The figures for the rest of Europe pale in comparison. The UK's closest rival in this ranking is Italy, which has 11 Confucius Institutes and 20 Confucius Classrooms. Germany has 15 Institutes and three Classrooms.

Chinese is now taught widely in secondary schools up to GCSE level and is increasingly popular at A level. Many school leavers take gap years in China in order to pick up some of the language. All Chinese programmes at UK universities have in recent years changed their admissions policy and are now very welcoming to non-beginners. Although it is still possible to study Chinese at university from scratch, the number of students arriving at our gates with no knowledge of the language at all is now incredibly small.

Beyond language learning per se, universities in the UK have also invested heavily in developing courses about different aspects of Chinese culture and society, Chinese economy, politics, and international relations, as well as the country's history. In recent years, several universities have opened China Institutes that take responsibility for teaching and learning about China across all disciplines. In addition to the SOAS China Institute, which houses by far the largest and most diverse community of China scholars in Europe, there are new, vibrant China institutes at the University of Oxford and at King's College.

UK universities have also successfully explored ways of working together with Chinese universities and establishing a presence for UK higher education in China. The University of Nottingham has for quite a few years been teaching courses at its campus in Ningbo, whereas Liverpool University and Xi'an Jiaotong University are

jointly running a campus in Suzhou. Even more recently, the University of Cardiff and Beijing Normal University have announced a joint undergraduate programme in Chinese, with students spending half of their time in Cardiff and half of their time in Beijing.

More opportunities are also becoming available for UK graduates to further advance their China-related skill-set at the postgraduate level. Only last year, a project led by SOAS and funded by the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE) made it possible for several UK universities to promote two-year MA programmes in Chinese Studies, where students are given the opportunity to integrate their studies of particular scholarly disciplines with the opportunity to apply those disciplines to Chinese-language material and study the publications of Chinese scholars. Programmes like this will finally help to address the long-standing shortage of UK-trained advanced China specialists. (Currently, only about a third of all scholars teaching Chinese Studies at UK universities were wholly trained in the UK).

The rise in numbers of Chinese speakers and readers in the UK also bodes well for the future of cultural exchange between the two countries. Although it is still the case that Chinese people on average learn a lot more about Britain in their basic education than the other way around, and although products of British popular culture ranging from Sherlock Holmes to James Bond, and from Harry Potter to Wayne Rooney, are infinitely better known in China than their Chinese equivalents are in the UK, there are plenty of initiatives underway that illustrate cultural influences flowing in the other direction, including the recent BBC reality TV programme featuring the experiences of Chinese teachers in a British school, the Chinese-English literary translation workshops organised by the British Centre for Literary Translation, the activities of the Writing Chinese network at the University of Leeds, and the upcoming festive commemorations of the 400th anniversary of the deaths of two of the world's greatest playwrights: Tang Xianzu from China, and William Shakespeare from Britain.

Sure enough, learning Chinese is not easy but if millions of Chinese people can learn English, then there is no reason why millions of Brits can't learn Chinese. Contrary to what one may think, Chinese is not a difficult language to learn to speak and understand. The main difficulty lies in learning to read and write. English is written with twenty-six letters representing sounds, and by and large if you hear an English word spoken you will know more or less how to write it. Chinese is written in characters that need to be individually memorised. If you hear a Chinese word spoken you won't know how to write it unless you have memorised the characters in question. Memorising characters takes time but can also be lots of fun. Even

after three decades of learning Chinese, I still take pleasure in practising my characters when I sit on the tube doing my daily commute – these days drawing the characters on the screen of my smartphone rather than on a piece of paper. For those just beginning to learn there are countless methods to try and remember the characters better, including a very imaginative method called 'Chineasy' which was developed by a London-based, Cambridge-educated entrepreneur.

It is estimated that a knowledge of around 3,500 characters is needed to read a newspaper. The good news is, however, that compared to the time when I learned Chinese back in the 1980s, it is nowadays no longer essential to learn to write the characters by hand. One can type what one wants to say into a computer using a phonetic transliteration, and then the computer will select the characters – as long as you can recognise the right character so that you can, if necessary, tell the computer which one to select. This not only speeds up the writing of Chinese, it also means that time previously invested by learners of Chinese in practising writing characters can now be used instead to practise speaking, listening, and reading. As a result those skills are now learned much more quickly and efficiently by many learners than before.

These developments, and all the other elements of the blossoming UK-China cultural relationship referred to in this short overview, will surely help to bring about that most remarkable historical change: Brits are becoming bilingual, and Chinese is their second language of choice.

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Cultural export: Bond market peaks in China

