

Chinese Language Teachers' Conference Meeting on Middle Ground

9th Annual National Conference of the Chinese Language Teachers' Federation of Australia 2003

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The conference organisers had suggested accommodation near to the College and I stayed in the Country Women's Association Guest House just five minutes away. If any of you are going to Australia I heartily recommend the CWA places around the country if they are like this one. This one was much more reasonable than the motels, and gave a really homelike welcome to visitor.

There were more than 100 delegates to the conference representing almost all of the State Chinese Language Teachers' Associations. Many were people who had also attended the Brisbane (2002) or Melbourne (2001) conferences, and they made me feel very special. James Wu, from Penleigh-Essenden Grammar School in Melbourne, the National President opened the conference with a warm welcome to all, and a special mention of the new Federation Banner which was on display. He thanked all the people and organisations which contribute to the well-being of the Federation, including Hanban (the Chinese organisation promoting Chinese as a Foreign Language). A special thanks was given to John Crone who has set up the CLTFA on-line discussion group. He then handed the microphone over to Thai Choong, the President of the South Australia Association, which hosted the conference.

To start the conference properly, students of Highgate Primary School sang the Australian National Anthem, Advance Australia, with the first verse in Chinese and the second verse in English. Thai introduced the First Keynote Speaker, Dr. Stephen Codrington, Principal of the host school, Prince Alfred College. Dr Codrington had also spent some time as principal of Kristin School in Auckland and while there introduced Chinese language as a compulsory subject for all students. Dr. Codrington's address is attached as Appendix One. It was a very stimulating speech and for me the most interesting part was that learning Chinese develops both sides of the brain, because of the characters, and therefore has been shown to increase students' IQ by an average of 15-20 points.

Andrew Scrimgeour of the University of South Australia, introduced the second Keynote Speaker, Linda Jaivin, well known China watcher, translator, critic,

journalist and author, speaking on "The China Experience, interpreting a dynamic culture". She was brought up in Taiwan but had spent the last 25 years in Hongkong as a journalist and broadcaster. She is the author of several novels and the translator of the English subtitles for many of the best Chinese films shown in the West. She spoke of the changes that occur in every language, but which seemed more apparent in the Chinese language as the country changed from strict Maoism and the Cultural Revolution through the "Open Door" policy and now into Communism combined with Free Market capitalism characteristics. She compared the "wooden language" of socialism, and the "natural language" of everyday communication and how these languages have combined over the decades until now the "wooden language" is only apparent in serious government communications. Chinese with all its homonyms has always been a "pun friendly" language and this was a great help in breaking down the "wooden language" of text books and serious political writing. Her most recent book was on sale at the conference, but sold out too soon for me to get one.

After Linda we had a brief greeting from Huang Jianping the PRC Education Attache from Canberra, whom I had also met in Brisbane. He spoke of the need, which we all agree with, for Caucasians to learn and to teach Chinese to prove that it can be done. He spoke of the help being given by Hanban to encourage the teaching of Chinese, and to improve the efficiency of teachers by giving scholarships for study in China. He mentioned the China Bridge Competition for university students. Four are going to Beijing from Australia to compete with some 60 finalists from around the world.

Morning Teas and the lunch breaks gave time for renewing acquaintances and the networking which are such an important parts of every conference. It was good to chat with those I had met before at my two previous conferences, and to hear what advances are being made in teaching Chinese in Australia, especially in the production of teaching resources.

The next session before lunch was a forum discussing "Teaching Chinese in the new Millennium - What and How we should be teaching". The three speakers were Andrew Scrimgeour, Matthew Winefield, and Lili Liang. Andrew has been working for some years on urging the systematic teaching of characters (a subject very close to my own interests). He spoke about the importance of using the web and IT to help in the teaching of Chinese. The younger generation are far more adept at using computers and should be encouraged to use it for Chinese communication and learning. School friends in China can communicate with those in Australia. Cultural

barriers can be more easily overcome. He spoke about the holistic teaching of the language - four aspects: practise in use, language in context, seeing the language in the real world, and encouraging dialogues with students and with teachers.

Lili Liang added more to Linda Jaivin's ideas about how the Chinese language has changed over the years - from the propaganda slogans of the Mao years to the freedom of language in the Chinese films available today. She urged the use of films in the teaching of Chinese. She also spoke of the improvements in education in China which has led to the changes. Nine years compulsory education for all is the government's aim. She also spoke of the difficulties presented to the teachers of Chinese with so little time available for learning Chinese in the overcrowded curriculum. With the increased use of computers in China, the most populous country in the world, she suggested that Chinese might become the Number One language on the web by 2020.

Matthew Winefield brought a totally different perspective to the conference. He had gone to China to teach English in Xian, returned to Adelaide to study Chinese and then went to Taiwan to improve his language and to combine it with computer science. He is now working for the South Australian State Government in their Trade and Industry section fostering joint ventures and commercial ties with China. He urges all those going to university to study Chinese to mix it with something else - commerce, computers, science etc. Then many more doors are opened for the future. He emphasised the importance that learning another language gives to understanding another people's culture and way of thinking. He mentioned, for example, the love of numerical allusions in Chinese. The Chinese language is much more subtle than English and so is their culture. He also stressed that teachers should be able to make students enjoy learning the language and the challenges that it presents.

After lunch there was another plenary where each state association gave a report on Chinese in their state, and I was asked to do the same for New Zealand. I had prepared a brief report which is attached as Appendix 2. Many of the states can be compared with New Zealand, for example the report from Perth in Western Australia spoke about 34 schools teaching Chinese. It seems that across the country, but especially in the south and eastern coastal cities, the main "customers" for Chinese language in schools are children of Chinese immigrants wanting a language maintenance course. This makes it very difficult to encourage Caucasian Australians to study with them, as they feel they are always at a disadvantage. Where separate classes are available this problem is overcome. The private schools are much more

likely to teach Chinese than any of the government schools in the various states. I am glad that in New Zealand we do not have separate States and that private schools are not so common here.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in workshops. A description of the 12 workshops available is found in Appendix 3. There were eight to choose from, one for each session. It was very difficult to choose. For Workshop One I went to "Exploring human rights through language education for secondary background speakers". Thai Choong led a discussion of two themes from the senior secondary Background Curriculum Statement with a focus on encouraging students to think critically and weigh up various viewpoints. The themes covered were "The changing role of women in China" and "the Political Issues of Tibet and Taiwan". There were handouts in Chinese and English for both themes and I found this session particularly interesting.

My second workshop was Andrew Scrimgeour speaking on "New Developments in Chinese character learning in years 8-12". Andrew is developing an 'on-line' course for character learning as part of the Learning Federation's development of on-line courses for LOTE (Languages other than English, the expression which is more and more being used for foreign language teaching). He presented the six concepts they are working with:

1. orthographies (alphabetic or symbolic);
2. strokes (for characters);
3. components - basic character origins and parts and compounds;
4. structure of characters
5. functions of parts of the characters - semantic, phonetic; and
6. application for word forming and characters in context.

This will eventually all be available "On-line".

Saturday ended with an excellent banquet in a Chinese restaurant in Adelaide's Chinatown. Adelaide is such a lovely compact (and flat) city that we were able to walk back to our CWA home to get some exercise after sitting for most of the day and evening. I also had a roommate for the night, April Fan from Victoria. She had taken the overnight bus from Melbourne and arrived early Saturday morning. We had met previously at the Melbourne conference.

Sunday morning we didn't start until 9.30 with a Plenary "Teaching Chinese: An Historical Perspective" by Jim Wilson, a Research Associate at Flinders University.

He spoke about Connections and Disconnections and Chinese in the modern world where globalisation has brought changes similar to those of the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th Centuries. Education now takes place in a western systematised world. English as a global language is not good for "relationships". There has been a decline in major crises since the second World War, but an increase in big minor crises. He emphasised the need for everyone to have 'a place'. He was born in England but has been in Australia for most of his life, so he has 'two places' but cannot forget the first. He went on to say that education of its citizens is the best investment a country can make. Much of what he said was more pertinent to Australia. I hope to get a copy of his address to include as another Appendix.

The next Plenary was "Reflections on Chinese Teaching in Australia" by the legendary founder of Chinese language study in Australia, Stephen Lee, who retired last year after forty years as a schoolmaster. He was recently awarded the OAM for his services to Chinese. His talk ranged over the changes that have taken place - adolescents are no longer acquiescent. They don't know what they want, but they know what they don't want. Teachers now have to educate their customers - the students - to have a love of learning long after they have left your classes. A teacher is a facilitator for promoting the learning of Chinese to the administration of the school, to the other staff members, and most importantly to the parents of the students. Above all be optimistic.

Amanda Stackpool of the AFS spoke about the Australian Young Scholars in China Programme. She assured us that China is much more able these days to host foreign students who will attend the local high schools, and expect reciprocal hosting in Australia. AFS is not just for China. Their cultural programme goes to more than 50 countries with short and long term stays. The Chinese programme began sixteen years ago. Candidates are required to write an essay about why they wanted to go in both English and Chinese. They were all passionate about China, were good students and will be leaders of the future. She then introduced Daniel, a 2001 scholar who spoke eloquently about his stay in China. He is now at university continuing his study of Chinese with his degree in International Relations. He said his stay in China was a life-altering experience with only benefits. It gave him greater self confidence and mad him much wiser about the world.

Kurt Mansell who had been an earlier AFS scholar is now running the China Student Tour business, called A Taste of China. He is looking into expanding it to include a professional development course for teachers. I have put my name on his email list so expect to hear more from him.

After lunch Dr. Gerry Groot of the Centre for Asian Studies at The University of Adelaide, spoke on "Politics and SARS". There is no doubt that the SARS epidemic has had a profound effect on China, both in the higher echelons of government where there is a determination to improve all facets of the public health system, but also in the government relations with non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Sunday afternoon closed with another workshop session, but instead of going to one, I attended the CLTFA Council Meeting to further discuss the possibility of them coming to New Zealand in July next year for their conference. The idea had been put to the delegates and they all seemed to think it was a good idea, and many came up to me and said they would be coming, and that they wanted to have a tour of the South Island, either before or after the conference (to fit in with the various school holidays in the different states). There was a short plenary closing session to wish us all a good journey home.

It was early enough for me to get to the South Australia Art Gallery to see some wonderful 'Old Masters' and to view Adelaide's Festival Centre - their answer to Sydney's Opera House. The next day I went into town with one of the other teachers and we went to several galleries to see exhibitions of Aboriginal Art which I find better than modern Western Art. The trip back to NZ involved a four-hour wait in Melbourne and an after midnight arrival in Wellington, but it was all well worth the very interesting time at the Conference.