**Keynote Speech**

# 3. Demographic Change and the Challenges it brings for TCSL Instructors

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In this presentation, I will attempt to outline the changes in the composition of the student body in classes for both the Chinese language and Chinese literature that have taken place in the almost twenty years that I have been at the University of Victoria, and the ways in which we have responded to those changes. I also wish to pose some questions to our colleagues here today, so that we can share the teaching strategies that the experience of teaching the language and culture of China in Canada (for many of us, on the Canadian West Coast) has forced us to develop. I will ask the following:

1. How are we to establish criteria for differentiating categories of native speakers of the Chinese language?

2. Are the materials available to us for language instruction, including those developed under the sponsorship and leadership of the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, suited to our needs, or are there recommendations we should be making to our colleagues from China for the development of future materials?

3. Does the Canadian language classroom need to function differently when the students in it are from Chinese backgrounds?

4. How can we profit from the ethnic and cultural diversity of the student body in classes on Chinese literature and other aspects of Chinese culture?

First, a brief summary of my own personal history of teaching Chinese studies over a period of more than thirty years, from which I hope to derive a more general picture of the way that our profession has grown up in a changing world.

When I began teaching Chinese in 1973, on graduation from the University of Cambridge, I joined a team of teachers who were developing new teaching materials suited for both undergraduate instruction and the training of diplomats and other professionals preparing

work in China. The Chinese Language Project at the University was led by the former head of the British military's Chinese language training centre in Hong Kong, and the former senior teacher at that centre. The materials we prepared were intended to replace the series of textbooks written by John DeFrancis which I had studied as an undergraduate, and which, we felt, were largely inaccessible to the students who studied them; at that time, as I understand it, no consideration was given to using the teaching materials then coming from China, which were felt (with some justification) to be poorly designed and, given that the Cultural Revolution had still not run its course, excessively influenced by the political vocabulary of the day. The assumption made by the teachers at the Chinese Language Project, and by everyone writing textbooks for Chinese at that time, was that the student would be learning from scratch, coming to the first class with no knowledge of the tonal nature of the Chinese language or anything but the most rudimentary idea of the writing system; I had certainly begun my study of Chinese in the late 1960s in such a state of ignorance.

That generation of British students had, almost without exception, no background in Chinese. I suspect the situation may have been somewhat different in Canada, with established Chinese communities in the major cities; however, when I began to teach my first beginners Mandarin class at York University in Toronto in 1982, students with a background in the Chinese language, either Chinese Canadian or students from Malaysia and Singapore who had graduated from an English- or Malay language school system, were still in the minority. At York, I also found myself teaching multiple classes of Mandarin for Cantonese speakers, my first experience of teaching these students and coming to terms with their very different needs as language learners. Initially, at least, these two groups, the absolute beginners and the native speakers of Southern forms of the Chinese language, were quite distinct; after a couple of years, however, it was clear that there were students at the University wishing to study the Chinese language (often at the insistence of their parents) who had grown up in Chinese-speaking families in the Toronto area or moved to Canada as children, who could not easily be placed in classes either with the absolute beginners or with the native speakers, most of whom had completed high-school in Hong Kong. The beginners' class moved too slowly for them, and left them bored and their class-mates intimidated by the speed with which they mastered grammar and learned characters; but they were not able to keep up with the native speakers' classes, which were conducted entirely in Chinese and involved quite lengthy written and oral presentations. For these students, I introduced a new course, which essentially took half the time to teach a first year text-book (Colloquial Chinese by David Pollard and P.C. T'ung) as was being taken by the beginners' class. I only had the opportunity to offer this course once before I left York, but I became aware that a different kind of language teaching material was needed that the one I was using, one that would place greater emphasis on the sounds of the language in the initial stages, and would deal with subject-matter of greater interest to the students.

When I arrived at the University of Victoria in 1986, I found a situation similar to the one that had existed at York four years earlier: a clear separation between beginners and the

fully literate native-speaker group. In the two decades since then, we have seen the same kind of demographic shift that our colleagues across the province, and in the major cities of central Canada, will themselves have witnessed: an increase in immigration to Canada from Hong Kong, some of it precipitated by the signing of the Joint Declaration on the future of the then colony and now Special Administrative Region in 1984 and the run-up to the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, and an accompanying increase of immigration from Taiwan, and the People's Republic, with a dramatic surge in 1989, when the Canadian government offered permanent residence to all Chinese citizens in Canada at the time of the tragic events of June 4. The children of these new immigrants, many of who settled close to where we are meeting today, ranged from infants to those who had completed high-school; many have since entered the university system, and their numbers go a long way to explaining the increase in the university-age cohort in British Columbia at a time when universities in other provinces are concerned at a decrease in qualified applicants. Many of them are interested in taking courses in Chinese studies, both language courses and those in literature, history, and culture, and they have brought new challenges and opportunities to those of us who teach in these areas. Some of these students have gone on to take major degrees in our Department of Pacific and Asian Studies; a larger number have added a minor degree in Chinese Studies to a major in another discipline.

The programme that we have in place to accommodate the varying levels of competence that students bring to Chinese language classes is the result of pioneering work done over a number of years by my colleague Karen Tang, and I would like to acknowledge the leadership role that she has played in offering an appropriate level of instruction to students from a very wide range of language competence.

We continue to offer a twelve-unit (corresponding to twenty-four units at UBC and most Lower Mainland colleges) language programme to students who enter the system as beginners. For many years we used Liu Xun's series of Practical Chinese Readers; in the 1990s we switched to the Chinese Primer produced in Princeton by Zhou Zhiping and his colleagues, a text that is still preferred by one of our teachers for its advocacy of full characters; and in recent years we have taught the first three of these courses using textbooks commissioned by the National Office of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language and compiled by a group of colleagues at Fudan University in Shanghai, led by the exceptional teacher and scholar of pedagogy, Wu Zhongwei. A number of us at both the Universities of Victoria and British Columbia were involved in the creative process that produced the books, and had the opportunity to work with, and learn from, Dr. Wu when he was a visitor at our research centre last year; Sun Ying, my colleague at the University of Victoria and the principal instructor of Chinese at Camosun College in Victoria, will be talking about this set of textbooks when the conference proper begins. Demand for courses from these "non-native" language learners has remained remarkably stable over the last two decades: each September, we begin two sections of twenty-five students each of our first introductory course, and in recent years we have had sufficient demand to offer an additional section in our summer programme. At the other extreme, the course

offered first by Hsiao Hsin-yi and taught by Karen Tang since Dr. Hsiao's retirement, offers students with the equivalent of a high-school education in a Chinese-language school system the chance to study either the novel Hongloumeng or a selection of recent Chinese films in a class conducted entirely in Chinese; demand for the course has been consistently high, with sections offered in both the September to April school year and summer school being considerably over-subscribed.

The increase in students studying Chinese has largely been in the two new courses devised by Karen Tang for those students who do not fit into the two categories of beginner and fully literate native speaker; that is, those students from native-speaking backgrounds who have been largely educated in an English-language school system, either here in Canada or in Asia. We have a one-semester 1.5 unit course for those with quite limited levels of literacy, which focuses both on the sounds of the language (since most of these students are fluent in forms of the Chinese language other than standard Mandarin/ putonghua) and in developing reading and writing skills, and a second course that follows on from it, intended to bring students to a level where they can take the advanced courses for native speakers. In addition to being offered in Victoria, these courses have also been offered for a number of years in a college in Hong Kong, under Karen Tang's supervision. In previous years, we have filled classes for both of these courses in both winter and summer sessions in Victoria, though there have recently been indications that changes in the composition of the Chinese community in British Columbia may result in fewer students coming to us as speakers of non-standard forms of the language with a degree of reading comprehension, and more coming in as beginners after an education that does not include any formal instruction in the Chinese language. With the course offerings I have described above, a student coming to the University can begin his or her study of the Chinese language at one of four levels, depending on the degree of previous exposure to, and facility with, the Chinese language.

All of the above leads to the first question that I raised in my introduction: How are we to establish criteria for differentiating categories of native speakers of the Chinese language? What constitutes native-speaking ability? And is there some way that we can standardize our evaluation of students entering our programme or transferring from other institutions? Most of you will be aware of the variables: we have students born in Canada and raised in Chinese-speaking families, but educated entirely in English, who reply in English to questions posed to them in Chinese by their parents and grandparents; others who came to Canada at any point between kindergarten and grade 12, or whose education in Southeast Asia was only partly in Chinese, who may feel more or less able to read and write in their mother tongue. At what point are we to classify these groups as native speakers? Are students who have taken Mandarin in the BC school system at grade 11 or 12 ready to enter classes for either native or non-native speakers at the intermediate level, or should they start from the beginning again?

Our experience to date is that it is extremely difficult for us to make a proper evaluation without first meeting the student and talking to him or her. This raises a number of

problems, of course: it makes it difficult for a student new to the University to select the appropriate course while registering for classes, something that most students do before arriving in Victoria; it is labour-intensive for instructors; and students may be asked to change classes once the term has begun and their level of facility with the language has become evident, something that may result in timetabling conflicts. Standardizing criteria is a real challenge when students come to us with such a variety of language backgrounds, and it is hard to see how we can devise systems that will transfer from one university to another, or from a college to a university. I have no solutions to these problems, and only hope that as we share our experiences and practice, we can find ways to cooperate.

The second question that I raised had to do with the kinds of teaching materials we use, particularly for those students with some native-speaking experience: are the materials available to us for language instruction, including those developed under the sponsorship and leadership of the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, suited to our needs, or are there recommendations we should be making to our colleagues from China for the development of future materials? In recent years, new language teaching materials have become available to us from China, thanks in considerable part to the sponsorship of National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language: in addition to the textbook series produced by Wu Zhongwei and his colleagues, there is the updated version of the Practical Chinese Readers compiled under the leadership of Liu Xun, both of which are clearly designed for the language learner beginning from scratch, with instruction in phonetics and elementary grammar that is far superior to that in previous textbooks, including the early Practical Chinese Readers. Few authors have devised textbooks which are designed, both in terms of their content and their pedagogy, for the needs of the partial native speaker; one who has attempted this is Zhou Zhiping, whose series of textbooks published by Princeton University includes one entitled Oh, China!, the narrative of which concerns the relations between an American Chinese student and her family as she takes college courses in Chinese. I would hope to see materials produced in China to meet the needs of this particular, and reasonably substantial, group; rather than dealing with life in North America, their narratives should be set in China and address contemporary issues (education, employment, entertainment, family and societal relations, the environment etc.), and include discussion of the particular challenges that overseas Chinese have in studying, travelling and finding their place in Chinese society. That way, they could be used in the UK and Australasia as well as in North America, and appeal to the widest possible market. If the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language was looking for advisors and collaborators for such a project, I am convinced they could find ideally qualified teachers in this gathering today. This is a project which I think would be of real value to many of us at the university and college level, and possibly in the high-school system as well.

The third question I raised at the beginning of this talk is one that has been considered by teachers of English as a Second Language in Canada who work in schools whose pupils are predominantly Asian, and also by our colleagues engaged in the teaching of Japanese at Canadian universities: does the Canadian language classroom need to function

differently when the students in are from Chinese backgrounds, or, I should add, from other parts of Asia? We are all familiar enough with the traditional Chinese classroom, with it stern and authoritative teacher demanding extensive memorization and the writing of impossible numbers of new Chinese characters every week from absolutely obedient (and occasionally terrified) students; many of us who learned Chinese in Western universities did it from teachers who replicated the traditional Chinese classroom in Europe or North America. More recently, the tendency has been to move to the more common interactive North American classroom, with its focus on the learner rather than the teacher. But is this necessarily better for the student? Would students of an Asian, or Asian-Canadian, background benefit from a more traditional and structured learning environment? In attempting to answer this question, I draw here from a paper on language instruction presented to a conference at the University of Victoria and published by my Centre in a conference volume entitled Changing Japanese Identities in Multicultural Canada. In the paper, titled “What is a Japanese Classroom Really Like?” the author, Tom Whalley, looks at a series of categories for understanding classroom culture, in which the opposing poles in each case appear to fit preconceptions of North American and Asian pedagogical practise. These include:

1. Preference for informal vs. formal communication

2. Preference for independent vs. dependent learning

3. Preference for participatory learning vs. passive learning, and

4. Preference for energetic vs. calm learning.

In a survey of Japanese students studying English in Vancouver, Whalley found that his students agreed that their perceptions of Japanese education was that the second category in each of the above cases was the preferred option in Japan. In stating their own preferences, an overwhelming majority maintained that they also preferred a system of “formal communication” in which teacher and student maintain traditional roles; however, in the other categories, the student respondents were more or less evenly divided between those who preferred what were perceived to be the traditional Japanese values (dependent, passive, calm learning) and what they understood to be North American values (independent, participatory, energetic learning). While it would be dangerous to read too much into this single survey, it does suggest that the replication in North America of the traditional Chinese classroom, with its authoritative and venerated teacher, may have been as much for the benefit of the instructor as the student. My own feeling is that, in teaching Chinese as with other languages, a good-humoured, interactive, learner-centred approach makes for a good classroom experience for all concerned; but there is much to be gained in a more traditional rigor as it applies to homework, and the correct mastery of tones and stroke-order.

The final question I posed goes outside the language classroom in which most of us work

to the broader world of Chinese studies. Though most of my teaching has been of the Chinese language, my research area is actually in modern literature; I teach classes in traditional fiction (focussing on seventeenth century works such as Feng Menglong's Sanyan stories and the Shuihuzhuan), in early twentieth century literature and culture (from the late Qing novel through the May Fourth period to the popular and literary culture of the republican period), and the literature of the People's Republic, including a new offering on a single author or topic. The student body includes students of Chinese ethnicity born in Canada, Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as Canadian students (with or without a background in Chinese studies) and a number of students from Japan, a mix that I find very satisfying and interesting to teach. The stereotypes of Asian students – that they are reticent to express opinions that might differ from their teachers or might lead to their classmates laughing at them, and that they are especially reluctant to discuss any work that deals with sex – largely proved not to be the case. The most recent course I taught on Chinese literature focussed on the writing of the contemporary short-story writer and novels Yu Hua, who is celebrated for the brutality of his narratives and his unflinching descriptions of the worst that people can do to each other. Students read almost all of the short stories by Yu Hua that had been translated into English, and the novels Huozhe (To Live) and Xu Sanguan maixue ji (Chronicle of a Blood Merchant). What the Chinese students were able to provide was a sensitivity to the family system that Yu Hua so trenchantly deconstructs in his fiction, and a reading based on the Chinese texts that often differed from the understanding that other students derived from the translations. Most were untroubled by the violence of the stories. More importantly for present purposes, most were comfortable with the discussion of the texts that went on in the classroom. I believe that, though the teacher has a responsibility to respect the students and ensure that they do not suffer embarrassment or humiliation by reason of their ethnicity (or for that matter, their gender or sexual orientation), all students can profit from the traditions of the North American classroom.

I have offered what I believe are important questions for those of us who teach the current generation of students, with their diverse backgrounds, in both language and literature classes. I hope to learn from your responses and thoughts on these questions.