

# AUSTRALIA-CHINA AGENDA 2013

## Language Learning in the Asian Century

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*THE AUSTRALIAN Centre on China in the World engages with the public and policy discussion of relations with the People's Republic of China and the Chinese world. Australia-China Agenda 2013 is our contribution to this important election year and the on-going consideration of the bilateral relationship.*

*This is a relationship that touches on virtually every aspect of our national life. A mature and beneficial engagement of such breadth and depth requires the leadership and support of government at all levels, as well as public stewardship, media understanding, educational enhancement and the strategic involvement of the business community.*

*Australia-China exchanges are also profoundly influenced by regional and bilateral relationships. Australia and China trade in goods as well as culture, politics and people, ideas and education, community and personalities.*

*Australia-China Agenda: 2013 brings to the attention of the public and the media, politicians and specialists some reflections and policy ideas authored by specialists with a professional interest and involvement in the relationship.*

—Geremie R. Barmé  
Founding Director, CIW

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AUSTRALIAN CENTRE ON  
CHINA IN THE WORLD



Australian  
National  
University

ANU College of Asia & the Pacific  
Canberra, Australia

2013  
2013

JANUARY 一月

FEBRUARY 二月

MARCH 三月

APRIL 四月

MAY 五月

JUNE 六月

JULY 七月

AUGUST 八月

SEPTEMBER 九月

OCTOBER 十月

NOVEMBER 十一月

DECEMBER 十二月

二〇一四年

ON 24 MAY 2013, perhaps one of the dumbest articles written on language policy was published in *The Age* and reprinted in its sister publication, *The Sydney Morning Herald*. The article concluded that language learning was not necessary because ‘in the Eurovision contest, English songs have overwhelmingly turned out the winner’. No joke. A senior correspondent of two of the largest and most influential broadsheets in the country was arguing that because ABBA sang in English, Australians don’t need to learn Chinese in the Asian Century.

*The Age’s* correspondent was not alone. Leading up to and in the aftermath of the release of the White Paper, *Australia in the Asian Century*, his was merely one of a number of voices arguing against mandatory study of Asian languages by young Australians. These included disgruntled parents who complained their children had not gained fluency from compulsory school language programs, and observed that they themselves had done well enough without an Asian language. Educational policy people also used the opportunity to complain about their dire situation – crowded curricula,

too few teachers, lack of system co-ordination, poor pedagogy especially by migrant teachers, and failure of promised technological solutions.

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Debate about the importance and sustainability of language programs did not start with the White Paper, however. In the preceding year universities such as La Trobe, Curtin, New South Wales, Western Sydney and Canberra had either threatened to close, or in Canberra’s case closed, their language programs.

It seemed that despite the White Paper finding broad consensus for its proposition that Australia’s economic, cultural and social future is inextricably linked to Asia’s, learning Asian languages was just too hard for Australia(ns), or perhaps just not worth the effort.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

It remains the case that speaking (and teaching) only English puts Australia at a disadvantage in the Asian Century and, among other things, in our relationship with China. Moreover, given the right environment and relevant programs, students are interested in languages, and institutions are well financed to teach them.

However, if policy makers and educational institutions are to cultivate broad (and deep) language competencies in the Australian community they need to develop a pragmatic response to the challenges of language education in Australia, as well as a realistic appraisal of where our efforts should be directed.

This starts with getting some key points clear.

### English is not Enough (for most things)

Although English is not enough, we must acknowledge that there is much that can be done with English. A pragmatic approach to building Asian language capabilities needs to recognise this: many people have found that a lack of fluency in an Asian language is no impediment to their success in Asia. Elite transnational operators can indeed perform perfectly well in English. Politicians, senior executives of large corporations and university vice-chancellors, for example, are quite capable of successfully engaging with their equally transnational Asian counterparts. Much can be accomplished with English and English alone.

This is not the end of the story, however. As the centre of world economic gravity moves towards Asia, and China in particular, we need to be capable of a depth and breadth of engagement beyond the elites. Australians operating at all levels will have to communicate and negotiate with counterparts in linguistic and cultural settings increasingly removed from elite trans-national norms.

In these diverse settings, the bilingual English learner has a distinct advantage economically over the native English monolingual. In small and medium enterprises, the Chinese business owner who learns English may not only compete globally, but also out-compete the monolingual English business owner for Chinese customers. The monolingual English speaker will also struggle to compete in the enormously important intra-Asian trade, where, for example, the supply chain between Korea and Taiwan might equally be negotiated in Japanese or Mandarin, instead of English.

While international education to English speaking countries benefits Australia's monolingual population, it is important not to forget that the same student mobility is happening within Asia so that Japan and Korea's very large international student pop-

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ulations are dominated by Chinese and ASEAN students. A case in point: according to UNESCO there were 86,553 students from China studying in Japan in 2010; there were only 319 from Australia.

For tourism too, monolingual English speakers may well provide the authentic Australian experience. But as incomes rise and Chinese tourists come from a greater cross-section of (non-elite, non-English speaking) Chinese society, we need to be able to understand and cater for them as well. We don't expect Australian long-weekend visitors to Bali to speak Indonesian, and nor should we expect Chinese visitors to have mastered English to experience Australia.

Importantly, when we do not have a firm grasp of the languages and cultures of our regional counterparts we miss a lot of what we are being told. Translation filters are not neutral or objective. Without our own language and cultural experts we must rely on others for translation, leaving us less engaged, less informed, and vulnerable.

We also know learning a foreign language makes you or your children smarter. Probably most importantly, we know that learning a second language makes you more globally engaged and empathetic – you meet more people and you have more fun. Moreover, these humanistic reasons for learning a language tend to be the most effective long-term motivation for learners.

Yes, to not know English is a disadvantage, but to only know English further sets back an individual or country. Without the language skills to participate actively in an increasingly internally integrated Asia, we will remain on the periphery, only able to communicate with one language, the useful, but nonetheless outsiders' 'second' language of English. Thus, just as we must invest in numeracy and English literacy, to fail to also invest in the study of languages will leave our children and nation vulnerable and uncultured.

### Languages are Not Expensive to Teach

All of the recent threats to university language programs have been at least partially based on the argument that they are expensive to deliver. That is a myth.

Language teaching is well funded. Government policymakers fund and support languages on par with allied health and ahead of subjects in social sciences, humanities, law and business. Unfortunately, university funding models often mean this greater level of support is not reflected at the coalface.

Furthermore, the notion that languages need greater contact hours than other subjects, and are thus more expensive, can be challenged. Students still need a considerable number of hours dedicated to language learning as they are starting out, but this does not need to be done in the classroom with an attending academic. Mobile computing and peer-directed learning mean that students can devote the time they need to master their language skills without the constant presence of their teacher.

This does not entail any ‘dumbing down’ of language learning, only that the locus of the time students need to spend on the exercise is shifted from the supervised classroom to a more independent personal or peer setting. Language learning remains as difficult and time consuming as always and no technology or flash pedagogy will miraculously replace that.

### Students are Interested

The myth that students in Australia do not want to study languages is also fundamentally false.

There are many disincentives in place to stop them from doing so, however. In senior secondary systems restrictive subject selection, poor recognition of languages in Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) calculations and lack of differentiation between native, heritage, continuing and *ab initio* learners dissuade many students from pursuing languages.

Without these constraints students study languages. The International Baccalaureate (IB) is a wonderful counter-example to the disappointing situation we have let unfold in the state senior secondary. Languages are a compulsory subject among the six subjects in the Year 11-12 IB diploma. Languages are fully valued in the calculation of the final IB mark. Importantly, because of the multiplicity of subjects and the compulsion to include all six subjects, the

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IB mark calculation does not disadvantage those who comparatively do not excel at languages. Finally, in contrast to the decrease in the number of students pursuing languages within the state senior secondary system, the IB with its compulsory language requirement has increased markedly over the recent period.

There is also no lack of students wanting to learn languages in universities. Both the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Australia saw significant increases in language students when rigid curriculum rules were released. Japanese and French shot through the roof at Melbourne, likely building on the strength of those two languages nationally up until the Year 10 level. The University of Western Australia was able to add Korean with the assistance of Korean soft diplomacy money but the enrolment number exceeded lecture theatre and lecturer capacity resulting in caps.

It is important to note, however, that most of these new learners are not the paradigmatic language student of earlier times. These students are not language majors who are interested or able to make the commitment that those traditional students do. Language is not the end point unto itself, but rather it is an add-on or extra to their other love or discipline.

We need to understand the differentiated goals and needs of language learning in the Australian community and structure our language programs and pathways accordingly.

### Where to From Here

So, if we need to learn Chinese to build a broader and deeper relationship with China, if the teaching of Chinese is not an unreasonable burden on our educational institutions, and if students would learn Chinese if only they had the right conditions, then what can be done to build broad and (where necessary, deep) language capabilities in the Australian community?

We suggest the following:

- We need to understand the differentiated goals and needs of language learning in the Australian community and structure our language programs and pathways accordingly. This may involve respecting that English is useful in the region, and that some are able to operate successfully with English alone. However, relying on English is not enough to sustain and build deep relationships with our neighbours, particularly China.
- Restructuring our language programs to meet student and national needs should

be done with reference to the Capabilities Pyramid of the *Asian Century* White Paper (namely, social foundations, broad capabilities and specialised experts).

- Much of the development of the community's broad capabilities and awareness of Asia and Asian languages can be achieved through compulsory language programs in high schools, even if native-like fluency is neither expected nor achieved. However, disincentives to take-up of language at senior secondary levels must be removed.
- Universities have a critical role in building our specialised language capabilities, but they also need to recognise their role in providing more general skills through elective 'broadening' courses where there is much demand from students.
- University administrators should recognise the financial viability of language programs and pass the priority funding received for languages down to areas delivering language programs.
- Language teachers and academics must be supported to engage with modern teaching methodologies such as fully realising the potential of modern technology in the language classroom.
- With limited resources we should focus on the three key languages – Chinese, Japanese, and Indonesian – with allowance for Korean and Hindi as well as many others such as Tagalog, Thai and Vietnamese as wild cards for schools that have a compelling reason for them.
- Finally, we should shift our attention away from primary school language learning to put more focus on secondary and university learning. This may appear to fly in the face of applied linguistic research that suggests the earlier exposure the better for language learning. It is, however, a pragmatic response to the reality of the context in which we operate in Australia where we are dominated by monolinguals, where quality language teachers are scarce, and where the crowded curriculum means a student is unlikely to get sufficient exposure hours through the early years to have any impact whatsoever. Most significantly, it is a response to the plethora of parents who keep quoting the anecdote of their child learning Japanese for eight years at primary and early secondary school and not being able to say hello (though they are extremely good at origami and a few nursery rhymes).

Delivery of these simple reforms will leave Australia better placed to speak and engage with China in this Asian Century.

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#### AUSTRALIAN CENTRE ON CHINA IN THE WORLD

The Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW), College of Asia & the Pacific (CAP), The Australian National University (ANU) is an initiative of the Commonwealth Government of Australia in collaboration with ANU, a university with the most significant concentration of dedicated Chinese Studies expertise and the publisher of the leading Chinese Studies journals in Australia. CIW is a national research centre that is jointly managed by a body of academics that includes scholars of China at universities in Adelaide, Brisbane, Hobart, Melbourne and Sydney.

The Centre is a humanities-led research institution that is engaged with the broad range of social sciences to produce academic work that, while relevant to the full spectrum of demands of international scholarship, also relates meaningfully to those in the public policy community, and to the broader interested public, both in Australia and overseas. It values a New Sinology, that is an intellectual, cultural and personal involvement with the Chinese world (be it in the People's Republic, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan or globally) that is underpinned by traditions of academic independence, local fluency and disciplinary relevance.

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#### CIW sites

<http://ciw.anu.edu.au>  
<http://www.thechinastory.org>

#### CIW publications (also available online)

*China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China*, October 2013

*China Story Yearbook 2012: Red Rising, Red Eclipse*, August 2012

Stephen FitzGerald, *Australia and China at Forty—Stretch of the Imagination*, 澳大利亚与中国已届四十年—舒展的想象力, February 2013

*Australia and China: A Joint Report on the Bilateral Relationship* 中国和澳大亚：关于双边关系的联合报告, with the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), February 2012

#### CIW journals

*China Heritage Quarterly*  
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*East Asian History*  
(<http://www.eastasianhistory.org>)

*The China Journal*, co-published  
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