

# Chinese Are Learning the 'Linguo'

By Michael Parks

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**B**EIJING — While millions of Chinese are studying English, French, Japanese and Russian to help speed China's modernization, more than 120,000 people here are learning Esperanto, the 97-year-old "international language" that increasingly is capturing the imagination of Chinese wanting to end their country's long isolation from the West.

More than 33,000 people — shop clerks, college graduates, farmers and factory workers — enrolled recently in two Esperanto correspondence courses. Thirteen Chinese universities are offering Esperanto as a foreign language this year, and 19 others have Esperanto teachers on their faculties.

Esperanto associations have been established in 32 Chinese provinces and cities, 30 Esperanto magazines are being published here and, four times daily, Radio Beijing broadcasts a half-hour program in Esperanto to about 50 countries. Because of Esperanto's increasing popularity in China, the 1986 World Esperanto Conference will take place in Shanghai.

Relatively few people, probably no more than 10 million worldwide, speak Esperanto, and virtually no up-to-date scientific material is published in Esperanto. But none of this seems to dismay China's Esperantists, who make up one of the world's fastest-growing contingents of Esperanto speakers.

## Hope for a World Language

Many Chinese taking up Esperanto believe it will make European languages, on which it is largely based, easier to learn. Some are convinced that the 30,000 or so foreign books that have been translated into Esperanto over the years offer much for China. And all seem to share the hope that Esperanto as a world language will in time bring people closer together.

"*Esperanto estas nur lingvo sed esta bela ideo*," Zhang Qicheng, secretary-general of the All-China Esperanto League, said the other day, then translated: "Esperanto is not merely a language but a beautiful ideal, and this ideal is that, sooner or later, mankind will have a common language."

Mr. Zhang, editor of the league's magazine, *El Popola Cinio* (From People's China, in Esperanto), and a member of the Universal Esperanto Association, argues that there is a long-term need, particularly by Third World countries, for such an international language to "counter language hegemony and fight for national independence."

"Although English, for example, is widely spoken, it cannot be used as a truly international language because English-speaking countries would then be privileged and other countries would be resentful," said Mr. Zhang, who speaks English and Indonesian as well as Esperanto and several Chinese dialects. "Still, English is now dominant in the world, and it will be difficult to change this historical trend."

As amazing as 120,000 Chinese speakers of Esperanto may be, the figure is dwarfed by the estimated 10 million students enrolled in formal courses of English and perhaps twice

that number who are studying English in night schools, by television and in informal groups that meet in factories, clubs and city parks.

With China's growing emphasis on English as the primary foreign language in its schools — French, Russian and Japanese combined probably have fewer than 3 million students — the effort to promote Esperanto has been vigorously debated. Critics have said it would be better to learn German or Spanish or any other national language than Esperanto.

"It's useless," an English-speaking Chinese intellectual said. "There are already too many languages in the world. Why invent another one?"

Others here have suggested that Chinese should first learn to speak well the standard dialect of their own language, a point that has also been made in criticism of English-language instruction in high schools here. And a few critics have noted in letters to Chinese newspapers that members of the All-China Esperanto League do not even speak Esperanto among themselves.

## Reasons for Popularity

"There is some debate within China on the usefulness of Esperanto," Mr. Zhang acknowledged. "Some do say that it is not worth learning."

But its popularity continues to grow in China, he said, because, for Chinese, Esperanto is "easy to learn compared with other Western languages and, again for Chinese, it does facilitate the learning of other European languages."

The Esperanto alphabet has 28 letters, each with only one sound. About 60 percent of the words are drawn from Latin, and with a series of prefixes and suffixes one root can produce as many as 40 related words. Esperanto's grammar is simple. All nouns end in "o," all adjectives end in "a," and there is a single, completely regular conjugation for verbs. All spelling is phonetic. In pronunciation, the accent is always on the last syllable.

Esperanto, which in Esperanto means "one who hopes," was devised in 1887 by a Polish-Russian ophthalmologist, L.L. Zamenhof, in the hope that a common language would bring the people of Europe closer together. Although Zamenhof borrowed little from Chinese in inventing Esperanto, the way its words are formed is similar to Chinese, Mr. Zhang said.

"Although we write in characters, and this gives our language another dimension, the conceptual basis of Esperanto is close to Chinese," he said. "This makes Esperanto very 'approachable' for a Chinese."

Mr. Zhang, 71, was studying English as a youth in Shanghai in 1930 when he became fascinated with Esperanto, which at the time was quite popular among Chinese intellectuals.

"It seemed to me that it would be easier for Chinese to assimilate the Western science and technology we needed to develop the country through Esperanto than a dozen different foreign languages," Mr. Zhang recalled. "Unfortunately, I found that few science books had been translated into Esperanto. But through reading novels and other literary

works which had been translated, my insight into the West increased greatly."

Mr. Zhang's — and China's — continuing fascination with Esperanto is thus part of the long search for a way to speed China's modernization and economic development by opening it to the outside world.

Experienced Western linguists are said to be able to learn Esperanto's basics with 20 hours of instruction, and Chu Mingjie, an official of the Esperanto League, said that Chinese can learn Esperanto well enough to teach it to others within a year, and that even those studying the language by correspondence course can read and write Esperanto with ease after a year.

When the Shanghai Foreign Language Institute allowed its third-year students majoring in English and French to take Esperanto as an optional third language, more than half enrolled, to the amazement of their teachers. After the first semester, Wei Yuangshu, the chief instructor, said that the students, among China's best in English, French and Japanese, would probably speak Esperanto even better because of its simplicity.

"Studying Esperanto is not as Quixotic as it seems at first," an American-trained Chinese historian commented. "In the 1930s, we were experimenting with anything that might help us, and that experimentation continues. ... Esperanto is not a very practical approach, but placed within modern Chinese history it is certainly understandable."

## Supported by Mao

Its study was supported by the Education Ministry under the old Chinese Nationalist government, by leading intellectuals such as the writer Lu Hsun and later by the Communists, who saw it as politically progressive.

"If we could take Esperanto as the means, and internationalism and revolution as the ideal," the late Chairman Mao said in 1939, when Esperanto was being used to promote the Chinese Communists' cause abroad, "then Esperanto can be learned and should be learned."

Esperanto was introduced into Chinese universities as a foreign language in 1963, but study was stopped when all schools were closed in 1966 by the Cultural Revolution, and a revival began only in 1979. Now, the Esperanto League's magazine has 42,000 subscribers, and new Esperanto books and dictionaries sell out quickly.

Despite the enthusiasm here for Esperanto, matched only in a few countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America, Mr. Zhang does not believe that its time has come.

"We should admit that, at least for the present, Esperanto is not widespread or very popular in the world, and thus is not practical as an international language," he said. "Still, it plays its role in other respects and will continue to deepen understanding and friendship among different peoples. ... To communicate today, people have to learn a lot of foreign languages, but, ideally, Esperanto would be sufficient, and this idea is still quite attractive to many people, particularly the young."