Teaching (Mandarin) Chinese at South African schools

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Why choose (Mandarin) Chinese?

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By far one of the most common questions we get asked when people find out our children are learning (Mandarin) Chinese at preschool, is 'why?' It seems to be one of the many polarizing subjects in our country at the moment, one group of people firmly planted in the anti-China camp, and the other - pro. People on both sides of the aisle got involved in heated debate following the announcement on March 20th 2015 by the South African department of Education that Mandarin would now be on offer in schools as an additional subject. It's important to note here that the decision to add Chinese was not at the expense of other languages/subjects, and would only be available to *some* South African schools.

Our decision as parents for our three young children to learn Chinese was not at the expense of an African language. We feel just as strongly that isiZulu (and others) are more practical in our country and for the sake of barrier breaking and nation-building, should be a priority for families while children are still young. However, the benefits of adding Chinese to my children's language learning far outweighed the sideways glances from strangers and well-meaning know-it-all-friends, and here's why:

Chinese is a tonal language, and in that is probably about as far removed from any other language my kids will be exposed to. A foundation in a tonal language (Chinese) and Bantu language (isiZulu) gives them a well-rounded linguistic foundation that will make learning any additional languages from those language families much, much easier. The ability to identify and reproduce tones is significantly decreased after the age of 8yrs, which is why learning a tonal language as an adult is almost impossible.

Another factor in our decision to choose Chinese over another language is most definitely the growing role that China is playing in the economy of our continent. One doesn't need to look far ahead into the future to know that China is going to be a major player, and China and South Africa are only going to have more to do with each other in years to come. On the whole, very little is known about one another from either side, and therein lies both a great challenge and even greater opportunity. I want my children to be able to leverage these opportunities and be indispensible in their future workplace.

As far as learning foreign languages go, Chinese is certainly up there as one of the best for South Africans to learn, alongside French and Portuguese. South Africa is also not the first country to bring Chinese into the mainstream curriculum in an effort to further relationships with China into the future: Australia has pushed for Chinese in their schools for many years already and as a predominantly monolingual country, Chinese is the second language of choice. Besides being spoken by the largest population in the world as a

first language, Chinese is also the fastest growing second language in the globe. So if it’s not yet on your radar, it probably should be.

However, learning Chinese is not for every family. As with any language, it takes an enormous amount of commitment and daily access to speaking is still not readily available in SA. When choosing a language for your child to learn other factors may include your *heritage* (languages your parents/grandparents speak), or *access* (what’s available around you). It’s important to remember that no one language is more important than another, which is why language choice is such a subjective one. However, if usefulness is a consideration when choosing a language for your child, Chinese should most definitely deserves your attention.

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