

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND GAZETTE

Vol. 10. No.1

PUBLISHED BY THE UNIVERSITY

April 1968

	Asian Language Studies	<i>Douglas Lancashire</i>
1	Plant Pathology in the University	<i>F. J. Newhook</i>
3	Grants and Donations	
5	Personal News	
5	Events	
11		

ASIAN LANGUAGE STUDIES

The study of Asian languages is not a totally new experience for New Zealanders. Since I arrived in this country two years ago I have met and corresponded with a number of people who, for one reason or another, have acquired a good command of Chinese, Japanese or Indonesian. As a recent donation of Chinese books from the University of Otago indicates, there have been some New Zealanders, the majority of them missionaries, who have carried their studies beyond the mere oral level to become knowledgeable in the literary traditions of the countries of their interest.

The introduction of Asian Language courses into a New Zealand university, beginning with Chinese in 1966, marks, even so, a radical departure from earlier attitudes. Formerly these languages were the preserve of a few people who, on the whole, required them for the dissemination of foreign ideas among the peoples of Asia, and who usually had to pursue their studies outside New Zealand. They are now being taught, or are about to be taught, as vehicles for their own cultures within the framework of the New Zealand education system.

A number of problems arise the moment one decides to introduce Asian Language studies into a European university. The first and most obvious is that such a university is, through its interrelated departments and disciplines, a microcosmic reflection of the whole range of European culture. No matter how a student may organize his studies he will quickly discover points of contact between the disciplines to which he submits himself. When he finally graduates, he should be in possession of a relatively cohesive body of knowledge which will provide him with a good understanding of his European heritage and which he can relate to the society in which he lives and to which he belongs.

Asian language and literature studies cannot themselves provide the whole social and cultural context of which these languages are a part. This means that a student who decides to take, say, Chinese, will find it exceedingly difficult to see any connection between this part of his course and those other, European, subjects which he may have to choose to complete his studies for a degree. Nor should this surprise us, for until very recent times the culture of China, as of certain other Asian nations, has possessed an autonomy of its own, and has often harboured feelings of self-sufficiency equal in intensity to anything found in Europe.

To overcome this isolation, and to help the student of an Asian language to relate his language studies to a wider context, other departments are examining the possibility of offering courses centred on East and South-east Asia. The Department of History is already providing tuition in Chinese and South-east Asian history, and

the departments of Geography, Economics and Political Studies hope to provide courses in the Asian field once suitable staff can be found.

The content of language and literature courses in Chinese (I shall limit my remarks to Chinese in this article but many of them generally relate to Japanese and Indonesian) confronts us with another problem. Do we limit ourselves, as some universities have done, to the language and literature of the classical tradition which, though archaic in form, reaches right into the twentieth century? Or should we concentrate on teaching the spoken language, and read only that literature which has been produced since the literary revolution just fifty years ago? Nor can we ignore the increasing interest of the historian and social scientist in the Asian field, and the need of students in these disciplines for courses of language training which will provide them with at least the minimum amount of skill required for reading modern books and journals connected with their subjects.

Fortunately, the very way in which university studies are organized in New Zealand has suggested a solution. It has been possible to work out three phases of study which, if followed through to stage three, will introduce the student to both the classical and modern traditions, and if the student wishes to take Chinese only as a sub-major, will go a long way towards equipping him with the knowledge he will need for reading modern writing of various kinds.

Literature is more than the mere stringing together of words according to accepted sentence structures. It is a vehicle for thought and emotion, and frequently reflects the moods, frustrations and aspirations of a whole society. Since one of the aims of Asian Studies in New Zealand must be to give New Zealanders some insight into the minds of her Asian neighbours, great care has been taken in the selection of the material used in our courses. All the texts studied in the second and third years are designed to convey the major artistic and social interests of the Chinese people throughout their long history.

The following is an outline of the Chinese courses as at present constituted.

First Year. No prior knowledge of Chinese is required, although a preliminary period of study in the course now offered by the Department of University Extension will naturally make the rather tough first year a little easier to bear.

The Chinese script offers virtually no guidance on the pronunciation of the language. The student must begin by learning one of the systems of romanization devised in recent times. However, if he is to make any headway at all, he must make good progress with the Chinese script. For this reason he is introduced to it no later than the second week of first term. Chinese characters (which are common to both Chinese and Japanese literature) do impose a great strain on the memory. Many students, having learnt two or three hundred characters, decide that they can go no further and give up. Once a student can be persuaded to break through this barrier and continue with his studies to the end of the year, he will discover that the six to seven hundred characters he has learnt are those which most frequently occur in modern writing, and he will be surprised at the amount he can understand when presented with a simple piece of modern prose.

First year Chinese, then, is essentially a stage in which the fundamentals of the language in its modern form are studied and, we hope, mastered. Tape-recordings have been made of all the lesson material employed, and students are expected to attend the language laboratory for one hour each week. In addition, two listening booths have been acquired for the department. These are available at any time of the day for students who wish to spend more time improving their oral ability.

Second Year. The most formidable part of the Chinese course is undoubtedly the first term of second year, when textbooks are left behind and the student is plunged headlong into material selected from modern writers. To bridge the gap between first and second year studies it is essential that students use the summer vacation to learn a further three or four hundred characters. Character and vocabulary lists have been compiled to assist students in this task. (These are lettered with a brush and reproduced in the Bindery by the Xerox process.)

The aim of our second year course is to introduce the student to the field of modern Chinese literature and at the same time help him make further progress in mastering the modern written language. The improvement of his skill in spoken Chinese is not neglected, but with the amount of work which has to be devoted to the written word, not as much time can be given to this aspect of his studies as we would like.

Two major forms of modern writing are introduced to the student in his prescribed texts. These are the novel and the essay. A chapter from one

of the most influential novels of the 1930s, by the popular writer Pa Chin, and a short story by Lu Hsun, generally acknowledged as the greatest Chinese writer of fiction in modern times, have been chosen to represent the modern Chinese novel. To represent the modern essay, two highly significant documents representative of the best of Chinese liberal scholarship on the one hand, and of the political writing of present-day Communism on the other, have been selected.

To supplement these prescribed texts material has been chosen from a wide range of modern authors for practice in translation. Each week the student is given passages in both Chinese and English which he is expected to translate at home, his efforts being examined in detail in subsequent translation classes. More than twenty passages representative of about a dozen Chinese authors are therefore read and translated into English during the year.

However, this piecemeal approach to the modern literary scene needs to be co-ordinated. This is done through a series of lectures on the history of Chinese fiction which examines the origins of this genre, makes a survey of the major novels in the classical tradition (some of these novels have to be read by the student in English translations), and finally deals with the literary revolution of 1917 and its aftermath, which aimed at replacing the classical style with a form of language which approximates to the colloquial language.

Third Year. The link between second and third year Chinese is an introductory course on classical Chinese in the second year. Modern Chinese is not lost sight of during the third year (students continue to have weekly practice in translation into modern Chinese and are given as one of their prescribed texts a longish essay by a modern novelist or playwright dealing with modern literature), but the major aim of the third year course is to take the student back into traditional literature and thought forms. The prescribed texts range from the period of the classical philosophers to chapters selected from a major eighteenth century novel. The philosopher chosen for study is Mencius (371-289 BC) since his version of Confucianism exercised a major influence on the minds of Chinese intellectuals until modern times. Next comes some short stories from the T'ang dynasty (AD 618-907), and then the chapters from the great novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Once again a series of lectures is given on the history of Chinese literature in order to unify the whole course. These lectures deal initially with the major Confucian classics together with pre-Han prose and poetry in general. (The Han dynasty ranges from 206BC to AD 221). Next comes a fairly detailed survey of the major forms of poetry of Han and post-Han times followed by one or two lectures on Chinese drama. Students are provided with selections of poetry in their original form and a number of poems are read through in class.

It has been impossible within the space of this article to say anything about the large subject of postgraduate studies in Chinese, but it is hoped that sufficient indication has been given of the factors which have influenced the pattern of teaching which has so far emerged. Considerations in many ways similar will obviously play a great part in the shaping of our future Japanese and Indonesian programmes.

Douglas Lancashire