Chinese Language Classes Help Prepare Students for Careers in Global Economy

When students take Li Li Peters’ Chinese language and studies classes, they're not only learning the language and traditions of one of the oldest civilizations in the world; many are preparing for future success in a globalized economy in which China plays a key role.

“The Chinese economy is at a crossroads transforming from one of producing labor-intensive commodities to one with a high-tech and service focus, and there is much the Chinese would like to learn from other countries in the years to come,” said Peters, an associate professor in the Chinese program.

According to Peters, China has attracted the largest population of expatriate post-graduates from English-speaking countries, especially Australia, Canada and the U.S. “Many of my former students have embarked on and developed China-related careers, from starting a wine export business to creating an environmental agency, from joining international law firms to running a financial/investment office, from video production to setting up art galleries,” she said.

The emergence of China has also raised questions particularly in the fields of humanities and social sciences, she said. Some of her former students have, with Fulbright, Boren, and other scholarships, engaged in research on topics such as migration, agricultural production, the ideal city, and the reform of the Chinese legal system.

“A degree in a professional field plus the mastery of Chinese language is a powerful combination when our students move into the increasingly competitive job market, either locally, domestically or globally,” she added.

Peters was raised in China, and was a child and teenager through the country's most turbulent time during the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976).

“After a few years of being sent to the countryside working with farmers and then back to the city working in a factory, I was admitted to Southwest Normal University, China, after the Cultural Revolution, majoring in English,” Peters said. After receiving her BA, she earned a master’s degree in English poetry and translation studies from Zhejiang University.
“I started to teach at Beijing Teacher’s College after gaining my MA in 1988 and in the meantime embarked on a career as a translator of English language poetry and poetics. Following the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, at which I was directly present, I came to the U.S. to advance my study in the field of literature and culture,” she said.

Peters earned a second MA in Asian Languages and Civilizations from the University of Colorado, Boulder, and a PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles in the same field.

Peters joined the University of Denver in 2007. Her interests include Chinese literature, cinema studies, gender studies and intellectual trends.

“I enjoy teaching all levels of language classes. It is a great satisfaction to see students making daily progress in learning this rather challenging, but critical language; yet the high point often comes when students start to use Chinese in expressing their opinions on social issues in upper level, content-based classes,” she said.

She encourages her students to fully immerse themselves in the culture through study in China.

“Chinese is a notoriously difficult language marked by tens of thousands of ideographic symbols, whose names and tones must be individually learned,” she said. “Learning Chinese in an immersion environment helps students more effectively bridge the gap between written words and their pronunciations and intonations. Furthermore, studying in China helps students build bonds with their Chinese host families, fellow students and other professionals through internship and other channels; and exposes them to the rapidly changing society and emerging opportunities.”

Peters has compiled and translated a few volumes of English poetry and poetry criticism and published a dozen articles and book chapters on Chinese literary and cultural studies. While Peters is on sabbatical during the fall and winter quarters, she will be completing the revision of a manuscript entitled “Memory, Fluid Identity, and the Politics of Remembering in the Representations of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in English-speaking Countries,” which will be published in 2014.