Chinese Studies Catch the Attention

There are not many instances where you can find high school seniors reciting pre-school-level songs with undisguised enthusiasm. But it is songs such as "Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes," some tongue twisters and other familiar catchy tunes that have Polly Li's Chinese students eagerly participating in class.

Of course, everything is in Mandarin. "We use a lot of songs," Ms. Li explains. "The students find it easy to remember that way," she adds, pointing out that the five tones of the language are tough for Westerners to acquire accurately. She says her students picked up the Chinese alphabet, recited to the "ABC" tune the students had grown up singing, in "two minutes."

The rise of China's participation in the global economy plus the Beijing Olympics have peaked students' interest in learning the language, Mrs. Li says. "These students have very dear goals and know that Chinese is going to be helpful in their futures," she says.

This is the second year that Chinese has been offered at Greeley and every junior who participated last year chose to return for Chinese Level II as seniors. Another class of seniors is taking Chinese Society, a course that covers language and social studies, and is taught by Mrs. Li in collaboration with social studies teacher Mark Jagels. Chinese Level I has 28 9th to 12th graders starting Chinese this year. Mrs. Li, who grew up in China and returns frequently, takes pains to make the language seem less daunting than its reputation would have it, and makes a point of including a good amount of cultural interest to her language lessons.

Ms. Li is very appreciative of the support for the program from the administration and the Chappaqua School Foundation, which provided a grant to enrich the cultural aspect of the program. "We shall get some culture-related materials to enhance our language teaching," explains Ms. Li, who will introduce the students to Chinese calligraphy and painting using authentic brush pens, inks, and ink sticks.

Aside from songs, Mrs. Li uses flash cards, read-aloud activities, group work, and individual presentations -- a variety of participatory techniques to keep the students engaged and help them master the language.

The students acknowledges the class is hard: "It's challenging," says Jonathan Allard, a senior in his second year of study. "It's very easy to get it wrong." Yet he, like the 15 other students who began Chinese as juniors, all returned this year for more.

The students' enthusiasm isn't confined to the classroom, and they are frequently overheard around school talking to each other in Chinese.

Senior Jordan Elkin is one of several of Mrs. Li's students planning to continue Chinese in college next year and is so taken with the language that he went on a six-week Chinese study program in Beijing last summer. "His language improved a lot," Mrs. Li observed.
Greeley seniors learn Chinese through song – here singing the pre-school favorite “Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes” – in Chinese.

Teacher Polly Li (below) challenges students to match Chinese characters on flash cards.

The Chinese Society class includes lessons on calligraphy and painting.