

# A CRISIS OF COMPLACENCY?

Chinese language learning in New Zealand

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*Ko Te Kaunihera o Aotearoa me Haina*

**New Zealand China Council**  
新西兰-中国关系促进委员会



## 1. Overview

For most of the past 175 years, New Zealand's international affairs were largely conducted in the Anglophone world or in an international environment where English was the lingua franca.

But now our largest merchandise trading partner is China, so for the first time in our history, we are dependent on a non-English speaking country for our long-term economic well-being.

While our economic engagement with China is strong, our deeper cultural engagement is less so. In particular, our level of Chinese language acquisition is low in light of our growing export, tourism and education connections.

For example, there are only two students learning Chinese for every \$1 million of our exports to China, compared to 63 for French. Just 4,218 New Zealand secondary students studied Chinese in 2014, compared to more than 20,000 who studied French.

New Zealanders understand the importance of increasing our pool of Chinese speakers. New research from the Asia New Zealand Foundation shows a clear preference for school children to learn Chinese compared to other non-English languages. But enrolment figures show our acquisition levels are clearly out of sync with

these expectations.

We are making some progress. The Confucius Institute runs a successful Mandarin Language Assistant programme, which encourages interest in Chinese language and culture in schools throughout New Zealand. At primary school level, enrolment numbers are growing rapidly. More than 24,000 primary students studied Chinese in 2014, up nearly 25% from 2013.

If the current rate of transition from primary to secondary continues, demand for Chinese language learning at secondary schools will spike after 2016, reaching approximately 24,000 students by 2021.

But more secondary schools need to offer Chinese language classes to meet this future demand. As of 2014, just 82 taught Chinese, compared to 160 that taught Spanish and 215 that taught French.

New Zealand must increase the number of students learning Chinese at the post primary level. If we remain complacent, we risk the opportunity to build on our successful bilateral trade, tourism and education linkages. We also risk the opportunity to equip future generations of New Zealanders to make the most of our economic relationship with China.

**Pat English**  
**Executive Director**  
**New Zealand China Council**

## 2. China has re-emerged

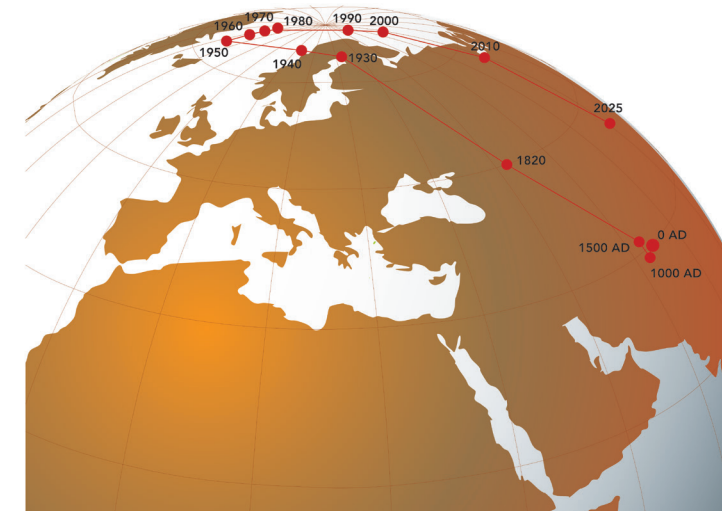
The global economy is becoming increasingly integrated. There are many channels for this integration - institutional, economic and cultural.

Globalisation is not new. The shape of the global economy is always changing, as demographics and economics change. This is visible in a shifting centre of global economic gravity (Figure 1).

Global economic activity was centred on the Silk Route in AD1. Industrialisation, education and urbanisation lifted the performance of the western world and the centre of the global economy shifted to the West.

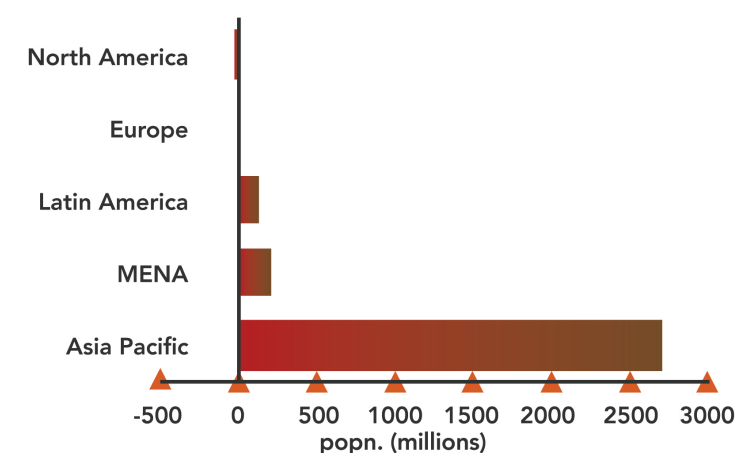
But since 1950 the centre of gravity has been shifting east, and is likely to be just over China by 2025.

**Figure 1: Evolution of the earth's economic centre of gravity**



Source: Original data from McKinsey Global Institute, illustration from The Economist

**Figure 2: Middle class population growth, 2010 - 2030**



Source: IMF, OECD, Brookings Institution.

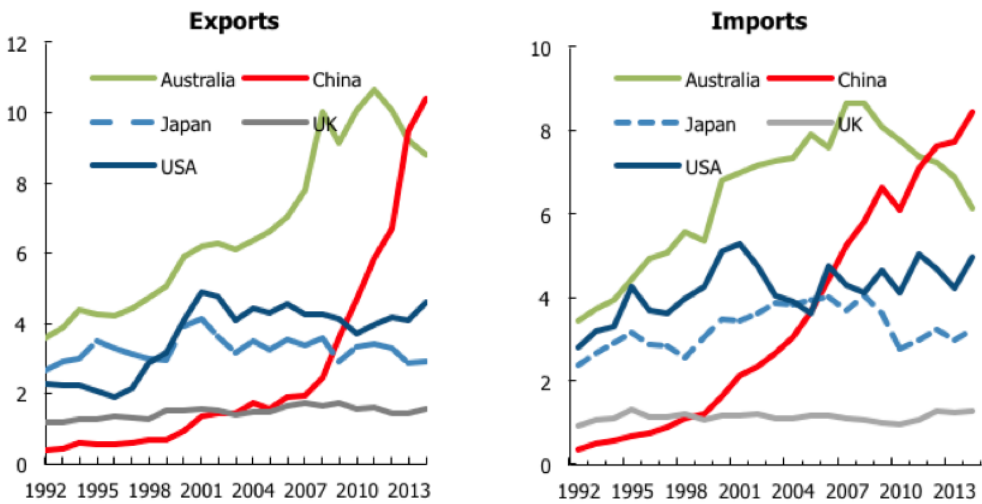
3. New Zealand is engaging well with China

New Zealand is increasingly engaged with the re-emerging China narrative. The most dominant displays so far have been institutional (official engagement through diplomatic and formal ties like Free Trade Agreements) and economic (merchandise trade and services such as tourism and education).

- Our exports to China have increased from just \$0.5b in 1994 to over \$10b in 2014. Imports have similarly surged (Figure 3).
- Tourism from China is also surging. There were more than 200,000 Chinese visitors in 2014, second only to Australia.
- China is our top source of international students. There were 24,268 international fee paying students from China in New Zealand in Trimester 2 of 2014, making up 28.4% of all enrolments.

Figure 3: New Zealand exports and imports: top 5 markets

\$b per year



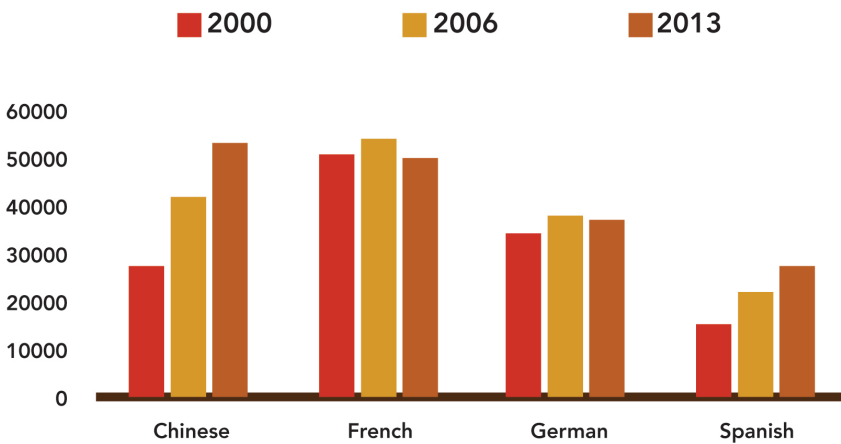
Source: Statistics NZ, NZIER

4. But language is a missing link

Our level of engagement with China in other modes has been slower to increase, in particular language acquisition. Language acquisition is important as it improves ease of communication and cultural empathy.

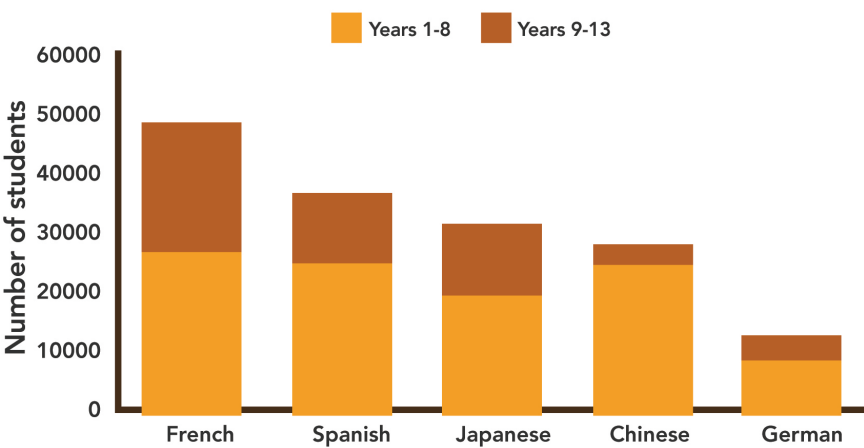
While Chinese language is increasingly spoken in New Zealand due to immigration and related factors (Figure 4), Chinese language teaching in schools is well behind other languages, especially at secondary level (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Foreign languages spoken in New Zealand



Source: Statistics New Zealand

Figure 5: Number of students learning languages in 2014



Source: Ministry of Education

5. We need to do better

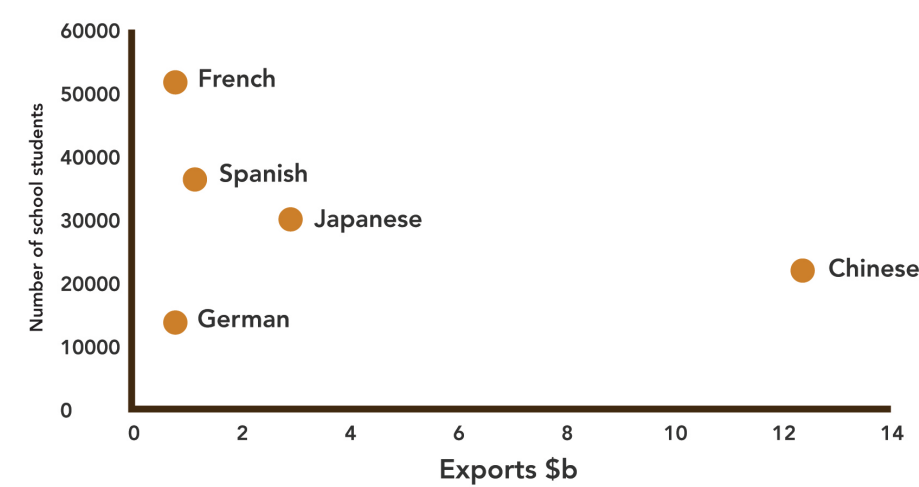
Our Chinese language acquisition is very low when measured against three key economic indicators:

- Exports to China,
- Tourism from China, and
- China's overall global economic strength in the world.

Exports:

There are only 2 school children learning Chinese for every \$1m of exports, but 63 for French, 31 for Spanish and 10 for Japanese (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Language teaching vs exports 2014



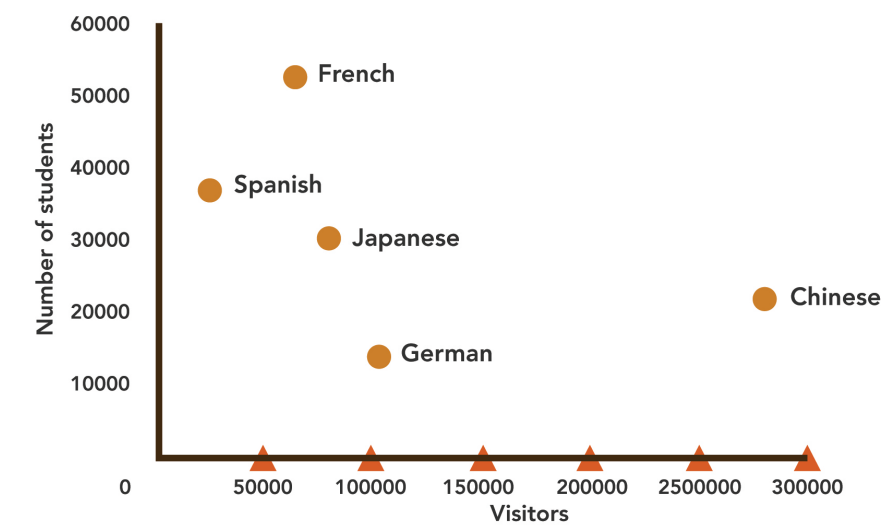
Source: Statistics NZ, Ministry of Education, NZIER

Chinese language acquisition needs to increase by at least five times if exporting is the benchmark.

**Tourism:**

There are only 78 children learning Chinese for every 1,000 visitors from China, but 136 for German, 377 for Japanese, 806 for French and 1,411 for Spanish (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Language teaching vs visitor arrivals 2014



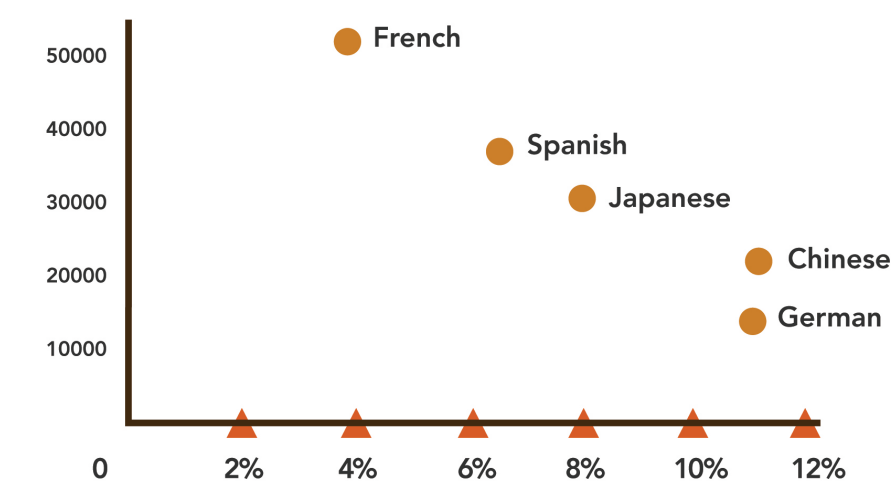
Source: Statistics NZ, Ministry of Education, NZIER

Chinese language acquisition needs to increase by at least 1.7 times if tourism is the benchmark.

**Global economic relevance:**

For every US\$1b of global economic activity, 3 New Zealand school children are learning Chinese and 2 learning German. In contrast, there are 18 learning French for every US\$1b of GDP, 8 Spanish, and 5 Japanese (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Language teaching vs share of global economy with first official language (excluding english)



Source: World Bank, Ministry of Education, NZIER

Chinese language acquisition needs to be at least two times if global economic size is the benchmark.

**6. Our attitudes are out of step with our reality**

The 2014 Asia New Zealand Foundation survey *New Zealanders' Perceptions of Asia and Asian Peoples* found New Zealanders are overwhelmingly in favour (83%) of learning a second language in school (in addition to English).

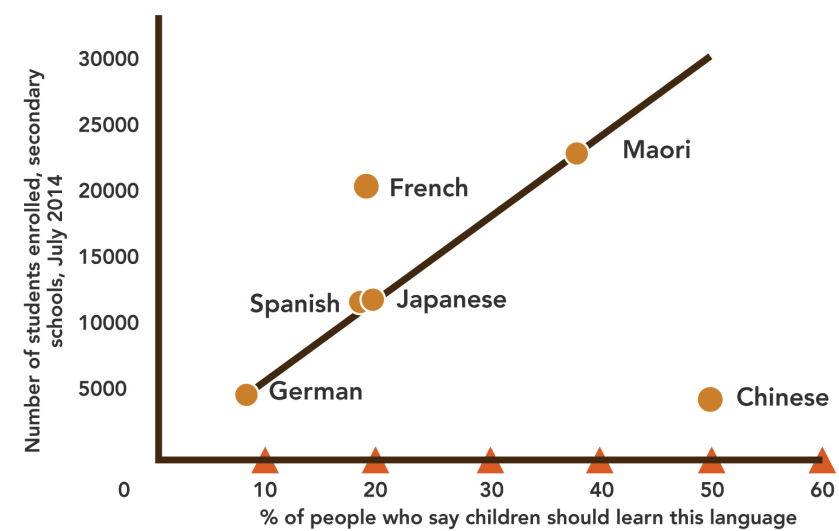
The most highly rated non-English language is Chinese, with 49% of respondents saying children in school should learn this language. When we look at the survey results against actual enrolments, we find consistent results for a number of languages, but also some stark differences (Figure 9).

German, Spanish, Japanese and Māori student enrolments are consistent with the relative weight placed by survey respondents. But French is taught more frequently (by around 10,000 compared to other languages, versus current enrolment of 20,478) than surveyed importance and Chinese is significantly under-taught (by around 25,000, versus current enrolment of 4,218).

The relative mismatches are stark when we consider Spanish to Chinese language teaching. Attitudes are 2.7 times in favour of Chinese (49% vs 18%), but enrolments are 2.7 times in favour of Spanish (11,573 Spanish enrolments vs 4,218 Chinese enrolments).

New Zealanders understand and recognise the need for Chinese to be taught in schools. But the reality of language teaching is falling well behind those expectations.

Figure 9: Surveyed importance of language acquisition and actual enrolments in school

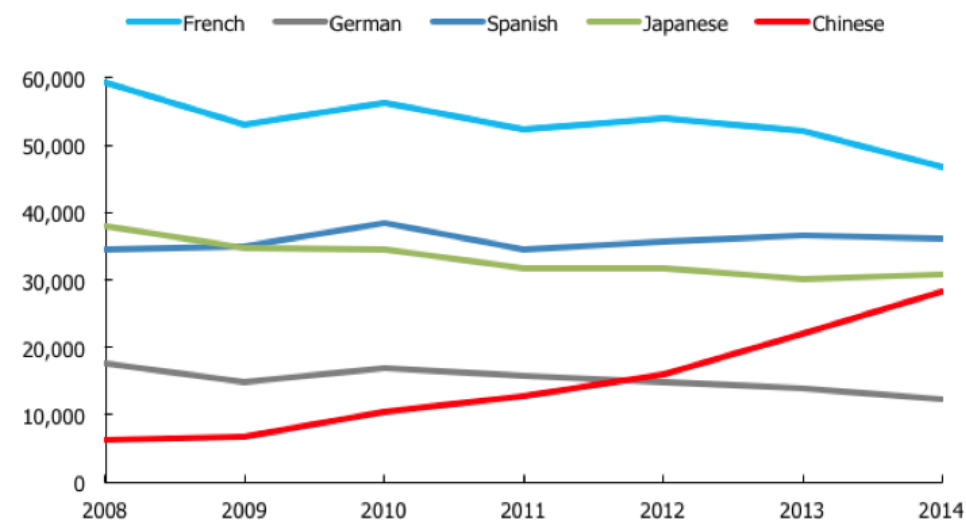


Source: Asia NZ Foundation (New Zealanders' Perceptions of Asia and Asian Peoples – 2014 Annual Survey, pages 37-38)

7. There has been some progress

The overall number of New Zealand students learning Chinese is growing, driven largely at Primary level (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Number of students learning languages, 2008-2014



Source: Ministry of Education

Primary school enrolments have increased significantly, from 18,754 in 2013 to 24,143 in 2014, a jump of 26%.

One of the organisations responsible for encouraging enrolments is the Confucius Institute, which has branches in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

The role of the Confucius Institute is to build understanding of and familiarity with China, its language, culture and people. The Institute has an active programme of placing native speaking Mandarin Language Assistants (MLAs) from China at New Zealand schools.

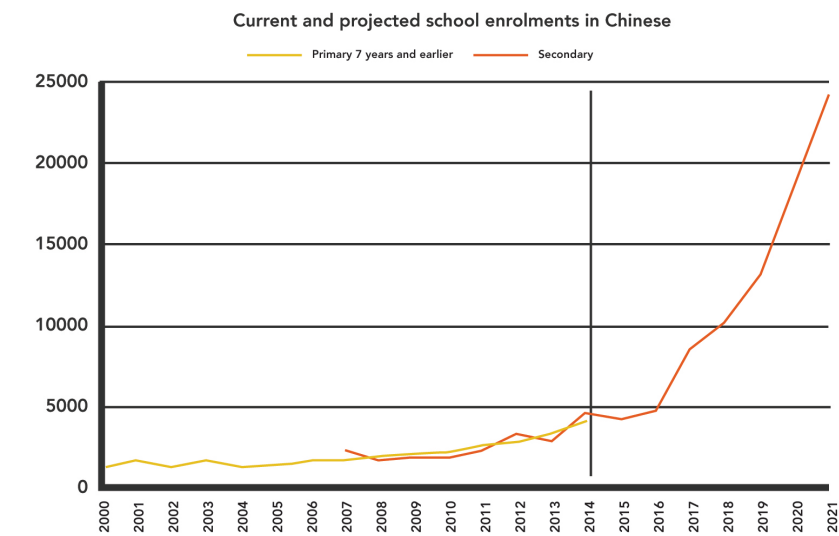
In 2014, there were more than 100 MLAs teaching at 250 schools across the country: 44 in Auckland, 38 in Wellington and 25 in Christchurch.

7. But we could struggle to meet future demand

If the current rate of primary school students studying Chinese that continue at secondary level continues, demand will increase to approximately 24,000 by 2021 (Figure 11).

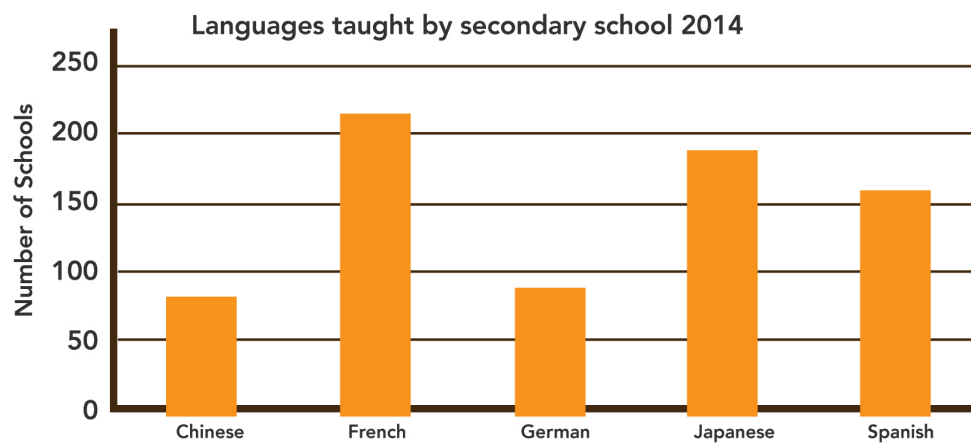
However, the number of secondary schools currently offering Chinese language is low and will need to increase significantly to cope with this demand.

Figure 11: Projected secondary Chinese enrolments 2014 - 2021



Source: NZIER

Figure 12: Secondary schools teaching Chinese vs other non-English



Source: Ministry of Education