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Greek popular in China

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By Carol Thorbes

SFU now teaches greek to more students than any other university in North America.

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Surprisingly, most are in China where student enrolment is skyrocketing in the university's fledgling, online, Greek language program.

Greek may be a difficult language to learn but Andre Gerolymatos, chair of Hellenic studies at SFU, is discovering that Chinese people welcome the challenge. While 25 students take Greek classes at SFU Burnaby, more than 170 students worldwide are enrolled in SFU's online program—160 are at the Beijing Language and Culture University in China.

Through a partnership with the university, SFU started offering the online program in China in March 2005. Already the Beijing university's students are lining up for an intermediate program, which should be online by January 2007.

"We originally intended to cap registration in China at 30 students, but the demand was so high we had to accommodate it," says Gerolymatos. "New economic agreements opening up and shipping trade between Greece and China, as well as a growing Chinese population in Athens' textile industry and a fascination with Greek mythology, account for the growing number of Chinese people learning Greek."

Sally Xiaoyin Huang was hired to translate and modify the online Greek program, which is normally taught in English, into Chinese for students at the Beijing Language and Culture University. Formerly an associate professor of education technology in China, Huang is the behind-the-scenes real-life tutor of the online program in Beijing.

"The Beijing university is focused on language education, and many of its students are learning English as a second language for teaching Chinese outside of China. They want to learn Greek as a third language," says Huang.

The online program was launched in February 2006 to bolster SFU's domestic enrolment in the Greek program and to reach a wider audience of potential students.

SFU also has a unique, online language learning program. While others provide no real-time interaction between students and teachers, Odysseas uses a computerized, intelligent, language-learning tutor to track students' language acquisition and provide real-time feedback.

Using sophisticated animation technology, Odysseas tells students why they've done exercises wrong, and provides further instruction. It adapts lessons to students' learning levels and allows them to compare their progress to others'.

The program's intelligent language learning tutor is programmed to teach pronunciation using audio recording. A real-life tutor at Burnaby campus grades audio exercises.

The project is supported by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. It underwrites philanthropic works around the world, and funds a variety of Hellenic Studies programs and projects such as Odysseas.

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