

Chinese studies gain popularity after Nixon trip

by Jacquin Saunders

It is not merely peace and ping pong competition that were served by President Nixon's visit to China. Quite suddenly, Chinese-language and culture courses have become the rage on U.S. campuses.

That is not to say that the numbers of Chinese scholars even approach those taking French or Spanish but the increase is, nevertheless, formidable. One UCLA professor describes his basic Chinese-language class as "crawling with students," and a professor at the University of Wisconsin says: "I never thought I'd see the day when I had to go out searching for a bigger classroom."

The students themselves seem a different breed from many of those who took Chinese in the past. Previously it had seemed almost a dead-end course of studies.

Indeed, the half-dozen or so major centers of East Asian studies in the U.S. were geared to small classes—and to the library rather than the field trip. Their astonishment at the sudden spurt in enrollment last fall, therefore, has been considerable.

At the University of Michigan, for example, Larry Sullivan—after discovering that his beginning course in Chinese government had been inadvertently omitted from the catalogue—put up two or three posters to advertise it around the campus. To his amazement, 40 students registered in a single day—and Sullivan hurriedly closed the class.

Though ping pong diplomacy started the big run on Chinese courses, there had already been some acceleration during the late '60s. In part, that was the doing of Maoist campus radicals who thought they

were willing to back their revolutionary zeal with the hard work it takes to plow through the rudiments of basic Chinese.

But these seldom lasted the semester. In fact, they helped make Chinese Language I into one of the most dropped-out-of courses on many campuses.

Now this pattern is changing. "Usually by mid-semester half the class will drop out, but this year two-thirds of the class is still here," says Dale Johnson, who teaches Chinese studies at Oberlin College in Ohio. "In fact, we're probably stealing some of the students who would have majored in Romance languages."

Yet many teachers of Chinese courses are less than euphoric about the new interest in their departments. Some consider it merely a fad. Others are worried about getting the funding to pay for teaching all these new students. And a number just seem bemused by their new popularity.

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