

# School where Chinese is compulsory

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A LEADING public school is making Mandarin Chinese compulsory for new pupils in recognition of the country's growing economic influence.

All 140 boys and girls entering Brighton College from September will study the language alongside a more traditional fare of French, Spanish and Latin for at least a year.

Richard Cairns, the headmaster, made the unprecedented decision within a week of taking charge of the school, which has 1,200 pupils. An Oxford history graduate who has never visited China, Mr Cairns was inspired by a news bulletin while holidaying in Australia.

"I heard on the news that the Chinese had overtaken the British economy, to the considerable glee of the Australians, and I decided we really ought to do something about this," he said.

The school is hoping to employ two teachers to introduce all 11-year-olds to Mandarin for a year, before deciding whether to take the language on to GCSE and A level.

"Becoming a centre of excellence in Chinese is not my prime goal," he said. "Rather, I wish all our students to be

DEBRA BATENBURG



These pupils at Brighton College will not learn Mandarin, but the new intake in September will have to study it for at least a year

exposed to some Asian language. One of my key tasks is to make sure our children are equipped for the world in which they live."

A dozen Chinese students are enrolled at Brighton, one of whom has agreed to help to advise the course.

Across Britain, most students take who take GCSE and A levels in Chinese are ethnic Chinese. Last year fewer than 1,000 students went on to study Japanese or Chinese at one of

only eight British universities that offer the languages.

Charles Aylmer, head of the Chinese department at Cambridge University library, welcomed Brighton's move as one that would help children to see the world with a different perspective.

"These children will have their eyes opened. I'm all in favour of it. I would put it in every school and it would be quite possible with interactive whiteboards, there's no barrier

to it at all," he said. Not only does Chinese use a different part of the brain from languages such as French or German, the characters have also been used to help children to overcome difficulties in reading and writing English by treating words as pictures rather than letters.

Professor Aylmer was sceptical, however, about how much 11-year-olds might learn within a year. To have a conversation in Mandarin and read a news-

paper or a book, students must master a minimum of 4,000 to 5,000 characters. At Cambridge, only those students who have spent two years learning the language are expected to be able to visit the country and carry on a conversation.

The Chinese Embassy in London was delighted and hoped that the move would help to end the requirement for all schools to offer a second European language before they can offer Chinese.



## USED BY MILLIONS

■ Mandarin is one of eight main dialects in China, spoken by most of the country's 1.3 billion people. It is the official language

■ For a thorough knowledge of Chinese, students should know about 5,000 characters

■ Japanese has three scripts, including one based on Chinese characters, but the grammar of the two languages is fundamentally different