Mandarin speech contest for US students bridges culture divide

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By Judy Zhu in Boston |   
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"China and Chinese, I am so thankful to you for the new ways of thinking you have opened my eyes to, and for making me contemplate more deeply the true meaning of 'compassion'."  
Max Horne, who also goes by his Chinese name Hong Mingwei, spoke the words fluently in Mandarin during his speech at the 13th Chinese Bridge Speech Contest for US high school students on Saturday at the Confucius Institute (CI) at the University of Massachusetts-Boston.  
"The people of both the US and China can learn so much from each other. Together, let us all work hard to make our vast world not only a smaller, but also full of love," Horne concluded to enthusiastic applause.  
The 17-year-old Riverdale Country School junior won first place in the advanced group of students who have studied Chinese for more than four years. He will be recommended to participate in the Chinese Bridge Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign Secondary School Students in China this winter.  
This year, 26 students from 14 states competed in the finals at the UMass-Boston campus. The annual language contest has been gathering American high school students to test their Chinese proficiency since 2007. So far, the program has attracted more than 10,000 students from 140 high schools throughout the US.  
Aside from a prepared 3-minute speech on something related to China or Chinese, contestants also answered up to five questions from judges on stage.  
Some contestants also gave Chinese cultural performances, including reciting poetry, yangko dance, martial arts and kuaiban, a traditional form of rhythmic storytelling to the accompaniment of bamboo clappers.  
"I started getting interested in Chinese during the fourth grade," Horne said with a big smile after the competition. "We learned about the Silk Road, Si Chou Zhi Lu, in history class. Ever since, I though Chinese culture so interesting and it was something that I really wanted to learn about. I am really happy I did."  
He also performed Pearl of the Orient in a Tibetan costume.  
"They are talking about such important ideas, like understanding a new culture, struggling with the difficulties of learning a new language, being inspired by staying in and visiting China," said Cheryl Nixon, associate provost at UMass-Boston.  
"It's amazing not only how fluent they are, but how the stories they tell are deeply meaningful to them," Nixon added.  
As more and more people learn the Chinese language, the need for centers of learning, like Confucius Institutes, are in greater demand. As of now, there are 525 Confucius Institutes and 1,076 Confucius Classrooms worldwide. Of them, 117 institutes and 826 classrooms are in the US.  
"We want to tell the world, American students are able to learn Chinese, just as Chinese students are capable of learning English," said Li Zhaohong, the contestants' teacher representative. "The peace of the world is depending on how much connection we made between people and people. We are the global citizens."  
Sun Baifeng, director of the CI at UMass-Boston, said the platform is a small stage for all the contestants today, but they will a make bigger contribution between the US and China in coming days.  
"People, especially those who have mastered the two languages and cultures, are the most important factor that makes US and China better connected," Sun said.  
"This Chinese bridge Speech Contest is a good showcase for us to see American students' success in learning Chinese language and culture. I hope all the participants will further utilize their language skills, so as to make contributions to increasing mutual understanding between the peoples of the two leading countries," Xu Yongji, education counselor of China's consulate in New York, said in an statement.

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