

Contest to find champions in Chinese

International finalists are ready in Hunan, also learn of province's prominence

By FENG ZHIWEI

After winning preliminary rounds of the language competition Chinese Bridge in their home countries, 118 foreign university students from 60 nations arrived on July 13 for the finals in Central China's Hunan province.

The event is sponsored by Hanban, a national organization for the promotion of Chinese language and culture among foreigners.

The finals in Hunan's capital Changsha mark completion of the 10th year of the competition.

But before contestants start their final contest this weekend, they had enough time for relaxing tours of Hunan, a province that produced a number of prominent figures that helped shape the modern history of China.

Students arrived at Hanban headquarters in Beijing on July 10 and then went on to Hunan, divided into three groups, and visited Zhangjiajie, Yueyang, and Changsha along with neighboring cities.

Hunan, a region of brilliant cultures and beautiful scenery, is also the home province of many founders of New China including Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoyi.

The tours helped provide students with an answer to why the Hunanese played such a

pioneering role in promoting social progress in China.

In Yueyang, a city in north Hunan, students climbed up Yueyang Tower to have a view of Dongting Lake — once the largest and now the third-biggest lake in the country.

Enlightening tours

They not only enjoyed the grand landscape, but also learned about the formation of a culture that has influenced the Hunan people for a millennium.

A thousand years ago, Fan Zhongyan — one of the greatest statesmen and Confucian scholars during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) — visited his friend Teng Zijing in Yueyang.

At the time, Teng had been banished from the imperial court and sent to govern the Yueyang region.

The two friends visited Yueyang Tower, and Fan — inspired by the boundless Dongting — wrote an essay that has been included in textbooks for many generations.

In the work, Fan suggests his friend should have a heart and soul as broad as the large lake. He goes on to discuss the responsibilities of politicians and intellectuals, saying that "they should be the first to worry for the future of the state and people and the last to claim a share of happiness".

A sense of responsibility unique to the area's culture was born. Local scholars then formed the Lixue School of Confucianism that gives prominence to social progress rather than academic research.

Numerous Hunanese have since devoted themselves to social reform, especially in the past century.

Notable native sons include Tan Sitong, among the first to advocate establishment of a constitutional nation during the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), as well as democratic forefathers Huang Xing, Cai E and Song Jiaoren, who were later followed by the founders of New China.

In Changsha, students visited Yuelu Academy — the nation's only Confucian academy in continuous operation for the past thousand years — and the cradle of the Lixue School and study of Hunan culture.

Foreign students also visited the sites where Mao Zedong and his comrades started their revolutionary careers.

They had a tour of Mao's hometown Shaoshan — visiting the plain brick house and village surrounded by mountains — which nurtured a great figure who bore great responsibility even during childhood.

Ethnic cultures

While two student groups studied mainstream Hunan culture in the north and center of the province, another group headed to Zhangjiajie in the northwest.

The region's dense forests, high mountains and mysterious caves help make it the



Competitors in front of a sculpture of youthful Mao Zedong on Orange Island in the Xiangjiang River that runs through Changsha.

largest tourism destination in Hunan.

But their primary task was to find the ethnic cultures that also contributed greatly to the collective personality of the Hunan people.

Zhangjiajie is home to Tujia and Miao people who have long lived in a harsh environment that engendered a tough and brave people with an enterprising spirit and great endurance.

Through centuries of integration, they injected fresh energy into Hunan culture, making the people more steadfast in their ideals and more preserving in times of hardship.

Those characteristics helped the Hunanese make a renowned contribution to fighting the Japanese invasion of the 1930s and 1940s.

In addition to studying local cultures, the students also interacted with the common people to learn about their present way of living, their feelings and their dreams.

After more than 20 days of study tours, the foreign students are now ready for their final competition this weekend.

The finals include tests of Chinese language skills and knowledge about China's people, life and culture.

Winners of the competition will be announced at the closing ceremony on August 8. Awards include scholarships to study at China's renowned universities and colleges.



Finalists in the Chinese Bridge competition toured Shaoshan, hometown of Chairman Mao.



The millenium-old Yuelu Academy is a center for the study of Hunan culture and the Lixue School of Confucianism.



The opening ceremony for the competition was held on July 16 in Changsha.

Hanban: Spreading language and culture

By ZHAO SHIJUN AND ZHOU QING

Organized by the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language — or Hanban — over the past decade, the Chinese Bridge competition has become a major channel for foreign students to learn Chinese language and culture.

The first Chinese Bridge competition was held in 2002.

More than 100,000 students from over 70 countries have since participated in the preliminary competitions in their home countries and more than 800 have competed in the finals in China.

The events have also been broadcast live to an audience of more than 100 million people overseas.

The Chinese Bridge has not only increased enthusiasm for

learning Chinese and offered deeper understanding of China, it has also brought great changes to the careers and lives of participants.

An Italian girl named Malga participated the first competition in 2002 and is now a reporter at the Xinhua News Agency's Rome bureau.

She recalls her experience in the event, noting that "through communication with the Chinese people (in 2002), I found I love the country deeply".

"I'd like to link my career and life with China," she said.

Her passion was shared by Natasia, a Belarussian girl who competed in the sixth session. She is now a professional Chinese-Russian translator.

"Communication is important in people's lives and exchanges," Natasia said. "I like to help build bridge between the Chinese and Belarussian people."

According to Xu Lin, head of the Hanban, the influence of the Chinese Bridge program has gone beyond direct participants.



The Hunan branch of the Hanban organized this year's Chinese Bridge event.

"Since the second session, many parents have been coming with their children to China. They also began to fall in love with the culture," she said, adding that "participants have also influenced their friends and classmates by talking about their experience in China".

Galal Walker, a professor at Ohio State University's depart-

ment of East Asian languages and literature — who is also known by the Chinese name Wu Weike — is a prominent figure in promoting the Chinese Bridge and Chinese language teaching in the United States.

Walker is proud that his students have participated in every session of the Chinese

Bridge finals in China.

During the past three decades, he taught Chinese language to about 2,700 students.

In addition to the Chinese Bridge, the Hanban's most important program is building Confucius Institutes — organizations that teach Chinese language and culture — in foreign countries.

There are now more than 300 Confucius Institutes in 96 countries. The number is expected to increase to 1,000 in 2020.

Information from the Hanban said about 50 million foreigners began to learn Chinese language in 2010, a figure estimated to grow to 150 million in 2020.



Famed folk singer Gong Linna and her German husband Robert Zollitsch perform at the opening ceremony.