

## China's National English Speaking Competition: Showcasing Quality English Skills

By Dr. David E. Shaffer, KOTESOL Representative

It was my first trip to the south-central region of China, and it would be my first time to serve as a judge of an English speaking contest in China. When I landed in Kunming, the venue city proved to be as beautiful as I had heard it was. Knowing that the event was organized by the *China Daily* and 21st Century English Education Media, I also had high expectations of the Seventeenth *China Daily* "21st Century Cup" National English Speaking Competition.

The Grand Final on April 8 was only a small, though very important, part of the entire competition. I was told that more than 10,000 university students from over 850 universities nationwide participated in the qualifying round by submitting video recordings and doing telephone interviews, or entering qualifying contests. Of these, 368 qualifiers participated in local preliminary contests last November and December to determine the 66 semifinalists to compete against each other on the two days before the final. And finally, twenty-four contestants were selected for the Sunday Grand Final.

These twenty-four finalists, three-fourths of whom were female, were the cream of the cream of



A view of the 21st Century Cup finalists with government officials. All finalists were prize-winners. Grand Prize winner Chen Jiehao can be seen kneeling front and center in the red dress.

the crop. They had made their way through a rigorous selection process to the finals, spawning high expectations from me of their English skills. The final competition, too, was rigorous. The contestants had a relevant but complex topic to speak on: *Cultural Clashes vs. Coexistence between China and the West: My Personal Perspective*. This was followed by an impromptu speech for which the contestants had only a very limited time to prepare. These were followed by a Q & A Session with questions from three question masters. In addition, there were 13 judges scoring the speeches.

The prepared speeches were truly outstanding, every one of them. Equally outstanding were the impromptu speeches, making judging anything but an easy task. It was the general opinion of most speakers that China and the West need to better understand and accept each other. Both the McDonald's restaurant chain and the movie *Kung Fu Panda* were repeatedly drawn on as examples. It was easy to recognize from the intelligent reasoning exhibited in both the speeches and answers to questions that these contestants would be among China's next generation of leaders.

About two thirds of the judges were from outside of China. These included, Dave Huxtable, First Secretary to the British Embassy; Dr. John Schmidt, Chair of TESOL 2014; and Dr. Verner Bickley, Chairman of the English-Speaking Union, Hong Kong. In the end, the judges selected Chen Jiehao, a sophomore at the Communication University of China in Beijing, as the grand champion. Ms. Chen was an obvious choice among the judges not just because of her effortlessly intelligible English, but also because of the maturity of the content of her speeches and the well-thought out answers she gave to her questions. However, all of the contestants were winners, and it was quite fitting that each of them received a prize.

The organization of the event was outstanding – meticulous in all aspects – and *China Daily* and 21st Century English Education Media should be commended for their efforts. My gratitude also goes to them for their sponsorship of a Korea TESOL judge to the Competition.

I would like to suggest that KOTESOL seriously consider organizing an annual English speaking competition similar to that of the China Daily but on a smaller initial scale. The competition could initially be open to only students of KOTESOL members. This would serve to keep the scale manageable, to be a benefit for KOTESOL members, and to encourage KOTESOL membership. Initial submissions could be videotaped presentations. Accepted submissions would compete using a different presentation and topic at the local level. Local chapters could assist a central competition committee in these local events (one in each chapter area). Local-level winners would advance to a national competition in which participants would present a third presentation on a third topic, with Q&A, and possibly an impromptu speech. Such a competition would increase KOTESOL's visibility and contribute to English education in the nation.



Chen Jiehao, winner of the 17th China Daily "21st Century Cup" National English Speaking Competition, at the awards ceremony following the competition on Sunday, April 9, 2012. Chen is a sophomore at the Communication University of China in Beijing.