

As China rises, demand grows for Mandarin language skills

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National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei has a Mandarin Training Center. Worldwide, about 40 million people are learning Mandarin, China's official spoken language and its most common dialect (Chiang Ying-ying/The Associated Press)

When Marvin Ho co-founded a Chinese language school in Taiwan in 1957, his only students were a handful of Western missionaries.

Five decades later, it's a different story. Ho's classrooms are packed with scores of people clamoring to learn what they believe is the next global language: Mandarin Chinese.

China, having traded socialism for capitalism, is emerging as an economic power, perhaps the only one that could rival U.S. dominance in the 21st century. For a new generation of students, business people and even artists, the land of opportunity now lies in the East, not the West.

Drawn to its promise, many are seeking ways to navigate the often rough-and-tumble atmosphere of working in China. The clearest barometer of this trend is a booming appetite for learning Chinese.

Worldwide, about 40 million people are learning Mandarin, China's official spoken language and its most common dialect. Nearly 100,000 foreigners went to China to study Mandarin in 2006, more than twice the number five years earlier.

"In my generation, the U.S. was the first choice," said Ho, whose Taipei Language Institute now boasts 2,400 students at 16 branches, nine of them in mainland China itself. This generation "thinks their future is in China," he said. "Why bother going to the U.S.? My friends encourage their children to go to China."

The rise of China has clear parallels with the rise of the United States in the past century, when it was a magnet for people around the world, said James McGregor, author of the best-selling book "One Billion Customers: Lessons from the Front Lines of Doing Business in China."

"This is a continental-sized economy being built from scratch," he said. "Everyone used to go to America because it was the global happening place. Now this is the global happening place."

McGregor, a former journalist who runs a business consulting firm in Beijing, advises those who want to head to China to bring an open mind, a sense of adventure and an appreciation for the absurd.

The other key to making it? Solid language skills.

"If you're going to be an entrepreneur, you need to sink into the culture," he said. "Any 20-year-old American thinking of doing business in China one day and not thinking of learning Mandarin is not thinking."

The United States has been infected by China fever. At universities there, the number of students studying Mandarin jumped to 51,600 in 2006, a 51 percent increase from 2002, according to a Modern Language Association survey. The increase is significant, although Spanish is still the most popular foreign language there, with 800,000 students.

Last year, more than 3,000 U.S. high school students took an Advanced Placement exam for Chinese language offered for the first time. And about 500 U.S. high schools, junior high schools and elementary schools offer Mandarin, nearly twice as many as in 2004, said Shuhan Wang, executive director of Chinese Language Initiatives for the Asia Society.

Illinois, Ohio, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Utah and Indiana are the states pursuing Mandarin instruction most aggressively, a sign of how seriously China's economic and political rise is being taken, she said.

It is a message that Skot Suyama, a 26-year-old musician from Seattle, has taken to heart.

Suyama, whose clean-cut boyish looks hint at his mixed heritage - half Swedish, half Japanese - has spent the past several years in Hong Kong and Taiwan, creating a mix of hip-hop, pop and grunge music. His skills are in demand because fewer people there are trained in creating and producing music than in the United States.

With only rudimentary Chinese, he wrote the lyrics for "Duibuqi, Xiexie" ("Sorry, Thank You") a few years ago. It became a big hit for the Hong Kong pop singer Eason Chan in mainland China and elsewhere. However, Suyama has held off diving headlong into the Chinese music scene, in part because laws protecting music copyright and royalties are simply not enforced.

"Musically, everything in China is wide open. 'Duibuqi' was huge, but I didn't get any royalties from it - only in Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong," he said.

"If I could go to the mainland now, I could make money," he said. "Right now in China, there's people who don't know the price of a song. You could find someone to pay you \$50,000 to write a song. If you've made a name for yourself, you can make it big there."

It's something that Joseph Green, a 36-year-old entrepreneur, saw coming a decade ago, when he first moved to Taiwan to study Mandarin after getting an MBA in 1997.

A native of Houston whose heavy Southern drawl disappears when he speaks rapid-fire Mandarin, Green said he felt lucky that he had concentrated on Chinese when "China wasn't even on the map." Now, his friends and family congratulate him on being farsighted.

Green, who has worked in China and Taiwan and is now pursuing advanced Mandarin at National Taiwan University, started a Web site with a Dutch friend a couple of years ago. The site, Chinglish.com, offers English-Chinese translation services.

Chinese "won't supersede English, but it's so big that it stands a chance of being integrated into the mainstream in the way that English is," Green predicted.

"Even the normal person in Texas is saying: 'Holy cow. This is it. I've got to learn Chinese,'" Green said.

Disponível em: <<http://www.iht.com>>. Acesso em 24/3/2008.