

# America in 'critical need' of Mandarin

As the US wakes up to China's emerging status as an economic and strategic competitor, US parents - and the Pentagon - are urging their children to learn the Chinese language, reports Julian Borger

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## Clarification:

We have been asked to point out that the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages is not helping "coordinate the defence department programme" in Oregon. The K-16 Mandarin program in Oregon is being administered jointly by the Center for Applied Language Studies at the University of Oregon, and the Portland Public Schools.

The US is being swept by a rush to learn Mandarin, the official form of the language used in mainland China. From wealthy New York mothers hiring Chinese nannies for their toddlers, to west coast parents demanding classes from their local schools to a defense department education project in Oregon.

The twin forces driving Mandarin's momentum are parental ambition for children facing a future in which China is almost certain to be a major player, and a government worried that America may get left behind in that new world order.

Grassroots demand is expanding exponentially. In a recent survey of US high schools 2,400 said they would consider teaching Mandarin if resources were available. By comparison, only 240 chose Italian and 175 chose Japanese, which was the fashionable language some 20 years ago when Japan was still considered an economic miracle.

However, the last time a reliable survey was done a couple of years

ago, only 203 high schools across the country and about 160 elementary schools were actually teaching Chinese.

All in all, there are thought to be about 50,000 American schoolchildren studying Mandarin at public schools and another 50,000 outside the public system, in private and specialist schools. In 2002, there were about 34,000 Mandarin students in US universities, a 20% increase on the 1998 figure but hardly a revolution in US language education.

The bottleneck is the supply of teachers. Mandarin instructors are difficult to import and difficult to train. There are visa problems in bringing over teachers from China but the biggest barrier is cultural. Teaching in Asia is generally done by rote and the change to western, interactive styles of instruction can be a substantial leap.

On the other hand, it requires enormous tenacity for westerners to learn a language like Mandarin, with its thousands of written characters and its tonal nuances. According to the Asia Society in New York, all of America's teacher-training institutions turn out only a couple of dozen home-grown Mandarin teachers a year.

"Our teacher education system is not geared up for producing these teachers," said Michael Levine, the Asia Society's head of education. "We need to figure out some incentives."

One way to ease the shortage is to find native Mandarin speakers and use fast-track methods to train them. However, the majority of Chinese-Americans grew up speaking Cantonese, the dialect spoken in Hong Kong, where their parents came from. Many are themselves signing on as Mandarin students at the private language schools springing up on the west coast.

Alarmed at the shortage of Chinese language speakers in its ranks, the Pentagon is trying a pilot project of its own in Oregon, funding an integrated chain of Mandarin classes from kindergarten to university.

Bret Lovejoy, the executive director of the American Council on the

Teaching of Foreign Languages, which is helping coordinate the defence department programme, said three more Mandarin projects and one in Arabic would be started this year around the country. But, for the moment, these are just isolated experiments. "The money that has come from the federal level so far has been a drop in the bucket," he said.

There are various bills making slow progress around Congress aimed at changing that and channelling significant federal investment into Chinese language learning. One bill sponsored by senators Lamar Alexander and Joseph Lieberman envisions spending \$1.3bn on US-Chinese cultural exchange projects, mostly involving language.

Without White House backing, congressional spending bills often end up as little more than good intentions, but that has changed this year. As part of his drive to maintain and improve American competitiveness, George Bush unveiled what he called his National Security Language Initiative in January, aimed at a dramatic increase in the number of Americans learning "critical need" languages, including Chinese, as well as Arabic, Russian, Hindi and Farsi.

"Deficits in foreign language learning and teaching negatively affect our national security, diplomacy, law enforcement, intelligence communities and cultural understanding," the White House warned in a statement marking the launch of the programme.

Lovejoy is optimistic that the initiative could mark a turning point in foreign language teaching, which has always been the poor cousin of the US education system.

"I hope the president's announcement shakes something loose in Congress this year, or at least sets in motion a serious debate about language learning in this country. This is of critical importance to our economy, not just our national security," he argued.

There are, however, dissenting voices who see the rush to Mandarin as little more than a fad fuelled by over-hyped anxiety over impending Chinese hegemony. Writing in the International Herald

Tribune in January, Andy Mukherjee, a commentator for Bloomberg News, scoffed: "Fear of China is making Americans so nervous that some of them have stopped thinking rationally. At least that is the impression I draw from the whole craze in the US about learning Chinese."

Mukherjee argued that so many Chinese students were learning English that it would not be cost-effective for Americans to pour hundreds of millions of dollars and years of their time into learning Mandarin. English would become the norm for commerce in China. The money, he concluded, would be better spent on teaching mathematics, in which American children are falling far behind their Chinese counterparts.

Unsurprisingly, Lovejoy is unimpressed by these arguments, which he sees as a form of linguistic Luddism. "To ignore a language spoken by more than 1 billion people is idiotic and dangerous," he wrote in response. "We will only maintain our position at the international trade table if we learn to speak to our suppliers and customers in other countries on their terms."

The White House and the Pentagon clearly agree, judging by the seriousness with which they are treating the widening "language gap" with China.

It does seem that big federal money is beginning to flow into Mandarin teaching. The question now is whether American students can rise to the linguistic challenge.