

# TIME

## Get Ahead, Learn Mandarin

### China's economic rise means the world has a new second language—and it isn't English

By [Austin Ramzy](#)

Posted Monday, June 19, 2006; 20:00 HKT It's Friday night in Ikebukuro, a Tokyo entertainment district full of cheap bars and pachinko parlors. As the office workers head to their favorite watering holes, three salarymen split from the crowd and enter a decrepit building that stands between a karaoke lounge and a tavern. Ignoring the sounds of sirens, drunken crooning and breaking glass outside, Hidetoshi Seki, Takashi Kudo and Yuji Yano huddle in a tiny room just big enough for a table for four, and open their Chinese textbooks. For the next 50 minutes the trio, all from a small trading company, practice describing their favorite foods and hobbies in Mandarin. Despite their crumpled shirts and five o'clock shadows, they are having a blast. The young female instructor at B-Chinese Language School indulges them as they crack jokes and make fun of each others' muddled pronunciation. Their language classes are the first lessons that any of them have taken since childhood, says Yano, 39. "We sort of unanimously agreed that Chinese would be a useful skill to acquire."

No kidding. The urge that drives those salarymen to pass up karaoke on a Friday night is increasingly common. In the past, when people set out to improve themselves by learning another language, those that didn't already speak it usually picked English. But while English may be the only truly international language, millions of tongues are wagging over what is rapidly becoming the world's *other* lingua franca: Mandarin. Seen as a key skill for people hitching their futures to China's economic rise, Mandarin is becoming common currency, particularly in Asia where trade ties with the Middle Kingdom are supplanting those of the region's longtime primary partner, the U.S. Indeed, because English is spoken so universally, it no longer offers companies and employees the edge it once did, according to a recent report by British linguist David Gaddol. If you want to get ahead, learn Mandarin. "In many Asian countries, in Europe and the USA, Mandarin has emerged as the new must-have language," Gaddol notes.

To an extent, this is a case of history repeating itself—with a twist. Just as Americans started studying Japanese in droves in the 1980s, when Japan's

economy was ascendant, so today, as China rises, the world is embracing Mandarin. (It doesn't hurt that Chinese is spoken by an estimated one out of every six people on earth.) In South Korea, 160,000 high school and university students are studying the Chinese language, an increase of 66% over the past five years. The number of Japanese secondary schools offering Mandarin more than tripled between 1993 and 2005, and in Japan it's now the most taught foreign language after English. Mandarin is even being pushed within China itself, where hundreds of Chinese dialects can make communication tricky. The central government has promoted standard Mandarin, or *putonghua*, since the 1950s. Growing internal migration has boosted that effort, and *putonghua* is now commonly heard on the streets of Shanghai and Guangzhou, cities with their own dialects.

Outside Asia, the ranks of students studying Chinese are small but growing rapidly. From 2000-2004, the number of students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland doing Advanced Level exams (those normally taken at age 18) in Chinese climbed by 57%. In the U.S., Chinese still lags far behind traditional foreign languages like French and Spanish, but China is the fastest growing destination for college students studying abroad. "I thought about what I was going to do after I graduated from college," says Kim Ku Jin, a 26-year-old from Pusan, South Korea. "How am I going to earn money? How am I going to eat?" The answer: buckle down and learn Mandarin. When Kim completed his obligatory two-year military service, he headed to the Chinese capital to pursue a language degree at the Beijing Language and Culture University. "In China I will definitely have opportunities," he says. Claudia Ross, a Chinese-language professor at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, says she's hearing the same things from her pupils. "Students who enrolled in Chinese used to tell me their parents would say, 'Why on earth are you studying this?'" says Ross. "Now students regularly come in saying, 'I'm taking Chinese because my parents say I should.'" At Holy Cross, enrollment in first-year Chinese doubled last year. "There are dollar signs attached to it," says Ross.

Mandarin was not always so trendy. It's daunting to learn, especially for Westerners, because of the tones used in speech to shift meaning—to say nothing of the thousands of characters that must be memorized to achieve true literacy. Politics threw up another impediment. During the Cold War, when China was sealed off from the rest of the world, fluency in Chinese was considered, at best, an arcane academic pursuit for diplomats and students of acupuncture or Tang poetry. At worst, it was considered the language of the enemy. Despotic right-wing governments in some Asian countries, fearing their regimes would be toppled by the spread of communism, thought of Chinese-speakers as Maoist revolutionary threats. In Indonesia, Suharto banned Chinese-language publications and closed almost all Mandarin schools. But

after then President Abdurrahman Wahid lifted the ban in 1999, six universities added Mandarin courses, as did dozens of smaller language centers.

Now, students who can put "fluent in Mandarin" on their résumés are seeing the payoff. Jakarta resident Imam Fanani, 26, was initially discouraged when he began hunting for work last year because many of his friends had been unable to find good-paying jobs. But a day after he submitted his résumé to several employment websites, he had three job offers. His edge? A degree from the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing. "There is no discrimination against the language anymore," says Imam, who now works at a conglomerate owned by an Indonesian Chinese. "In fact, you could even say it's become kind of fashionable."

It's in vogue even in the backwaters of Asia's least developed countries. In 2004, China became Cambodia's biggest foreign investor, and some Cambodians now think Mandarin is as useful as English. The Chea family in Phnom Penh decided to spread its bets: Rotha, a 13-year-old boy, studies English while his 12-year-old sister, Sophea, learns Mandarin. Spending money on language lessons has earned their parents, Chea Song and his wife Sotheary, the ridicule of neighbors, who point out that the Cheas don't have a proper house—they live in their open-air coffee-and-noodle shop. "Some people criticize me, saying I have no home to live in but I send my daughter to learn Chinese," says Chea Song. "But even if I'm poor, I want the best education for my children." English may help his son find a job with one of the many aid agencies working in Cambodia, or allow him to pursue medical studies, Chea reckons. His daughter's Mandarin skills may land her a job in a private business or as a translator. As he sees it, "The whole world is speaking Chinese."

**EXPORTING MANDARIN** eager to assert itself internationally, the Chinese government is itself on a drive to promote Mandarin abroad in hopes of putting it on a par with English. "Promoting the use of Chinese among overseas people has gone beyond purely cultural issues," said Hu Youqing, a National People's Congress deputy and Chinese-language professor at Nanjing University, in an interview with the government-owned *China Daily*. "It can help build up our national strength and should be taken as a way to develop our country's 'soft power.'"

To that end, over the past two years Beijing has opened language and cultural centers called Confucius Institutes—modeled on Spain's Instituto Cervantes or Germany's Goethe-Institut—in more than 30 countries, including Australia, Japan, Kenya, the U.S. and Sweden. China has also deployed more than 2,000 Peace Corps-like volunteers to teach Mandarin overseas, mostly in Asian

nations such as Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea. Meanwhile, back home, China has been rapidly upgrading Mandarin-language schools to handle a rising influx of overseas students. In Beijing, for example, Capital Normal University's North Number 1 campus features a pair of new gray steel and glass towers with polished stone floors and an indoor swimming pool. China's vastly ambitious goal is to have 100 million foreigners studying Mandarin by the end of the decade. "China is like an imperial civilization, or the U.S. or Britain or France. It tends to view the world on its own terms," says Nicholas Ostler, the British author of *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World*. "In China, people talk in Chinese. More and more, they expect others to speak to them in Chinese, too."

China's efforts to spread Mandarin are managed from the 17th floor of an office building in the northwest corner of Beijing. There, school officials from around the world come to talk with Xu Lin, a voluble woman with an intense gaze who heads the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. On a hot, smoggy day last fall, she hosted a delegation of American educational and business leaders, including a former assistant secretary of education and school superintendents from New York and California. They sat at attention as Xu outlined her agency's plans for teaching Chinese to the world. To close the meeting, Xu signed an agreement with the commissioner of education in Kentucky to help his state develop a Chinese-language program. Xu and the commissioner, Gene Wilhoit, shook hands and Xu presented him with a gift: a digital wand that reads Chinese characters aloud when dragged across text. Wilhoit tried it out. An uncomfortable silence followed. "I think it's broken," one of Xu's subordinates muttered. Someone fiddled with the gadget, and Wilhoit tried again. There was a pause, and then a mechanical voice droned out one of the phrases that Xu deemed critical to survival in China: "*Ganbei!*"

Kentucky may have to rely heavily on such technology to teach students to say "cheers" in Chinese. The state has only a handful of Mandarin classes, such as a program that started up in January at a Louisville elementary school, because there aren't enough trained Mandarin teachers. The problem is widespread in the U.S. According to a 2004 survey by the College Board, a nonprofit organization that conducts college placement exams, 2,400 high schools wanted to offer Advanced Placement classes in Chinese, far more than the few hundred schools the organization expected. "The level of interest is high, but the level of expertise is low," says Scott McGinnis, an academic adviser at the Defense Language Institute in Washington. In January, U.S. President George W. Bush announced plans to spend \$114 million next year to boost the number of instructors and augment educational programs for "critical

need" languages including Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hindi and Farsi.

For now, Kentucky educators are relying in large part on young Chinese volunteers such as Zhao Jing, a 29-year-old from the northern coastal city of Tianjin. A year ago, Zhao's knowledge of Kentucky was limited to visits to *Ken De Ji*—the Chinese name for Kentucky Fried Chicken. But after being recruited by the Kentucky Department of Education to develop the state's Mandarin curriculum, she drives hours to rural towns to talk with students and teachers about China. At noon on a recent Monday, Zhao carried her laptop to an audio-visual studio in the state education building in Frankfort, set up a PowerPoint presentation on an octagonal table, and waited for her students. One by one, department employees filed into the room and took seats around the table for the twice-weekly Chinese class. "*Ni hao*," they said, and then they began a lesson on the Chinese New Year and signs of the zodiac. When Zhao asked department policy advisor Debbie Hendricks, 51, to say her birth animal, Hendricks laughed, "I'm in over my head."

**SETTING THE PACE** the rest of the world isn't going to wait for people like this to catch up in the race to learn Chinese. East Asians have a head start, due to the long history of interaction between China and its neighbors. China is now South Korea's biggest trading partner—having surpassed Japan in 2002 and the U.S. in 2004—and its people are signing up for Chinese lessons with zeal. South Koreans are the largest group of foreigners studying in China, representing about 40% of the 110,800 total last year. This trend is boosted by cultural ties, both new and old. Korean music and drama are among the most popular offerings on the mainland today, while 60% of Korean vocabulary comes from Chinese (similarly, written Japanese has several thousand characters borrowed from China). While that language transfer took place over centuries, Chinese now spreads across Asian borders at the speed of an instant message. Woo Jae Hoa, a 22-year-old student in Seoul, practices Mandarin by chatting online with a Chinese girl he met on the Internet. He types phonetically as he has yet to learn many Chinese characters. His new pen pal responds with simple, out-of-a-textbook answers, though they also delve into lighter topics, such as Korean pop music.

But a shared history can also be a curse. The widespread popularity of Chinese-language study in Japan has been hindered by the sensitive relationship between the former enemies. Last year there were 24 students in Mitsuko Yajima's Mandarin courses at Asia University. This year, following anti-Japanese demonstrations in several large Chinese cities, there are just 14. "Japan is slow to nurture a population of Mandarin students," says Yajima, who has taught Mandarin at the university for 30 years. "We are way behind South

Korea."

That's not just an academic concern. As China's economic clout grows, the ability to reduce frictions and misunderstandings in business communications offers a strategic advantage. Even enthusiastic promoters of Mandarin aren't predicting that it will ever overtake English as the world's common language. But just as knowing English proved a key to getting ahead in the 20th century, learning Chinese will provide an edge in the 21st. It won't be easy, though. Acquiring the language requires hundreds of hours of study, countless early mornings memorizing characters, or, if you're a salaryman in Tokyo like Hidetoshi Seki and his pals, practicing sentence patterns while everyone else is out having fun. "We deal with a lot of Chinese clients," says Seki, 39. "But we weren't sent here by the company. We're drinking buddies, and decided to do something more constructive with our time than guzzling beer." Getting ahead sometimes requires a little sacrifice.

*With reporting by Theunis Bates/London, Kevin Doyle/Phnom Penh, Theo Emery/Frankfort, Chanyong Kim/Seoul, Toko Sekiguchi/Tokyo and Jason Tedjasukmana/Jakarta*