

## **First words in the tongue of an awakening giant More and more American schools are teaching their students Chinese**

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The short drive from the train station to Marshall High School in Virginia's Fairfax County reflects the banality of American suburbia: a shopping mall, Starbucks, a petrol station and the monotonous motion of mid-morning traffic. But in the school's classroom number 108, another world opens up. Red paper Chinese lanterns are piled along a window sill. A map of China is pinned to the back wall, together with photos of Tiananmen Square, temples and Beijing street scenes.

Matt Glazer, a 17-year old student in a black T-shirt, stands in front of the class, reading vocabulary written in Chinese characters.

His teacher, Jie Lei, prompts applause from the class when he finishes pronouncing his tones with commendable fluency.

Matt and 15 classmates are enrolled in Marshall's Chinese language class for 17-18 year olds, one of three levels of Chinese language tuition available at two schools in the county. Lessons start as early as the age of six. In the classrooms of America, Chinese is rapidly moving from being a cultural curiosity to a central part of the foreign language curriculum.

Fairfax introduced Chinese in 1996 but has seen enrolment take off, with one of the two schools offering it launching a lottery placement system for parents wanting to send their children from beyond the school's normal catchment area.

Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation has donated Dollars 500,000 to the Shuang Wen school in New York's Chinatown.

Two US senators, Joe Lieberman and Lamar Alexander, are hoping a Senate foreign relations sub-committee will this year hold a hearing on a bill they have proposed that would provide Dollars 1.3bn for the teaching of Chinese in US schools.

The heightened interest in Chinese is a direct result of America's broader awareness of China's growing economic might and perceived future global influence.

"A lot of it has been the opening of the Chinese economy," says Paula Patrick, foreign language co-ordinator for Fairfax County's public schools. "The students want to be prepared to compete for jobs in the future and they realise that Chinese might be a language in demand when they come to apply for a job. The kids are really thinking."

Matt says he has always been "kind of interested in Chinese culture" and only recently realised it could come in handy as part of a job application much later. Hundreds of miles away in the Midwest, the story is the same.

Chicago's schools started offering Chinese in 1999, three years after Fairfax County. The city's programme is now the largest Chinese public school curriculum in the US. The mayor, Richard Daley, has been at the forefront of expansion since his first trip to China a couple of years ago. There, on a tour of Shanghai - a sister city to Chicago - he was shocked to learn that about 200m Chinese students were learning

English in China; in the US, the number of American students learning Chinese was only about 24,000.

He says demand is coming from parents. "It wasn't like the board of education saying it. They see 'Made in China' on things when they go shopping; they see the rising importance of China. I believe the parents are ahead of the political and business leaders."

Yet there are some growing pains. In Matt's class, most of the students are bussed in from surrounding schools because there is not yet enough demand to start classes in more than two schools in the county. That means mixing together students with varying abilities in the same class.

Ms Lei, who teaches Matt's class, finds herself having to break into English as she teaches, so that students with weaker Chinese are not left behind. "It's very mixed, so some people are better at speaking than others. We just have to deal with it," she says.

And while most of the students in Matt's class are of Chinese heritage, not all speak Chinese at home with their parents, further complicating matters. "There's no good definition of 'Chinese heritage' student," says Ms Lei.

Chicago has avoided such problems partly because most of its Chinese immigrants have been Cantonese-speaking - and are thus not involved.

The city has also promoted Chinese to as many students across the city's school system as possible, says Robert Davis, manager of Chicago's Chinese programme. The result is that almost 90 per cent of the 3,500 students studying Chinese at 20 schools are African-American or Hispanic - a reflection of Chicago's population, which is, for example, 26 per cent Hispanic.

"These shouldn't be boutique programmes, these are for all students: to give them opportunities," Mr Davis says.

The city has also found a way to deal with a persistent difficulty: that parents, daunted by the unfamiliarity of Chinese are often unable to support their children's Chinese learning efforts after school.

Next month, China will open the first Confucius Institute cultural education centre in north America in Chicago. It will offer workshops for parents showing how their children can supplement their learning, including using internet resources.

Yet the problem of finding enough teachers is starting to grow.

"We need teachers right now," says Mr Davis. He is mildly encouraged by signs that some Chinese speakers who are teaching in other fields are becoming "career changers" and switching to teaching Chinese instead.

Ms Patrick counts herself lucky that she discovered Ms Lei, who, while she graduated from a Florida university with a masters in German, was persuaded to teach Chinese for Fairfax County.

"Five years ago I'd be scratching my head wondering where I'm going to find the teachers," says Ms Patrick. "We've had three resumes from people who are teachers in other fields. If I had to find a hundred teachers tomorrow I would probably panic. But if we have this slow increase I think we're going to be fine."

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