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If you can't beat them, join them

As China's economic might grows, the popularity of learning Mandarin as a second language has ballooned in the US

By Gretchen Ruethling
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The future of foreign language study in the United States might be glimpsed here at Louisa May Alcott Elementary School, in a classroom where lanterns with cherry blossoms and pandas dangle overhead, and a paper dragon, an American flag and a Chinese flag hang from the wall.



One recent morning, a class of third-graders bowed to one another and introduced themselves in Chinese, and a class of fourth-graders practiced writing numbers in Chinese characters on marker boards. Chinese classes began at Alcott in February, but more students are already choosing it over Spanish.

There is a shortage of qualified teachers to teach Chinese in US.

PHOTO: NY TIMES

"Chinese is our new baby," said David J Domovic, the principal at Alcott, on the North Side, one of 20 public schools in the city offering instruction in Mandarin Chinese. "Everybody just wants in."

With encouragement from the Chinese and American governments, schools across the United States are expanding their foreign language offerings to include the world's most spoken tongue, not to mention one of its most difficult to learn.

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consul at the Chinese Education Consulate Last month, the Defense Department gave a US\$700,000 grant to public schools in Portland, Ore., to double the number of students studying Chinese in an immersion program. In May, Senator Joseph I Lieberman, Democrat Connecticut, and Senator Lamar Alexander, Republican Tennessee, introduced a bill to spend US\$1.3 billion over five years on Chinese language programs in schools and on cultural exchanges to improve ties between the United States and China. The bill has been referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

After 2,400 schools expressed interest, Advanced Placement Chinese classes will be offered in high schools around the country starting next year. Beijing is paying for half the US\$1.35 million to develop the classes, including Chinese teachers' scholarships and developing curriculums and examinations, said Trevor Packer, executive director of the Advanced Placement Program at the College Board.

"Many Americans are beginning to realize the importance of speaking Chinese," Zhu Hongqing, consul at the Chinese Education Consulate here, said. "We need to provide as much powerful support as we can."

The number of Chinese language programs around the country, from elementary school through adult programs, has tripled in 10 years, according to Scott McGinnis, an academic adviser at the Defense Language Institute in Washington.

"Chinese is strategic in a way that a lot of other languages aren't," because of China's growth as an economic and military force, McGinnis said.

"Whatever tensions lie between us, there is a historical long-standing mutual fascination with each other," he said. "Planning to be ready to engage with them rather than only thinking of them in terms of a challenge or a competitor is the smart thing to do."

Up to 50,000 students are studying Chinese in elementary and secondary schools in the United States, experts estimate. Many are in cities like New York and San Francisco that have large numbers of Chinese-American students, and many take lessons after school or on weekends.

The Chicago program stands out because it is entirely in public schools during the regular school day and primarily serves students who are not of Chinese descent.

Mayor Richard M Daley, a vocal supporter of the program, said proficiency in Chinese would be critical in understanding the competition.

"I think there will be two languages in this world," Daley said. "There will be Chinese and English."

From an all-black elementary school on the West Side to a nearly all-Hispanic elementary school on the South Side to more diverse schools throughout the city, some

3,000 students from kindergarten through high school are learning Chinese. The Chinese Education Ministry has called the program a model for teaching students who are not of Chinese descent. The ministry donated 3,000 textbooks to the school system last year.

The program has expanded from three schools in 1999 to 20 this year and is scheduled to add an additional five by the end of the school year.

"They have a great international experience right in their own classroom," said Robert Davis, manager of the district's Chicago Chinese Connections Program, which aims to develop skills to help students compete in the world marketplace. "We want them to meet on an equal playing field."

Some parents here worry at first about how relevant the Chinese classes are and whether they will be too difficult. The Foreign Service Institute, which trains American diplomats, ranks Chinese as one of the four most time-intensive languages to learn. An average English speaker takes 1,320 hours to become proficient in Chinese, compared with 480 hours in French, Spanish or Italian, the institute says.

Sevtap Guldur, 31, said she and her daughter Sahire, a fourth-grader at Alcott, looked over the unfamiliar Chinese characters before deciding whether to take the class.

"If you're ready to learn that, go for it," Guldur said she told her daughter.

Sahire, who is fluent in Turkish, said it was her favorite class.

At Alcott, 160 students from kindergarten to fifth grade are studying Spanish, compared with 242 taking Chinese, although not without occasional frustration.

"Do we have to do it in Chinese?" a third-grader asked during a recent exercise, perhaps missing the point of the class.

Raul Freire, nine, a fourth-grader fluent in Spanish, said he taught words to his mother so she can better communicate with Chinese-speaking customers at the bank where she works.

"Mostly everybody in the school wants to take Chinese," Raul said. "I think about being a traveler when I grow up, so I have to learn as many languages as I can."

Adriana Freire, 33, Raul's mother, who is from Ecuador, said the skills would help her son be a better competitor in the job market. "I never thought that he was going to be able to do something like that," Freire said.

Most of the 10 elementary and 10 high schools in the program here offer the language four times a week for 40 minutes a day. Each school decides how to fit the class in the school day, with some taking time from classes like physical education, music and art to make room.

Chicago has a waiting list of schools that want to offer Chinese. The main obstacle is a lack of teachers certified by a college in the United States, a requirement of the No Child Left Behind law, Davis said.

"It's hard when we can't hire a teacher that is qualified because of that missing certification," he said.

The shortage of teachers is common throughout the United States, said Michael Levine, executive director of education at the Asia Society in New York. Six states have signed or plan to sign agreements with the Chinese government to import teachers from China and send teachers from the United States to China for training, said Levine.

"Eventually," he said, "we're going to have to home grow our own."

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