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The Mandarin Offensive

Inside Beijing's global campaign to make Chinese the number one language in the world.

By Michael Erard

A **light snow** is falling outside the windows of Cyrus H. McCormick School in southwest Chicago, but the second graders in Room 203 are not distracted from their lesson. May Cheung, an energetic teacher from Hong Kong, holds a cup to her lips and asks, "*Wo he shemma?*" (What am I drinking?) A forest of arms go up. "*Cha! Cha!*" (Tea!) An hour later, Cheung has kindergartners counting to 27 in Mandarin as she hands out Chinese New Year *hong bao*, the red envelopes that promise wealth, abundance, and good fortune. For most of the kids in this Mexican-American neighborhood, Mandarin is their third language - after Spanish and English.

The children at McCormick are part of the largest grade school Chinese program in the US. Seven years ago, after a post-college stint teaching English in China, Robert Davis wandered into the offices of the Chicago Public Schools and convinced the director to start a comprehensive Chinese language program and hire him to manage it. Now 3,500 Chicago kids, from kindergartners to 12th graders, learn Mandarin. "The days of everybody trying to be American are over," Davis says. "When you do business with or go to other countries, be prepared to work on their terms."

Far from Chicago - 6,597 miles to the west, to be exact - Ma Jianfei is pointing at a huge map on the wall of a plush meeting room in an otherwise dreary building in Beijing. Ma is the deputy director general of the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, better known as Hanban, and the map chronicles his success exporting Mandarin around the world. The map shows that the hottest markets for Mandarin are Thailand and South Korea, where all elementary and middle schools will offer Chinese by 2007. Europe, particularly France and Germany, is also doing well, thick with yellow circles (teachers), red triangles (test facilities), and blue squares (language centers).

There aren't many shapes in the US yet, but Ma is working on that. For the past two years, Hanban has been collaborating with the College Board, the nonprofit that runs the SAT and the Advanced Placement program; in 2007, high school kids across the US will be able to take the first ever AP exam for Chinese language and culture (this year they're prepping for the test in new College Board-accredited classes). In October, Ma was in the American heartland, inking an agreement to open a Confucius Institute, a center for Chinese language learning and cultural studies, at the University of Kansas. It'll be the sixth in the US, the 41st in the world. Soon there will be 100 such institutes worldwide.

Mandarin Chinese is already the most popular first language on the planet, beating out English by 500 million speakers. And it's the second-most-common language on the Internet. Now, just as China requires students to learn English, Beijing wants to make Chinese the must-take language for English speakers - and everyone else. Ma figures there are currently 30 million people around the world learning Chinese as a second language. Hanban aims to increase that to 100 million over the next four years.

It's an audacious goal, and the government is backing it by funding - to the tune of nearly \$25 million a year - the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. Last year, Hanban sent 1,042 volunteer teachers to France, Kazakhstan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Mauritius, Nigeria, Colombia, and 16 other countries. This year, it will top that number.

Hanban provides schools, centers, and Confucius Institutes with seed money, textbooks, and game-based learning software. College kids and adults play *Great Wall Chinese*, while middle school students get a game called *Chengo Chinese*, which Hanban developed through a partnership with the US Department of Education. Nearly 15,000 American kids in 20 states helped beta-test the game, and it's now used in Mandarin classes offered through the accredited Michigan Virtual High School.

Beijing isn't doing anything different from what the British or the Americans or the French have done - sending emissaries abroad to spread its language and culture. It's not the first time the Chinese have pushed their native tongue, either: In the 17th and 18th centuries, imperial China brought several Chinese languages to much of Southeast Asia. But this 21st-century push is more global in scope, as befits an emerging world power. "This is the linguistic equivalent of sending a person to the moon," says Oded Shenkar, a professor at the Ohio State University and author of *The Chinese Century*.

Chinese bureaucrats take their evangelism seriously. The country is "merging into the world," Zhang Xincheng, China's deputy minister of education, explained to reporters before the first World Chinese Conference last June. The event attracted diplomats and teachers from 65 countries - all there to partake in China's efforts to export Mandarin. "China, as the mother country of the language, shoulders the responsibility of promoting [the language] and helping other nations to learn it better and faster."

Chinese authorities also see spreading Chinese as an important part of the country's "peaceful rise," says Elizabeth Economy, the director for Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, a New York foreign-policy think tank. This was the philosophy articulated in 2003 by China's president, Hu Jintao. China wants to emerge as a global power without threatening global security. "I think the Chinese have been very careful and thoughtful about assuaging the fears of the rest of the world," says Economy. "There's a benign element of the language work: to help educate."

One of the people most responsible for providing that help is Zhang Yi. Over the past three years, she's been to South Africa, Thailand, Japan, and Canada on business - not bad for a 24-year-old government employee. Trained as a lawyer, she coordinates Hanban's volunteer teacher program, selecting, training, sending, and supporting the agency's pool of 10,000-plus volunteer instructors. Like missionaries, these full-time teachers receive no pay, only a small stipend from Hanban. Most are young women who sign on to see the world - and sow the seeds of Chinese along the way.

As a young cosmopolitan Beijinger, Zhang Yi celebrates Christmas and prefers coffee over tea, so when we meet one frigid evening in Haidian (China's Silicon Valley), she picks Starbucks. Zhang marvels at the remarkable popularity of her native language outside China - it's something European newspapers like to call "Chinese fever," or *hanyu re*. Zhang sees evidence of Chinese fever all the time. In Bangkok, her waiters spoke Chinese. In Jakarta, she helped a Korean traveler who couldn't speak Indonesian or English, only Chinese. She recently had dinner with three professors from Beijing who had just been in Cuba, where they met students who were learning Chinese. Zhang is delighted to see the language taking hold in all these places. "That's why we are feeding the fire," she says.

Back in Chicago, Robert Davis is fanning the flames, but he isn't asking for volunteers. He wants teachers who'll stay, not leave after a year or two. So Hanban gave him \$70,000 to build a Confucius Institute at Walter Payton College Prep; it also sends him free software and books. This spring, the new institute will begin providing grade school instructors with teaching materials and lesson plans, and it will offer how-to seminars for parents who want to help their kids with Chinese homework.

If Hanban exports Chinese around the world, then the main American importer is Gaston Caperton. He looks like Bill Clinton - though thinner - and speaks, once he gets talking, with an unchecked southern accent.

Caperton caught his own version of Chinese fever on his third visit to the country in 1994, when he was governor of West Virginia and traveling to China as part of an international trade mission. Expecting to return to the raw, poor country he'd seen in the 1980s, he instead found people drinking Coca-Cola and using computers, and the hotel was as lavish as any in the West.

Normally you'd find him in New York at the College Board, where he's president and unofficial promoter for Chinese-language education. But ever since the AP Chinese course was established, he's been on the road, trying to solve the shortage of qualified Chinese teachers in the US by prodding American universities to offer certification programs and persuading elementary schools and colleges statewide to offer more Chinese language classes. He's recently been in Beijing, meeting with Hanban officials about their volunteer-teacher program. But today he's in Shanghai with his wife, Idit Harel Caperton. She spent the fall teaching software engineering at a university here and is a consultant and major investor (along with MIT's Nicholas Negroponte) in a language software company based in China.

The College Board is among the few organizations that can have national impact in a public school system where most decisions are made at the local level. So Gaston Caperton hopes that the Chinese AP will spur interest in the language in high schools - and even trickle down to elementary schools. "The future is in Asia, and we have to know Asian languages," he says. The point is to keep the US competitive. Learning Chinese isn't just a way for Americans to get jobs in China, but for them to do business with Chinese companies and compete with Mandarin speakers from other countries.

Hanban contacted Caperton in 2004. At first, the Chinese government was frustrated by the fragmented US public school system. "They said to me, 'In China, we made English the second language,'" Caperton says. "'So why don't you just make it happen in the US?'"

Caperton is working to spread Chinese however he can. After becoming president of the College Board in 1999, he urged the organization to offer courses and exams in more languages. Given the importance of standardized tests, decisions by the College Board inevitably filter down to high schools and even elementary schools. Hanban also wanted to import the curriculum they'd developed directly into US schools. But Caperton persuaded them to abandon their one-size-fits-all approach. The Chinese were "aggressive" about helping, he says. After speaking for a few moments, Caperton backtracks and changes *aggressive* to *progressive*. What's the difference? "Progressive is moving forward and up. Aggressive is simply getting what you want."

Alexander Feldman saw this behavior firsthand when, as the US government's coordinator for international information programs, he was touring a new library at the State Institute for Islamic Studies of North Sumatra in Indonesia. On the third floor, an "American corner" was stocked with books, magazines, and computers with Internet access. Feldman suggested to the university's chancellor that videoconference equipment be installed in the empty space next to the corner. That's a good idea, the chancellor said. But about a month after the American corner was built, the Chinese were here and proposed a Chinese corner, which would sit right next to yours and have more resources than yours, he said. "There is a bit of friendly competition," Feldman mused later. "Competition is a good thing, both in business and in public diplomacy."

Michael Erard (erard@lucidwork.com) wrote about [kosher tech](#) in issue 12.11.

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