

Mandarin in China

Schools in China and agencies around the world testify to the growth in demand for Mandarin programmes. As JANE VERNON SMITH discovers, the market, although young, is developing quickly.

Economically, China has undergone an astonishing rate of growth over recent years, rising to become the world's fourth-largest economy. The increase in international business has meant that a growing number of foreigners have become interested in learning Mandarin, the most widely spoken language in China. Today, in many countries around the world, courses in Mandarin Chinese are widely offered both at university and secondary school level, and, according to a report in the Chinese newspaper, *The People's Daily*, the number of foreign students studying in China has risen rapidly, from just 11,000 in 1991 to more than 160,000 in 2006.

However, from the language travel perspective, the market is still in the early stages of development. Indeed, many agents have not yet begun to explore the destination's potential. Other agencies, like EuroStudy International in Denmark, have begun to market programmes in China, but have so far experienced only a low level of uptake. Suzana Dias, Director of Get It Intercâmbio in Brazil is perhaps typical. "We still don't have demand for Mandarin courses in China," she comments, "but, as I see that

China's economy has been growing 10 per cent per year, and as I start seeing Mandarin schools in Belo Horizonte city – where I work and live – and regular schools introducing Mandarin as a subject, I am getting prepared to offer this option to our potential students. I really believe that studying Mandarin in China is the option for those who want to have a higher qualification in the market."

Elsewhere, however, some agencies are already beginning to unlock the potential of China as a language travel destination. "It is new," says Ng Saha, Chief Executive of Vantage International Education Centre in Bangladesh, "but responses are very high day-by-day, [and] compared to 2006 [have] increased by 85 per cent." Pockets of demand exist in many different parts of the globe. From Spain, Pilar Cantarino of lead-generator website, The Language Business, which forwards brochure requests from students on to language schools, reports that demand for a Chinese language course in Shanghai has increased by 50 per cent over the past year. Meanwhile, Swiss agent, Krister Weidenhielm, International Sales Manager at ESL, has also witnessed a 50 per cent surge in demand over the past couple of years.

Within China itself, schools also have good reason to be upbeat. At Beijing University of Science & Technology, Chen Meijuan has seen increasing numbers of foreign students enrolling for Chinese and other programmes. Similarly, Jasmine Bian of Mandarin House, which runs language schools in Beijing and Shanghai, observes, "There has been an immense growth in demand, because of the global focus on China and learning Mandarin. Year-on-year, our language programmes have witnessed a doubling of student numbers." She adds, "With China growing more and more into a global powerhouse, and the Olympics and World Expo coming up, we expect this level of growth to continue in the next few years."

With such positive business trends in evidence, it is not surprising that foreign language school chains have begun to enter the market. The language school and agency chain, Sprachcaffe Languages Plus, opened a school in Beijing in 2004 and, according to Director, Alberto Sarno, demand has grown by 30 per cent every year since. The European chain, EC, moved into the market a year ago, when it teamed up with the HuiMin Middle School in Beijing to offer a Mandarin programme specifically for young learners. Meanwhile, International House (IH) has schools in Qingdao and Xi'an, both of which have recently experienced a substantial growth in demand. In Xi'an, Director, Peng Su, notes that demand for the school's general Chinese programme has almost quintupled over the past year or so.

The USA and UK figure prominently among the source countries of students registering for these programmes. According to Bian, the majority of students come from North America or Europe,



PHOTOGRAPH: MANDARIN HOUSE

predominantly the USA and UK, while demand is also increasing in both South America and South East Asia. International House Qingdao, meanwhile, receives “the large majority” of students from Europe, with some also from the USA and Canada. Here, “Demand from the Swiss sector has grown exponentially,” notes Director of Education, Claire Firat, “as our students report many companies are now actively supporting their desire to study.”

German, French and UK students represent the main nationalities at IH Xi’an, although numbers from Korea, Japan, the US, Canada and South East Asian countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, are currently growing fast, Su highlights. Japanese and Korean students are already present in large numbers at Beijing University of Science & Technology, according to Meijuan. However, demand is not limited to just a few particular markets. Sarno stresses that Sprachcaffe receives enquiries from “literally all over the world”, including Mongolia, Colombia, Uzbekistan, Ecuador and Venezuela.

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When undertaking language travel programmes in China, students should be prepared for the fact that there is currently less choice than may be found in many other destinations. In terms of accommodation, choice reflects the fact that language travel is still very new in this country. According to Weidenhielm, most schools offer only self-catering shared or private flats. She adds that host family accommodation is not yet well established in China, for a number of reasons, including travellers’ expectations and cultural issues. However, options are available at both ends of the price spectrum, from basic shared apartments to comfortable hotels. In terms of destination, meanwhile, many agencies offer only one or two options. ESL clients can choose from four Chinese destinations (Beijing, Shanghai, Qingdao and Xi’an), and, as Weidenhielm points out, “Cities like Beijing and Shanghai are very different by nature, [so] we make sure students choose the right destination where they will experience the side of China they are interested in.”

In contrast to most other language travel destinations, many foreign students arrive in China with little prior knowledge of the language. At Mandarin House, students typically start their programme at either total beginner or elementary level, as is also the case at IH Qingdao. “They come here with either little or no previous Chinese experience, and they want to put the language into use from their first day. They want to go out and chat to the taxi drivers, enjoy the restaurants and haggle at the markets,” says Firat.

Peter Hao of InternshipChina, a company which offers both internships and Chinese language tuition to foreign students in China, confirms that most arrive with little more than a basic knowledge of the language, “[A] few of them know Chinese before they come here, but their spoken Chinese is not good.” However, “After a few months’ study, they can not only [speak] but also [write] Chinese.” As Sarno underlines, “Despite rumours, Chinese is not too difficult to learn: conjugations and declensions are very simple. Even after a short term, students are able to communicate.”

Because so many students have little prior knowledge of the language, general Chinese programmes tend to be most in demand. As Weidenhielm points out, the level of proficiency is still an issue in relation to business Chinese programmes. “But,” she notes, “it will come.” Bian highlights, “Mandarin is a much sought-after skill in the job market and our students realise that knowledge of the language will give them more opportunities and open many new doors for them.” Many are willing to pay out of their own pockets for the experience, although companies do sometimes make a contribution on behalf of employees. “Our experience is that costs will normally be shared by both the company and the student,” says Sarno.

The reality of studying Mandarin in the country where it is spoken offers, perhaps, even greater benefits than is the case for many other languages. As Firat underlines, “Of all the students I have welcomed this year, those who have studied Chinese in their home countries have been the most astonished by the language in their initial encounters with the Chinese. ‘I know 500 characters! Why can’t I understand? Why can’t they understand me?’ It seems, like everything, you can only get so far by reading about it. You have to live it, touch it, smell it, see it and speak it to get it.” ●

Programme options

China may be young as a language travel destination, but, for those who are interested in studying Mandarin in China, a wide range of courses are available to suit all ages and interests. Most schools offer standard intensive programmes of varying lengths, consisting of 20 hours of language study per week, as well as a variety of additional programmes.

Many travel to China in order to soak up the country’s culture as much as to learn the language. This is reflected in the availability of many courses that offer cultural studies as a supplement to core intensive programmes. Mandarin House offers opportunities for language study each morning, followed by study of Chinese culture and history in the afternoons, while International House (IH) in Qingdao offers Chinese Xieyi

painting or Chinese calligraphy, and IH’s Xi’an school offers a range of Chinese plus activity programmes, including traditional Chinese medicine, Chinese dance and cookery. IH Xi’an also runs a study tour to Western China, to give foreign students the chance to become familiar with the lesser known areas of the country.

Young learners are also well catered for in terms of language plus programmes. EC English offers a two-week Explore China programme specifically for young learners, which offers them “the opportunity to embark on the trip of a lifetime, while learning Mandarin,” according to spokesperson Sabine Lank. Participating students join with local Chinese students, to gain an insight into the local way of life. EC also offers an introductory Mandarin programme that covers “survival level” language skills, combined with history, culture and traditions, and knowledge of modern China.

The philosophy at Mandarin House is that the younger students are when they begin to learn the better. In this spirit, it launched its junior summer camps in 2007, to cater for young people aged seven-to-17 years. Family packages are also available, including special family accommodation and the chance for parents to participate in group language courses.

Exam preparation for the official Chinese proficiency exam, the HSK, is also on offer. InternshipChina runs courses of variable duration, with a minimum enrolment requirement of approximately 600 Chinese characters. It also offers academic year programmes, as well as internships within Chinese companies. Mandarin House’s new Work & Study programme also offers the opportunity to combine language study with work experience. As Jasmine Bian explains, “Most students come to learn Mandarin for career purposes.”