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Chinese is hot campus subject

By K. Oanh Ha
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Faisal Mostamandy, a San Jose State University graduate of Afghan ancestry, hopes to have a future in his homeland. To help him get there, he's learning Chinese.

``Afghanistan borders China, and China is an emerging power," said Mostamandy, 27. With the pace of economic globalization, he added: ``You'd be a fool not to learn Chinese."

That seems to be the thinking for thousands across America, particularly in the Bay Area, where business and cultural ties with China are deep and broad. As globalization ushers China's economy onto center stage, unprecedented numbers of students, professionals and even preschool children -- many of whom are not of Chinese ancestry -- are clamoring to learn Mandarin, the language spoken by one-fifth of the world's population.

Most Chinese-learners feel they need to prepare for a future in which China will grow in economic, political and cultural clout.

Most corporations aren't yet rushing to teach employees Chinese. But among college students, many of whom will be the next generation working for those corporations, the growth is dramatic, swelling by at least 20 percent over the past five years, according to estimates by educators.

``Since 9/11, American college students have become more sensitized about what it takes to be a well-functioning global citizen," said Rosemary Feal, executive director of the Modern Language Institute, which promotes foreign-language teaching. ``That means having a deep understanding and knowledge of other languages and cultures."

Evidence abounds

Some signs of the trend:

- Among some of the largest universities and colleges in the state, enrollment in Chinese-language courses is up as much as 64 percent over the past five years. The demand is so great that some schools, including the University of California-Berkeley, routinely are turning away a hundred students or more each term. While interest in Chinese has been healthy in a state with a high Asian-American population, much of the recent growth comes from students who are not of Chinese ancestry.
- California produces a disproportionately large share of K-12 students studying Chinese -- about a third of the 24,000 students enrolled in the United States. The total number of K-12 students learning Chinese across the country tripled between 2000 and 2005. At College Park magnet school in the Foster City-San Mateo school district, the majority of students enrolled in Chinese immersion are Latino.
- This spring, U.S. Sens. Joe Lieberman and Lamar Alexander introduced a bill authorizing \$1.3 billion over five years to fund Chinese-language instruction in U.S. schools with the aim of improving business and cultural relations with China.
- While Chinese still lags far behind other languages such as Spanish and French on college campuses, a 2002 study by the Modern Language Association showed the number in the United States learning Chinese grew 20 percent since 1998.

At Berkeley, so many students show up for the first day of class that many end up sitting on the floor, said Jan Johnson, student-affairs adviser in the East Asian languages and cultures department. Many students are economics and business majors. In September, about 120 students were turned away from its course designed for ``non-heritage" students -- those without Chinese ancestry.

Two-year degree

Foothill College last year began offering an associate degree in Chinese. It also revised its courses to use the simplified character writing style that China uses, rather than the traditional characters used in Taiwan.

``We felt it would be more useful for people who want to do business in China," said Karen Alfsen, Foothill's dean of language arts.

The Chinese government, in attempts to bolster its own cultural diplomacy, offers various programs to help foreigners learn

the language. It has set up 100 Chinese-language centers, called Confucius Institutes, around the world, and staffs them with native Chinese teachers.

San Francisco State University will host the first such institute in the Western United States. It plans to offer language courses to the community, such as business Chinese, as well as a teaching-certification program, said Charles Egan, program coordinator of the Chinese program.

Even with China's emergence as a global economic power, English remains the predominant language of commerce for companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Intel and Oracle. Despite Yahoo's purchase of online auction site Alibaba in China, the Internet giant doesn't encourage employees in Silicon Valley to learn Chinese or offer on-site language courses.

``As a company we certainly think it's positive for our Yahoos to be bilingual, but for most positions that is not a requirement or expectation," wrote Heidi Burgett, Yahoo spokeswoman, in an e-mail.

Personal initiative

But other business professionals are taking up Chinese on their own initiative.

Lily Wu, an independent Chinese tutor who has been teaching the language the past 11 years, said she has seen an dramatic increase in Chinese in the past few years. Her full roster of 10 students are mostly non-Chinese professionals who are traveling to China for business.

David Earle found Wu's ad on Craigslist three weeks ago. Next year, he plans to move to Taiwan to start a bicycle-design and marketing business.

``A lot of Taiwanese aren't forgiving if you don't speak their language right," Earle said.

Finally, some aren't waiting for college, or even high school, to dive into Chinese. Some parents of preschoolers believe speaking Chinese can give their children an edge, and several local preschools offer Chinese-language instruction.

Manju Ramachandran of San Jose enrolled her 5-year-old daughter, Nithya, in an after-school Chinese program at Milpitas Montessori in September. There, she learns to sing nursery rhymes such as ``Head, shoulders, knees and toes" in Chinese, taught by a native Chinese speaker.

Ramachandran, who speaks Hindi with her daughters at home, points to the populations of India and China as motivation enough.

``All of the business in the world will come from either China or India," she said. ``If she knows the language of the two most populated counties in the world, she can't go wrong in life."

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