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CULTURE

Demand for Chinese Language Courses in US Soars

From well-to-do families hiring Mandarin-speaking nannies for their tots to students in crammed Asian studies programmes, demand for Chinese language instruction is booming like never before in the United States.

In a country that has never prioritized teaching foreign languages, demand is difficult to meet given a serious shortage of qualified instructors, said Michael Levine, who handles education at the New York-based Asia Society, which works to support cultural ties between the United States and Asia.

Clifford Greenhouse, who runs the Pavilion agency specializing in household help, said he gets more and more requests from "very wealthy families" seeking nannies who speak Mandarin, in the hopes their offspring will grow up bilingual. He can't always deliver.

"Mandarin-speaking people in New York tend to look down upon this work; they see it as being a servant," he said.

Leon Furchgott, 17, a freshman at prestigious Princeton University, grew up eating Chinese from the age of 10 months throughout his childhood in Bethesda, Maryland, an expensive Washington suburb.

"My mother likes to say that my first word was 'bu yao,' which means 'I don't want'," said Furchgott, who now speaks fluent Mandarin thanks to nannies and two hours of Chinese classes per week.

"When I was little, it was not difficult," he said.

Though Chinese has not yet reached the ranks of more traditional foreign languages, it is red hot in Pacific coast cities such as San Francisco and Los Angeles.

But it also has seen a surge in interest in cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia and Houston, and in more rural states such as Kentucky and Kansas, the Asia Society says.

The interest is "coming from the heartland as well as from the big cities," said Levine. He said that behind the focus on Chinese was


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interest in doing business with China.

"Part of the demand comes from families who want to maintain their heritage, but in Chicago it comes from middle class families who see that as an advantage for their children," said Levine. "That's why demand is growing so rapidly."

Just about 50,000 US students are learning Chinese in public schools, and another 50,000 are studying it elsewhere, according to Asia Today.

"If we wanted to have 5 percent of all high schoolers in America learning Chinese, we'd need to have 25,000 qualified Chinese teachers" and not the current 1,000, Levine said.

To help deal with the teacher shortage, US philanthropists and corporate foundations are beginning to chip in to support instruction in Chinese, he noted.

At the university level as well, demand for Chinese instruction is on the rise; it is now in seventh place among foreign languages behind Spanish, French, German, Italian, sign language and Japanese. The latest data, from 2002, showed that 34,153 university students were learning Chinese, up a sharp 20 percent from 28,456 in 1998.

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