

Interest in Learning This Less Commonly Taught Language is Hot

Chinese Fever

BY MAURA HALLAM SWELEY

Without a doubt China has risen to be a great world power, both politically and economically, and U.S. leaders in the public and private sectors are taking notice. The result: a growing interest in advancing Chinese language learning in the United States and creating a pool of U.S. citizens who can communicate effectively in Chinese for professional and political purposes.

"There's a lot of talk now about Chinese language training," says Dana Scott Bourgerie, associate professor of Asian and Near Eastern

Languages at Brigham Young University and program director for the university's Chinese Flagship program.

"The interest now around the country is hot," says Lucy Lee, world languages teacher with Livingston Public Schools in New Jersey, and a Chinese AP test development consultant with ETS.

Although this national excitement about Chinese language learning has led to the addition or expansion of a number of Chinese language programs, and at all educational levels, significant challenges still exist for long-term program sustainability, including a dearth of well-trained teachers, a slow adoption of standardization, and the lack of an effective K-16 pipeline.

"Even though we're teaching the oldest language," says Lee, "We still have a long way to go."

The Chinese Language Explosion

While there have been Chinese language programs in place in the United States for many years, historically most students who learned Chinese in the country did so in so-called "weekend" schools, run by community organizations teaching Chinese culture and language primarily to heritage learners on evenings and weekends. But as China grew as a power, interest in learning Chinese in traditional academic settings grew as well. Estimates of the number of U.S. students learning Chinese in public and private schools vary widely, from approximately 5,000 students in grades 7-12 (reported by ACTFL in 2000) to 24,000 K-12 students, according to a 2003 report by the Secondary School Chinese Language Center at Princeton University.



First grade teacher Wei Yang with her class at Alcott Elementary School in Chicago.

"Right now there's no systemic data collected on a national level to document the growth," says Shuhan Wang, executive director for the Asia Society's newly created Chinese Language Initiative.

Yet 2,400 schools indicated in a 2004 survey by the College Board that they were interested in offering an Advanced Placement (AP) class in Chinese language and culture, which led to the development of the first new AP course in 30 years.

"This new AP program created an unprecedented interest in learning Chinese," says ACTFL Board of Directors Member Yu-Lan Lin, who is the senior program director of world languages with Boston Public Schools and content advisor for the Chinese AP program.

This interest is not limited to K-12 schools, but also reaches into higher education.

"Anecdotal evidence from other institutions points toward a three-fold increase in student numbers this year," says Cynthia Ning, executive director of the Chinese Language Teachers Association and associate director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

On the plus side, this increased interest and legitimacy has led to the development of more resources and materials to help schools develop and maintain programs. For example, the Asia Society's new publication, *Creating a Chinese Language Program in Your School: An Introductory Guide*, offers schools a detailed guide for curriculum development, resources, and assessment.

"We really lay out the process of how to do it," says Wang, who was a co-author of the handbook.

Help Wanted

But increased interest, historic AP offerings, and new materials are not enough to ensure that Chinese language programs are effective or sustainable. One of the major hurdles that U.S. schools need to overcome is as simple as it is challenging: a shortage of qualified teachers.

"The biggest challenge we face in creating successful Chinese programs is the lack of highly qualified teachers," says Lin. "There are simply too many demands needing to be met too quickly."

"Trained, effective language teachers, those who can develop and teach a task-, standards-, performance-based/proficiency-oriented curriculum, are critically in short supply at all levels, K-12 and postsecondary," says Ning.

According to the Asia Society's 2005 report, *Expanding Chinese Language Capacity in the United States*, "Chinese-language teacher-education programs that are accredited by the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) include only those at University of Iowa, New York University, Ohio State University, and University of Massachusetts at Amherst. There are no data available on how many of their graduates become certified Chinese language teachers."

The good news is there has been a response to the demand. For example, Brigham Young University is reinstating its Chinese teaching major, which was discontinued due to a lack of demand for teachers and a lack of locations for Chinese teachers in training to go for student teaching experience.

"That's completely changed now," says Bourgerie.

Boston Public Schools

Boston, Massachusetts
<http://boston.k12.ma.us>

The Boston Public School system has a well-established Chinese language program. In 1983, the city's Snowden International School became the first school in the state to offer a Mandarin Chinese program. Today, Boston Public Schools offers Chinese language instruction at no less than six elementary schools, four middle schools, and five high schools, with a total of about 2,300 students enrolled in various Chinese classes, and 13 instructors and two exchange teachers from China on staff.

"We have schools that have been offering Chinese for more than 20 years, while others have just started offering Chinese 20 days into the school year," says Dr. Yu-Lan Lin, senior program director of world languages with Boston Public Schools and content advisor for the Chinese AP program.

Program milestones for the school district include adding an AP Chinese language course to the curriculum at Boston Latin School with plans to add another AP course at Josiah Quincy Upper School next year; building a K-12 pipeline for the language through Josiah Quincy Elementary School and Josiah Quincy Upper School; and Snowden High School's development of a summer program for students to visit major cities as well as rural sites of China to experience both urban and farm life.

Brigham Young University's Chinese Flagship Program

Provo, Utah
<http://chineseflagship.byu.edu>

With one of the largest Chinese programs in the country, it makes sense that Brigham Young University was the first to receive Flagship program funding for Chinese from the National Security Education Program (NSEP)/National Flagship Language Initiative (NFLI).

"We're looking to prepare people at the professional level, says Dana Scott Bourgerie, associate professor of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at Brigham Young University and program director for the university's Chinese Flagship program.

Established in 2002, the two-year program is small, with between 7 and 12 students with demonstrated proficiency in Chinese accepted each year. The program includes three main curriculum components: on-campus directed study for the first year, and a study abroad program at Nanjing University and international internship the second year. The instruction is highly individualized based on the student's domain of interest. For example, a student who plans to study the law would focus on learning materials that are relevant to practicing law in China.

"It's a one-on-one intensive program," says Bourgerie.

Learn More

For more information on Chinese language learning, check out these online resources:

Asia Society

<http://www.askasia.org/chinese/>

Chinese Language Teachers Association

<http://clta.osu.edu>

Chinese Language Association for Secondary-Elementary Schools

<http://www.classk12.org>

Creating a Chinese Language Program in Your School: An Introductory Guide

<http://www.askasia.org/chinese/publications.htm>

The National East Asian Languages Resource Center

<http://nealrc.osu.edu/default.cfm>

Chicago Public Schools

Chicago, Illinois

<http://www.cps.k12.il.us/>

Since the 1999–2000 academic year, the city of Chicago has had in place one of the most comprehensive Chinese language programs in the country, offering study for approximately 5,500–6,000 preK–12 students at 28 schools with 38 full-time teachers. The program is offered at both neighborhood and selective enrollment schools and the majority of participating students are African American and Latino, with very few heritage students enrolled. Chicago is also the only K–12 school district in the world that hosts a Confucius Institute.

In 2004, Mayor Richard Daley traveled to China and visited Chinese schools. He also met with Vice-Education Minister WU Xidi and signed a Memorandum of Understanding which set the foundation for the formation of the Confucius Institute in Chicago and the Chicago-Shanghai Teacher Recruitment Program. Based on the success of the existing programs, more and more families became interested in having their students learn Chinese, and these families brought these requests to principals, who then shared this with the Office of Language and Cultural Education.

According to Robert Davis, director of Chicago's Chinese Connections Program and of the Confucius Institute in Chicago, "We started with a very grassroots, community-based initiative and grew into the largest Chinese world language program in the United States.

"Chicago Public Schools have brought over 100 teachers and administrators to China for immersion education programs, and also offered intensive ESL training for over 300 Chinese ESL teachers in Hubei Province. We have successfully worked with the Illinois State Board of Education to create a Chinese language teaching endorsement, as well visiting teacher certificate, and secured funding for our Chinese and Japanese language teachers to become certified and NCLB qualified."

The long-running weekend schools may also provide a solution for the current teacher shortage.

"Teachers in heritage language schools are already here, they're highly proficient, and mostly highly educated," says Wang. With the right training and certification, Wang believes, "they are potentially a great pool for K–12 education."

More professional development opportunities for current Chinese teachers are also becoming available. This summer, for example, the Department of Education sponsored two foreign language workshops focused on Mandarin Chinese.

"We are very encouraged by that," says Lee. "We have been ignored for so long."

In the past, many Chinese language programs relied on visiting teachers from China, and the Chinese government is usually happy to supply them. But that, says Carl Falsgraf, Director of the Center for Applied Second Language Studies at the University of Oregon, is not an effective solution.

"One thing districts should *not* do is import 'free' teachers from China," he says. "There is no free lunch. These teachers generally have little idea of how to manage American classrooms, deal with parents, or develop appropriate curriculum. They generally leave after a year or two, leaving the program to die. Even a promise of a continuing line of temporary teachers is not sufficient to build a program. The revolving door of teachers makes articulation almost impossible and all it takes is a year or two of an unsuitable teacher to kill an elective program such as Chinese."

Your Standards or Mine?

Even with well-trained teachers at the helm, Chinese language programs frequently suffer from a lack of universally applied teaching standards. Despite published Chinese language standards, such as *Professional Standards for K–12 Chinese Teachers*, developed by the Chinese Language Association for Secondary–Elementary Schools (CLASS), and *Standards for Chinese Language Learning*, many K–12 language programs are setting their own standards for curriculum development and program assessment.

"Some language fields are catching up fast [with standardization]; some are slow, Chinese being one of them," says Lin.

Why Chinese language educators have been so slow to adopt standards is not clear, but some educators believe it is due, at least in part, to the attitudes of the educators themselves.

"The Chinese language field is conservative, as a whole," says Ning. "I would estimate that at least half of my colleagues believe that Chinese is fundamentally different than other languages, and therefore pedagogical approaches that work for other languages are not relevant to Chinese."

"We still have a long way to go in terms of correcting our hundred years' of perpetuating traditional instructional methods," says Lin.

"This is why performance and standards-based [curriculum] is so important," says Wang. "We have to figure out pedagogically how we teach students. If they learn 300 characters and 100 sentence structures the key is, 'so what?' Can you do something with the Chinese you know? Can you communicate with people?"

This is a problem that can even affect programs within the same school district.

"Since our Mandarin programs are offered at different schools, one of the challenges has been trying to create a smooth vertical and horizontal articulation among all schools," says Lin. "We have six elementary schools and five high schools that offer Chinese, but each one seems to move at its own pace, and their outcomes are not comparable either."

The new AP class in Chinese means that there is hope on the horizon, however. As more schools implement the AP program, more students will have to be prepared for the AP exam, which may force more programs into standardization and provide the capacity for them to more effectively evaluate their success.

Breaks in the Pipeline

As a category IV language, Chinese requires an estimated 1,300 hours of study before a student is truly proficient, according to Defense Language Institute standards. That is a level of study that is difficult for students to accomplish if they do not start until high school. More school districts are realizing this and many of the newest Chinese language programs are at the elementary and middle school levels.

Livingston Public Schools, for example, has added two middle school classes in Chinese for the 2006–2007 school year.

"It was a natural outgrowth of the AP program," says Lee. "If they started [learning Chinese] in the ninth grade, they'd never make it to the AP program."

Most experts agree that to educate superior-level Chinese speakers, what is needed is an articulated program that takes students all the way from kindergarten through college graduation.

"Right now there's a huge gap between K–12 and higher education," says Wang. "People are aware of the gap and are working to bridge it. But we need to do more and come up with consensus for the field."

"The term that's used a lot is 'pipeline,'" says Bourgerie.

There are several initiatives in various stages of development to address the pipeline issue, most notably the University of Oregon's newly funded K–16 Chinese Flagship program, tasked with developing



Adrienne Bee's seventh grade Chinese immersion students concentrate on a social studies project at Hosford Middle School in Portland, Oregon.

Confucius Institute at the University of Kansas Lawrence, Kansas <http://www.confucius.ku.edu>

The University of Kansas celebrated the opening of its Confucius Institute in May 2006, a Chinese language program that is targeted at working professionals and families. Part of an international network of Confucius Institutes, an initiative of China's National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, the University of Kansas institute is the fourth one to be established in the United States.

"It's a community program," says William Tsutsui, executive director of the institute, as well as a professor of history and director of both the Kansas Consortium for Teaching About Asia and the Undergraduate Asian Studies Initiative. "The classes are taught at hours that are convenient for working people."

The classes meet once a week for 10 weeks, in the early morning or late evening, and are designed to give students basic Chinese communication skills. So far the brand new program has been well received, with more than 100 students registered in seven classes, and the institute has even offered onsite classes to companies that conduct business in China.

In the future, Tsutsui hopes that the Confucius Institute will be able to extend the range of the program to reach more of the state.

"We're looking into ways of doing this using technology," he says, "We really hope to expand this."

Livingston Public Schools Livingston, New Jersey <http://www.livingston.org>

Livingston, New Jersey has a fairly large population of Chinese speakers and in 1990 the community successfully lobbied to have a Chinese language class added to the curriculum at Livingston High School.

"It was petitioned by the parents," Lucy Lee, world languages teacher at Livingston High School, and a Chinese AP test development consultant with ETS.

The program grew steadily over the years, and the high school now offers five levels of Chinese, including a new AP Chinese class that started this school year. The public school district has also added two Chinese classes to the curriculum at the middle school level for the 2006–2007 school year.

The existing high school classes are well attended and Lee reports that many of the classes have more than one section.

"We have a lot of community support," says Lee.

To date, most of the advanced students have been heritage speakers, and Lee has seen an increase in interest in the classes among heritage students, perhaps in part because the new AP program makes learning Chinese more directly applicable to higher education.

"AP makes the language more legitimate," says Lee.

University of Oregon's K-16 Chinese Flagship Program

Portland, Oregon

<http://casls.uoregon.edu/ORflagship>

The latest Chinese Flagship program to launch is a unique partnership between the University of Oregon and Portland Public Schools—tasked by the National Security Education Program (NSEP) of the Department of Defense to develop a national model of K-16 language education to produce superior-level speakers of Chinese.

"The Oregon K-16 Chinese Flagship provides truly articulated language learning from kindergarten through university," says Carl Falsgraf, director of the Center for Applied Second Language Studies at the University of Oregon.

The program utilizes the Chinese immersion and heritage language programs that Portland Public Schools implemented in 1997, thanks to grassroots efforts of the community. In the immersion program, students spend a significant portion of their day in regular classes taught in Mandarin, learning the language and culture as they study various core subjects.

"Students use Chinese as a tool to learn other subjects rather than as a separate object of study," says Falsgraf. "So the half day they spend in Chinese does not subtract from the time they spend on other subjects."

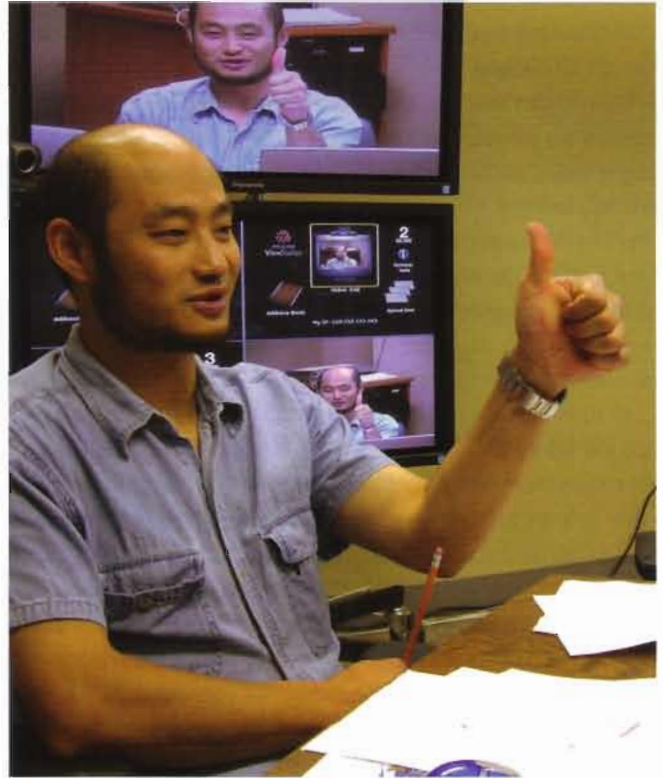
This approach offers several advantages over traditional language classes, most particularly when it comes to finding qualified teachers.

"There are many teachers certified in a variety of subjects who speak Chinese at native or near-native levels," says Falsgraf.

At the university level, the Flagship program offers students a four-year, honors-level course of study that helps them develop superior-level language skills while pursuing degrees in the academic major of their choice. As part of the program, students will spend their junior year abroad at Nanjing University, taking courses relevant to their major.

The first group of 10 students was admitted to the University of Oregon's Chinese Flagship program this fall, and moving forward the university has plans to recruit 25 students per year.

Aside from serving as a model of language learning, says Falsgraf, "the Flagship model represents a new way for universities to look at diversity. It shifts us from a deficit model focused on what heritage speakers cannot do to an excellence model that rewards them for possessing unique skills that make them such an asset to the country and their communities."



Honggen Yi, a professor at Huazhong Normal University and a visiting scholar at the Confucius Institute at the University of Kansas, teaches an interactive distance learning (IDL) class that brings Mandarin to seven high schools across the state of Kansas.

a national model for K-16 language learning. The program was funded by a grant from the National Security Education Program (NSEP), U.S. Department of Defense, as part of its National Flagship Language Initiative (NFLI)—a strategic partnership between the U.S. national security community and higher education to address serious deficits in languages critical to national security.

"One of their main charges is to develop that pipeline," says Bourgerie.

University of Oregon's program, a partnership between the university and the Portland Public Schools' Chinese language immersion program, started this fall.

"The profession has said for years that long sequences of quality language instruction will address the nation's language crisis," says Falsgraf. "Flagship can provide the first systematic approach leading to superior-level language skills . . . it could revolutionize language teaching in the country."

Other initiatives, including planning for an additional K-16 Chinese Flagship program at Ohio State University, are also in the works and within some K-12 school systems pipelines are being developed on a smaller scale.

"We have finally built a K-12 long sequence Mandarin program at Josiah Quincy Elementary School (K-5) and Josiah Quincy Upper School (6-12)," says Lin.

Negative Consequences

Why Standards-Based Instruction is Critical

There are many knowledgeable Chinese language teachers in the profession who, inadvertently or not, are hampering the process of Chinese language acquisition for their students. John M. Love, upper school principal of the Fieldston School in New York, shares some of his experiences—and frustrations—with learning Chinese:

"Five years ago, at the age of 52, I began studying Chinese. I studied assiduously for three years in a classroom setting, completing the fifth year of high school Chinese at the school where I was principal. For the last two years I have been studying on my own.

"This past fall I began corresponding in Chinese with a fellow principal in Nanjing. I have discovered a near-total incapacity to form idiomatic Chinese sentences (I have also come to realize that the 1,000 odd characters I painstakingly memorized are of limited use). I am shocked to discover how much I never learned.

"I have had the chance to study under three excellent Chinese language teachers. But their approach and that of the three textbook series we used have left me ill-equipped to communicate in speech or writing to native Chinese speakers. I have come to believe that our approach to teaching Chinese to American students is fundamentally wrong-headed.

"The ability to recognize Chinese characters remains essential, but the requirement inflicted upon generations of Chinese language learners painstakingly to trace and re-trace the stroke order of a character until you can write it perfectly and without hesitation has become as important as the ability to write legible cursive with a fountain pen is to English. If all the time that students of Chinese spent tracing characters and developing the ability to recall them were devoted to understanding the essential features of Chinese grammar and learning how to compose idiomatic Chinese sentences,

a generation of second language speakers of Chinese would emerge possessed of a fluency far surpassing the current generation of students."

Dr. Yu-Lan Lin, who is the senior program director of world languages with Boston Public Schools and content advisor for the College Board's Chinese AP program recognizes in Mr. Love's frustration a lack of the application of standards-based instruction:

"What John Love shares about his Chinese learning experiences, describes a lot of current practices that a standards-based instruction tries not to perpetuate.

"In a true proficiency approach, standards-based instruction where language function is emphasized, communication is at the core of both spoken and written forms. Accumulation/memorization of characters out of context should never be the focus of Chinese teaching and learning.

"This is not to say that learning characters is not important. In fact, writing characters should be part of the curriculum since both handwriting and use of technology are important. Technology is a tool in this modern society, we all need to face and use it, but it cannot replace a handwriting experience, which is deeply embedded in Chinese culture and arts.

"In Chinese there are colloquial (*kou yu*) and written (*shumian yu*) forms—one informal, one formal. Textbooks tend to use a lot of formal language, therefore, after learning a number of years, learners still find themselves challenged to conduct a conversation using so-called 'idiomatic Chinese.' Had Mr. Love been taught under a functional communication approach, not a textbook-based approach, he would not have experienced the shock he describes."

The Road Ahead

Not so long ago, there was a similar national push to teach Japanese, which reached a fever pitch and then cooled off. Some question whether the current focus on Chinese will play out in similar fashion. Most educators are optimistic that will not be so.

"People ask if it is a blip," says Bourgerie. "But I think you're going to see a stable, steady growth."

"We can bring the Chinese language into the mainstream," says Lee, "If we align curriculum with standards."

What is most critical overall to ensure that this happens, says Wang, is to "coordinate efforts and build strong programs so that it's not just a Chinese fever."



Teacher Xiaoping Xe teaches a bilingual kindergarten class at Josiah Quincy Elementary School in Boston.

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