



Confucius Institute: Promoting language, culture and friendliness

GONG YIDONG

TWO thousand, five hundred and fifty-six years after his birth in China, Confucius is reliving his mission of "touring various kingdoms". This time, he has gone beyond China and settled in 36 countries, home to Confucius Institutes.

However, the task for his disciples is no longer to memorize doctrines left by the great philosopher and educator, but to learn Mandarin, "the must-have language", according to the British linguist David Gaddol. "Mandarin is trendy around the globe, and the establishment of

Confucius Institutes is a natural response to the world thirst," says Xu Lin, Chief of the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCL). Xu hit the point. Statistics from the Ministry of Education show that there are 30 million foreigners studying Chinese worldwide. More than 2,500 colleges and universi-

ties offer Chinese courses in 100-plus countries. Meanwhile, the number of foreign students studying in China has increased from 8,000 in the mid-1980s to 110,800 in 2005. More than 500,000 examinees have sat the Chinese Language Proficiency Test (HSK) since it was introduced in 1990. Many observers attribute the language fever to China's booming economy. Being the fourth-largest economy worldwide, China has maintained an annual growth rate on average of 10 percent in the past two decades.

Jump on board the locomotive of China: Nowadays, speaking Mandarin is a key to tapping the economic potential of the Dragon. "I hope to land a finance-related job in China upon graduation next year," says Hans Rasmussen, a 28-year-old Dane pursuing a Master's of Business Administration (MBA) program at the National University of Singapore. During the summer vacation, he flew to Beijing for a two-and-a-half-month intensive training course at the Bridge School, a Beijing-based Chinese language school. "I think my efforts will pay off in real terms," he says. "The market is huge. Every month, we enroll more than 2,800 students," says Wang Renhua, a marketing specialist of the school. Three quarters of them register for a course because Mandarin is seen as an important tool in their business exchange, Wang explains.

Echoing the world tide, the Chinese government decided to promote Mandarin overseas in 2004. In November, the first Confucius Institute was founded in Seoul, the Republic of Korea. In two years' time, the number has climbed to 81 scattered across Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, South America and Oceania. Adding to the expanding list are 99 foreign organizations and universities which have put forward their applications. Following the initial success, the Office has mapped out an even more ambitious plan: to establish 100 Confucius Institutes by the end of 2006 and 1,000 by 2020.

Yao Ying, a professor of Chinese language with Fudan University in Shanghai, is confident that the Confucius Institute will transcend the sole role of language teaching. "It is expected to upgrade Chinese learning, mainly driven by pragmatic interests, to a systematic package encompassing official cultural exchanges, civil interactions, training of teachers and dissemination of new breeds of Chinese culture," she says. Xu Jialu, a Chinese linguist, goes even further. "As an ingredient of the diversified cultures belonging to mankind, the Chinese culture should make more contributions to world peace and harmony by adding new colors to human life," he said.

The Confucius Institute has gradually given play to these functions. "I appreciate the Confucius ideology on peacefulness and respecting humans, which is adopted in our teaching," says Koh Hock Kiat, director of the Confucius Institute under Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

Teaching an ancient Chinese poem titled "Respecting Farming," Koh recalls, he asked each student to bring a pack of rice from home. When the class was over, the pupils were brought to the canteen, where they had a meal made from the rice. "This is an effective way to implant the idea of frugality and promote Chinese culture," he says.

The Confucius Institute is increasingly reaching out to a wider population: the Confucius Institute at Maryland University will hold the largest-ever exhibition on Confucius next year; Peking Opera performance organized by the Confucius Institute at Stockholm University is an eye-opening event for the Swedish; the upcoming Confucius Institute sponsored by the Wenzhou Medical College and Burapha University will cater to the Thai's fondness for traditional Chinese medicine.

The Confucius Institute also acts as a friendly envoy overseas. The Confucius Institute of Hokuriku University, for instance, will play its due role in "facilitating the Japanese' proper understanding of China and Chinese people," said university president Yoshiro Kitamoto in April.

However, one obstacle in promoting Mandarin overseas is the

shortage of professional teachers. The National Office of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language estimates that five million teachers are required by 2020 to teach 100 million Chinese learners worldwide. The United States alone needs 5,000 Chinese-language teachers in 2,400 high schools. For the moment, there are less than 5,000 teachers in China who hold a certificate of Teaching Chinese to Foreigners.

"Efforts should be made to fill in the deficient resources, involving the introduction of the market," says Xu Lin. Starting from this consideration, China kicked off a program in 2004 to send volunteers overseas to teach Chinese. Most of them have an educational background in Chinese or hold a qualification certificate.

Ai Dandan, is one of this Chinese "peace corps". A graduate of Beijing University of Language and Culture, she was dispatched to Indonesia in 2005 as a Chinese teacher in Pontianak.

"I was impressed by their earnest quest for Chinese," says Ai. Some of the students were full-time professionals, who came up in the evening for a four-hour program, Monday to Friday.

Apart from language teaching, Ai tried her best to impart Chinese culture to the students. Collaborating with her colleagues, Ai formulated many courses of special interest: calligraphy, Chinese songs, shadow boxing and

Chinese culture seminars. More significant for Ai is the friendship forged with the students. "I will never forget the farewell party, when they joined in a chorus of a Chinese song named 'Thank You, Teacher'. All of us were moved to tears," she says. "The Confucius Institute is an important symbol of China's 'soft power', believes Zhou Qing'an, a researcher at the Center for International Communications Studies of Tsinghua University. However, China has a long way to go to effectively deliver 'soft power'.

"China is facing a cultural deficit," warned Zhao Qizheng, former minister in charge of the Information Office of the State Council, when addressing a plenary session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the country's top advisory body, in March.

To name one: China imported 4,322 foreign films from 2000 to 2004, most from the US, but exported few over the same period. The revenue from book trading for China is only one percent that of the US and Europe.

"China still lags behind in terms of cultural competitiveness, and the Confucius Institute should add more profound and dynamic elements to attract attention overseas, rather than hanging on to superficial or stereotyped cultural icons," says Zhou Qing'an.

China Features



Beijing ticking down to 2008 Olympic games

ZHAN YAN

JIA Shasha, a 20-year-old student in the Beijing-based Renmin University of China, is longing to become a volunteer at the 2008 Olympic Games. Having worked as a volunteer on campus, Jia is quite confident in her experience and qualification.

In Beijing, there are many others like Jia, who wish to contribute their shares to the success of the games, the first ever to be hosted by China.

About 100,000 volunteers are needed for the Olympic Games and the ensuing Paralympic Games in 2008, which will set a record in the Olympic history, according to the Beijing Olympics organizers, known as the Beijing Olympics Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG).

Beijing is ticking down to the "great event", slated for August 8 to 24, 2008 with the theme of "One world, one dream."

Bird's Nest taking shape

Bird's Nest, the signature building for the Beijing Olympics, is beginning to take shape after it broke ground in December 2005. It is the nickname of the futuristic National Stadium for its nest-like steel-boned exterior.

All the new venues of the Games will be completed before the end of 2007, according to the organizers.

Beijing will build 12 new venues, expand 11 existing ones and set up eight temporary ones for the Olympic Games, the organizers say.

The organizers had planned to build three more, but changed their mind after learning that excessive venues are burdening some former Olympic hosts with high vacancy rates and huge maintenance costs.

"Thrift and pragmatism should be the first consideration for developing countries," said Yu Xiaoxuan, deputy director of the BOCOG Project and Environment Department, "and we have to think over whether the venues could be used efficiently after the games."

"The projects are scattered in the Olympics area, universities and residential communities, for more efficient civil use in the future," said Yu, "and temporary seats are also added to the venues to accommodate more people. The seats could be removed after the Games."

Covering a space of 258,000 square meters with 91,000 seats, the Bird's Nest will first stage the Games' opening ceremony, to be directed by China's best-known film director Zhang Yimou. It will also serve as the venue for football finals and track and field competitions during the Games.

Beijing Olympics organizers have repeatedly vowed to host a "clean Olympics", namely one free of corruption and scandals.

The BOCOG asked its department heads to sign anti-corruption pledges. The department officials would be held responsible for any violations of anti-graft rules within their departments, according to the letters signed on August 3.

"We promised a clean Olympic Games free of corruption when we won the bid. Now the department heads have signed the letters of responsibility, to show their commitment to preventing corruption within the BOCOG," said Liu Jingmin, the organizing committee's executive vice president, at the signing ceremony.

Challenging traffic jams

Sudden rainstorms have paralyzed Beijing's transport system this summer more than once, triggering doubts on whether the city's traffic network could beat the heavy transportation pressure during the 2008 Games.

Traffic jams have been afflicting Beijingers almost everyday in recent years, partially due to the increasing number of automobiles. It challenges Beijing's promise that all the Olympic venues could be reached within 30 minutes from the Olympic Village.

"Driving here is indeed a nerve-racking experience. The very first thing I do every morning is to figure out how to avoid getting stuck in traffic jams," said Jiang Nan, a software engineer with Baidu.com company.

Automobiles topped 2.3 million in Beijing by the end of 2005. Given the current growth rate, the number could rise to 3.5 million in 2008.

In order to ensure smooth transportation during the Olympic Games, Beijing has published and implemented a "transportation strategic plan" for the 2008 Olympics.

The plan focuses on promoting public transportation and providing special traffic lanes for exclusive Olympic use.

Subway transportation, which

contributed to the success of the Athens Olympics, will also play a key role during the Beijing Olympics. The city is upgrading its underground transport network to relieve the pressure on road transport.

Meanwhile, the government has been replacing the old fleet of more than 18,000 buses in Beijing, not only as part of its efforts to present a "Green Beijing", but in the hope that more comfortable buses will persuade at least some drivers to leave their cars at home.

Free public transport is an important measure of encouragement.

People with tickets for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games can take free ride of buses, subway and light railway during the Games.

The city will dispatch 4,000 vehicles for free use, said Yu Xiaoxuan of the BOCOG.

Food, water and security

Beijing is carefully planning food services for both the competitors and spectators.

Vegetables will get their own identity numbers and go through inspections at the distribution center before they are eligible to enter Olympic kitchens.

In this way, if there is a safety incident, the vegetable's file can be immediately checked and its origins traced.

The city will need more than 5,000 tons of vegetables during the Games, mostly from Beijing and the northern Chinese provinces of Hebei and Shandong, according to Zhang Baohai, an expert with the Agriculture Research Center under Beijing Academy of Agriculture and Forestry Sciences.

The Academy is counseling the Games' organizers on how to provide diversified and safe vegetables during the Games.

Water safety is also highlighted since Beijing is located in the drought-prone northern China.

Beijing is stepping up efforts to improve its water environment for the aquatic sports venues of the 2008 Olympic Games, says Beijing Water Authority.

The city will need about 3.89 billion cubic meters of water in 2008, while an estimated 4.2 billion cubic meters of water will be available at that time, according to a three-year water plan released by the Beijing Water Authority in July.

Nevertheless, the city has been encouraging the public to use

water more efficiently, since its per capita water resources stand at less than 300 cubic meters, according to the Authority.

The 2008 Games are expected to receive about 7 million spectators, but it's still not clear how many of them will come from outside Beijing.

The city's 650 star-rated hotels and 4,000 common ones could accommodate about 500,000 visitors, said Wang Wei, BOCOG's executive vice president.

Smaller guesthouses in the city could accommodate more, Wang said.

BOCOG is also mapping out security arrangements for the 2008 Games.

"When bidding, we planned to deploy 20,000 policemen for the Games, along with 10,000 professional security staff. We are upgrading the security plan in the run-up to the Games," Jiang Xiaoyu, another executive vice president of the BOCOG, has told a press conference.

Dreams and toil

"As long as the tickets are not too highly priced, I would like to go to watch the high-level Olympic competition on the venue," Chen Qiying, a civil servant in Xiamen City of Southeast China's Fujian Province, told China Features on the phone.

Many people like Chen are eager to get a ticket of the Games. This might test the city's infrastructure capacity, since Beijing now has some 15 million residents already.

Campaigns have been launched to improve local people's etiquette.

A three-year campaign is helping some locals fight bad habits, such as spitting, jaywalking, and talking too loud in public. It focuses not only on daily social manners, but also proper ways to communicate with foreigners and get to know their cultures.

The campaign was launched by the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China, the Beijing Municipal Government and the Capital Ethic Development Office in January 2005.

China is also promoting Olympic knowledge among the public.

The Games' organizers have compiled books about the Olympics and will distribute the books in about 500,000 schools across the country with some 400 million students.

China plans five-year leap forward of railway development

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transport capacity of the existing tracks by 50 million tons a year," says Ji Jialun, a professor with Beijing Transportation University.

The Chinese government has also approved the construction of a maglev passenger railway between Shanghai and Hangzhou with German technology. Train speed on the 175-km maglev line is expected to reach 450 km/hr, cutting the 2-hour-and-20-minute trip to only 30 minutes.

Heavy Loading Cars

To increase the freight transportation capacity of the railways, China will introduce 70-ton freight cars

which carry more goods than the 60-ton freight cars presently in use.

According to the plan of the Ministry of Railways, China will roll out 70-ton cars for general use, 80-ton cars for coal and 100-ton cars for ore, iron and steel in the next five years.

The adoption of heavy loading freight cars can help reduce the length of a train set, making it possible for existing railway station platforms to accommodate heavy hauling trains.

"We will produce 1,000 more engines that can pull 5,000 tons of goods and run at 120 km an hour in the next five years," Liu says.

China's six major railway trunk lines now all have 5,000-ton freight

train service. The Ministry of Railways is even running 10,000-ton freight trains on the Da-Qin Railway, with a designed annual transportation capacity of 100 million tons. The line's actual annual transportation volume reached 203 million tons in 2005.

China will also develop railway container transportation, making 10,000 km of tracks able to accommodate double-deck container transportation, and establishing an annual capacity of 10 million TEUs.

Liu says that to realize the planned leap-forward in railway development, China will invest 1.25 trillion yuan (150 billion U.S. dollars) in the next five years. He


adds that the country will mainly rely on domestic technology and manufacturing in railway development, though it also needs to import some key, advanced technologies from abroad.

Sun Zhang, a professor with the Shanghai-based Tongji University, holds that even in five years, China's railway networks will still lag behind those in the developed countries. He says that Germany, with a land territory smaller than Yunnan, a province in Southwest China, boasts 45,000 km of railways, nearly half of the overall railway length China expects to have in five years.


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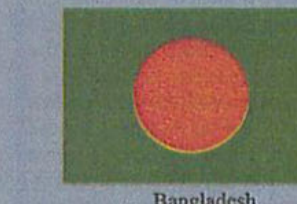
Our Heartiest Felicitations to The People's Republic of China on The Occasion of its 57th National Day




H.E. Mr. Wen Jiabao,
Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China



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