China's the word in more US schools

More and younger students are studying Chinese in the US as China's profile rises

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In Washington

From the outside, there is not much to differentiate Washington Yu Ying from any other elementary school in the American capital.

Children with names like Skye, Tenaya and Soleil arrive on a frosty morning, chirping hello to their friends and hugging their parents goodbye.

But that all stops the moment they walk through the school's front door – the speaking in English, that is, not the chatter. With a bright smile and a zaoshang hao! (good morning), Yu Ying's executive director and founder Mary Shaffner greets each child.

As they troop down the corridor, their teachers from China and Taiwan welcome the youngsters into brightly decorated classrooms, giving instructions in Mandarin for them to hang up their coats and bags in little cabinets outside the rooms.

Yu Ying has 200 pre-kindergarten to Grade 2 pupils (four- to seven-year-olds). Half are African-American, 30 per cent are Caucasian, and the rest are Asian (16 per cent) or Hispanic (4 per cent).

The children are getting a very different education from most of their peers in other schools. Half of all their classes, which include mathematics, art and PE, are taught in Chinese.

Students have alternate English and Chinese days, learning entirely in one language on a given day. They also move between separate Chinese and English classrooms.

Yu Ying, which opened in September 2008, is Washington DC's first Chinese language immersion school and the only one that offers a 50-50 instructional model in the city, said Ms Shaffner. It hopes to extend its programme to high school eventually.

Language immersion programmes here are different from traditional language classes, as the majority of subject content is taught in the second language.

As a charter school (an independent, publicly funded school), Yu Ying has more autonomy than US public schools in curriculum and hiring. Half of Yu Ying's 18 teachers are native Chinese speakers, the other half are native English speakers.

Yu Ying may go further than most schools in the United States, but Chinese language programmes are becoming much less uncommon as more American students say "ni hao" to learning Chinese.

It is their second day back at Yu Ying after the three-week year-end break, and the kids need a refresher. Teacher Liang Chia Chu, 36, warms them up by getting them to sing "Head, shoulders, knees and toes" in Chinese. Then she launches into the first exercise of the day.

"What's the date today? What month, what day of the week is it?" she asks in Chinese.

Twenty-five young faces stare back at her. It takes some coaxing, but five-year-old Simon Toro Raciborski, who is half-Polish and half-Bolivian, finally writes the Chinese characters for five, one and two on cards pasted on the classroom wall.

Scenes like this are playing out in more classrooms across the US, evidence of what experts are calling a boom in Chinese language learning in a country which has not done as much to encourage the learning of foreign languages compared with multi-lingual Europe and Asia.

The US does not have a national bilingual mandate, and education policy is left up to individual states and school districts to decide.

A decade ago, seven million public school students in Grades 7 to 12 were enrolled in foreign language courses, representing 33.8 per cent of total enrolment in those levels. Only about 5,000 were students of Chinese, according to a 2000 survey by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

But a new survey that the council is releasing next month found that the number of students studying Chinese has exploded to some 66,000, said council spokesman Marty Abbott.

The new study also shows that Spanish is still the most popular foreign language in US schools, with about 80 per cent of students who chose to learn a foreign language studying it. French is a distant second, followed by German and Latin. Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Italian come next.

But among the more "exotic" languages, Chinese is by far the fastest-growing language being taken up by students, Ms Abbot said.

US colleges have traditionally offered Chinese language and China studies, but Chinese programmes in elementary, middle and high schools are relatively new. Most were started in the past five years or so, said Mr Christopher Livaccari, associate director of the New York-based Asia Society's education and Chinese language initiatives.

Although there is no definitive figure, it has been estimated that at least 550 schools now offer Chinese classes as part of their curriculum.

Experts attribute the phenomenal popularity of the Chinese language to China's rising economic and political presence in the world, as well as a growing desire among American parents to expose their children to other cultures and new perspectives.

"There is the perceived value of learning Chinese for the future economic and business applications of the language, but also more people are becoming aware that they are part of a globalised world," said Mr Livaccari.

Conscious of the geo-political power shift away from the West, the federal government has led the effort to address the lack of proficiency in Chinese and other languages. The US State Department has classified Mandarin Chinese as one of its six "super critical needs" languages, along with Arabic, Dari, Farsi, Hindi and Urdu.

These are languages which are extremely difficult to master and are deemed critical to US political, economic and cultural interests.

To dramatically boost the number of Americans learning, speaking, and teaching critical foreign languages, former president George W. Bush introduced the US$114 million (S$158 million) National Security Language Initiative in January 2006 to expand programmes from kindergarten to university.

The US Department of Education's Foreign Language Assistance Programme has allocated millions in funding to schools wishing to start, beef up and innovate on Chinese language instruction.

Seeing the upsurge in interest as an opportunity to expand its soft power, China's National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (also known as Hanban) has also been active in the promotion of Chinese language learning in the US.

It has, for example, teamed up with the US College Board – which administers university entrance exams, the SAT and Advanced Placement exams – to recruit teachers from China to start new Chinese language programmes or teach existing ones in US schools.

Experts say the heavy investment reflects official thinking that Chinese language learning is not just a passing fad.

"I don't see China's rise or the importance of US-China cooperation on global issues like climate change and economic recovery changing any time soon," said Mr Livaccari.

Interest in learning Chinese is also cutting across racial and socio-economic lines.

"The growth is not limited to urban or coastal areas, it is everywhere. And what is most significant is that kids who have no cultural or ethnic link to Chinese are taking it up," noted Ms Abbott.

Chicago, which has the largest public school Chinese programme in the US, teaches the language to at least 6,000 students out of some 421,000, the majority black or Hispanic, according to news reports.

The growing demand prompted the US College Board to introduce Chinese Advanced Placement tests, which allow students to earn placement or college credit, in 2007. That year, 3,261 students took the exam from 433 schools in the US.

The appetite for Chinese, however, has created several problems. The number of certified, high-calibre Chinese teachers cannot keep pace with the demand, said experts. "The issue is finding highly qualified teachers who can connect with US students and to engage them in learning Chinese in a meaningful way," said Ms Abbott.

Instructional and assessment materials in Chinese are also in short supply in the US. Yu Ying's Chinese teachers had to create worksheets, lesson plans and even word and picture cards from scratch.

To help schools, the non-profit Asia Society, which works to promote understanding about Asia, is teaming up with Hanban to set up an online network of schools that offer Chinese language programmes. Designed to be a platform for schools to share resources and ideas, the network will launch later this month with its first 20 schools. It hopes to grow to 100 schools over the next three years.

Beyond the infrastructural challenges, sometimes cultural differences get in the way.

Yu Ying's kindergarten teacher Ms Liang is from Taiwan, where she says students "do not question their teachers. Here, kids can't wait to voice their opinions." She admits that the outspokenness sometimes gets in the way: "To learn Chinese, you have to be focused."

The State Department classifies Mandarin Chinese as one of the five hardest languages for English speakers to learn. It takes about 2,200 class hours, compared to 600 hours needed to learn French or Spanish.

What their kids go through can also be stressful for parents who do not speak a word of Mandarin.

"Parents have to be on board 100 per cent," said Ms Shaffner. "They can help by buying Chinese music, books, exposing their kids to Chinese culture."

Dr John King, 37, an economist, makes sure to include Chinese picture and story books along with English books when he makes a trip to the library with his kids.

His son, Nico, four, attends pre-kindergarten at Yu Ying, and he plans to enrol his two-year-old daughter, Quincey, in a year's time.

Dr King reckons he is readying his kids for the future by exposing them to Chinese now, despite risks that they might initially lag behind their peers in English.

"It is cognitively good for kids to speak two languages, and China is just going to be so prominent," he said.

After three months in Yu Ying, Nico is making great strides in Chinese. He manages short sentences and his pronunciation impresses his proud father.

Dr King said: "It's great. I've always wanted to go to China and now, I hope my kids will take me there one day."

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ST PHOTOS: CHUA CHIN HON

(From top) Simon Toro Raciborski, five, Mei-ling Powell Young, seven, and Rhaya Jacobs, five, with teacher Liang Chiachu, are some of the pupils at Washington Yu Ying, where half of all classes are taught in Chinese.

GETTING OVER MY CHINESE HANG-UP

It is one of my most vivid childhood memories. I was about five or six and was just about to start primary school. My parents had decided to engage a Chinese tutor for me as we spoke only English at home.

I had never had a tutor before and was excited. I insisted on putting on my best dress hours before my lesson was due to start. Then I waited by the window so that I could see my very first Chinese tutor approach the house.

I do not recall much of the lesson itself, except that I was determined to impress my tutor with my attentiveness.

Thinking back on that episode, it strikes me as being rather ironic, for it marked the beginning of my personal struggle with the Chinese language.

After 12 years of barely scraping through my Chinese exams, I completed my A Levels and was overjoyed that I could finally shut the door on the Chinese language.

But a decade later, I found myself rethinking my attitude towards my bete noir. I decided to confront my fears and give Chinese another go. But this time, I would try a different approach.

In February 2005, I arrived in Beijing to start an intensive course in Chinese language at the Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU), which specialises in teaching Chinese to foreigners.

In Beijing, my lack of proficiency really hit home. I could barely read the Chinese street signs, much less communicate with the local Chinese. I felt isolated in my monolingual bubble.

But it was precisely this sense of being the odd one out in a Chinese-speaking world that made me want to overcome the language barrier.

I threw myself into my studies. For almost four months, it was Chinese six hours a day, five days a week. To speed up my learning, I supplemented formal classes with one-on-one tutoring.

By the end of the course, I had gone from stammering in Chinese to being able to confidently converse and read simple articles in Chinese newspapers. Even my writing of Chinese characters had improved.

So what made the difference? I put it down to a combination of factors: I was motivated. I was immersed in a Chinese-speaking environment that made me see Chinese as a living, evolving language.

I also had dedicated teachers who taught their hearts out using an excellent syllabus that was pitched just right for my level of proficiency.

I still remember my first day at BLCU. All new students were required to take a written test to determine our levels of proficiency. We were then grouped into classes according to our different abilities, but had the flexibility of switching to more advanced classes if we so desired.

Class sizes were kept relatively small, with between 15 and 30 students in each class.

My classmates were from Japan, South Korea and Indonesia. We were allowed to speak only Chinese in class, but Chinese was the only common language we could use to communicate anyway. They were a disciplined, hardworking bunch.

I had three main teachers for classes that were divided into "listening", "speaking" and a "general" class which combined the two skills with reading and class participation. Writing was not the focus of the course, although we were encouraged to try our hand at short essays.

My laoshi (teachers) impressed me with their enthusiasm and dedication. From the get-go, they set a positive tone and even on muggy summer days managed to keep lessons lively and light-hearted. They were always encouraging, but never indulgent. They quickly remembered our names and figured out each of our strengths and weaknesses.

Students who needed more practice in pronunciation were called on in class to read short passages out loud, for example.

We studied from textbooks. Each chapter comprised a passage, usually a story set in modern times that we could relate to. We slowly expanded our vocabulary, learning new, practical words and phrases from the passages. There were English explanations to help us along.

Our teachers spent much of the time explaining the meaning, nuance and context of each new word and phrase precisely. They taught us syntax and basic rules of Chinese grammar – concepts I never properly mastered in school.

The classes were designed to help us overcome our fear of speaking the language. We often were called on to speak in class or give presentations on a theme of our choosing.

Compared with Chinese lessons in Singapore, I was learning and understanding, rather than learning by rote.

By the time we graduated, I felt I had re-learnt the language. My old hang-ups about Chinese being dull and tedious were gone.

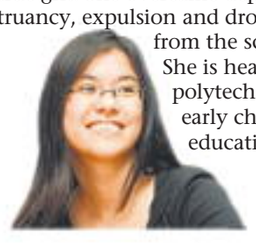
Most importantly, my experience ignited a desire to keep improving. Learning Chinese has now become a lifelong pursuit.

Tracy Quek

[HEADLINERS]

Grace Heng
Lives up to 'ace' in her name

At 23 years old, Miss Heng was among the oldest in this year's O-level cohort. But behind her four distinctions was true grit. She overcame depression, truancy, expulsion and dropping out from the school system. She is headed for a polytechnic to do an early childhood education course.



Goh Poh Seng
Pioneer writer dies, 73

Dr Goh – medical doctor, entrepreneur and the author of the iconic 1972 novel, If We Dream Too Long – died of pneumonia in Vancouver, Canada, last Sunday. A prolific writer, his themes ranged from interracial marriages to the Japanese Occupation.

Simon Cowell
Bye, bye, American Idol-maker

The acerbic Brit and a judge on American Idol – famous for his put-downs – will leave the popular show after the current ninth season. Cowell, 50, will produce and judge a new talent competition, The X Factor, the American version of the top-rated British show.

Sarah Palin
Fox News gets foxy lady

The former Alaska governor and ex-Republican vice-presidential candidate became a political commentator and part-time host with conservative network Fox News. The move is seen by many as part of the 45-year-old's campaign to position herself as a 2012 presidential candidate.

Ronald Susilo
Top shuttler to retire

The 30-year-old, after 11 years as a professional badminton player, will retire from the national team in March. He plans to set up a badminton academy. "It was a very difficult decision (but) it does not mean I will be away from the sport," he told The Straits Times.